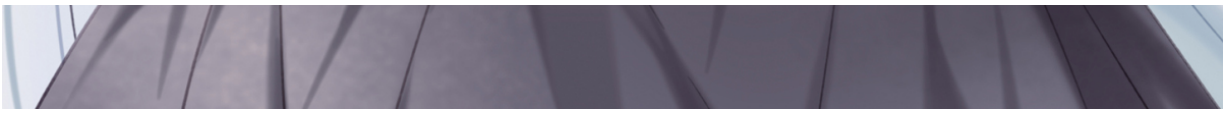

Koushi
Tachibana
Illustration by
Tsunako
1
KING'S
PROPOSAL
The Silver Fairy



6

King’s Proposal
The Silver Fairy




“Come on.
Let’s play,
Sister.”
Silvelle
The Garden’s administrative AI. Strongly
insists on acting as everyone’s older sister.
Edelgarde Silvelle
Hildegarde’s genius younger sister.
Thought to have passed away years ago.


"I'll show you a thing or two."
Ruri Fuyajoh
A mage with an obsessive fondness for her brother, Mushiki, and Saika. A warrior in the game world.
"I see. So it *was* a trap."
"There's no need for us to start the adventure at level one!"
"I'm sorry you have to look at this ugly, flabby body of mine…"
Kuroe Karasuma
Saika's attendant, who is carefully guarding a major secret. A thief in the game world.
Hildegarde Silvelle
A sorcery engineer and head of the technical department at Void's Garden. A sage in the game world.
Saika Kuozaki
The world's most powerful mage, and a mage in the game world.


"It seems you need some extra lessons."
"No one knows I work here."
"Why don't we play another game tomorrow, just you and me?"
"Sorry. I'm feeling a little light-headed."



"This outfit is embarrassing… I'd prefer not to wear it…"

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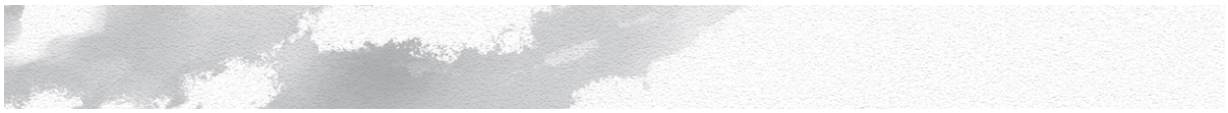
Volume 6

The Silver Fairy

Koushi Tachibana

Illustration by Tsunako

YEN ON
NEW YORK



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Vol. 6

Koushi Tachibana

Translation by Haydn Trowell
Cover art by Tsunako

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KING'S PROPOSAL

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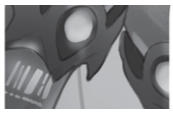
In melancholy and in depression.

When I'm feeling embarrassed and when I want to die.

When I'm feeling negative and when I'm blue.

…So pretty much all the time.

Will you really stay with me…?





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Prologue

Paradise

Saika Kuozaki was my first love.

We were classmates, and she was the most popular girl at school.

She was good-looking, talented both academically and athletically, the ace of the swimming team, and always the center of attention in class.

Honestly, she was like the perfect superhuman, living in a world far removed from my own. Of course, I never considered actively getting involved with her; I just looked on from afar.

It all started when I accidentally misplaced the anime character keychain that was always attached to my bag.

"Oh! Is this yours? Heh, you have good taste. I also like this series, but I've never had anyone to talk to about it. If you don't mind, would you chat with me a bit?" she asked cheerfully, her iridescent eyes narrowing in a warm smile.

With that, my heart started making a sound I'd never heard before.

Saika Kuozaki was my first love.

I was engrossed in a fighting game at my favorite video game arcade.

I wasn't a particularly good student, but if there was one thing I was confident about, it was that I could beat anyone and everyone at this particular game. Today, as I'd done so many times before, I defeated one opponent after the other.

Before long, a formidable foe reared their head. A player of tremendous skill.

They took the lead early, so I sharpened my focus and secured a come-from-behind victory at the very last moment.

I did it! The moment that thought went through my mind, they appeared from behind the cabinet across from me.

She had a hoodie over her school uniform. Headphones around her neck. Bubble gum in her mouth.

There could be no mistake: It was Saika Kuozaki, from the class next to mine. She always kept to herself and never interacted with other students, so she had a bit of a scary reputation.

And yet—

"Huh. You're good. Interesting. I didn't think anyone could beat me at that. We should have a rematch. Give me your number," she said, pulling out her cell phone.

Saika Kuozaki was my first love.

By some twist of fate, I happened to find myself at a café in the neighboring town. The moment I walked in— "Welcome back, Master ♡!"

Standing there in front of me was a cute girl dressed in a maid outfit and cat ears.

The shop, it seemed, was a cat-themed maid café.

It was only then that I realized.

The cat-eared maid appeared surprised when she saw my face.

Looking closer, I recognized her as Saika Kuozaki, an honor roll student at school and the head of the disciplinary committee.

Why is she here? I thought the school had a rule against part-time work…

As those thoughts swirled around in my head, she spoke to me.

"…You've caught me in a bad spot. I'm in a bit of a situation, and I need the money. So if you can keep this between us…I'll offer you a special service I don't provide for anyone else."

She raised her index finger and offered me a cute wink.

Saika Kuozaki was my first love.

I'd stayed late for photography club after school and was walking alone through the deserted school building.

As I turned a corner, I accidentally bumped into someone carrying a bundle of papers, making them drop them all over the floor. I hurriedly apologized and rushed to pick them up.

But my hand froze in place.

Mixed into the documents was a professional-looking photograph of someone wearing cosplay.

And the person in the picture was—

"…You saw it, didn't you? That's my little secret."

The trainee teacher Saika Kuozaki.

She seemed so serious, but apparently Ms. Saika's hobby was cosplaying.

"There's nothing I can do about it now that you've seen that, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone at school. By the way…you aren't interested in being a photographer, are you?" she asked, sounding embarrassed.

A flutter went through my chest.

◇

“…!”

A torrent of information suddenly poured into Mushiki’s brain like a raging river.

They were sights that should never have existed.

Swept away by the storm of images, he felt his consciousness fading.

Chapter 1
A Creeping Horror

"…Mmm. What a delightful scent. Your skills have improved once again, Kuroe," Mushiki Kuga said, elegantly raising his teacup. He was sitting in the front yard of the Kuozaki mansion.

By now, Mushiki had learned to pay special attention to his manners when it came to drinking tea.

Keep your back straight.

Don't put your fingers through the handle of the teacup.

Don't make a sound when you set the cup back on the saucer.

And most importantly, do all of this in a way that that comes across as perfectly natural.

It wasn't about trying to follow proper etiquette, but rather, making good manners an integral part of himself.

Only by giving off such an impression could he play the part of Saika Kuozaki.

"…You honor me," the black-haired, black-eyed girl standing off to the side of the table said with a small bow of her head.

Her name was Kuroe Karasuma—Mushiki's classmate and Saika Kuozaki's attendant. She was holding an ornately decorated teapot.

"Hmm?" Mushiki murmured, tilting his head slightly.

For a second, he thought he sensed a hint of confusion in Kuroe's calm gaze.

"Is something the matter? Perhaps there's something on my face?"

"No. Nothing like that," Kuroe answered evasively—very strange, given her usually sharp tongue.

Puzzled, Mushiki looked across the table at the girl sitting opposite him.

"How odd. Wouldn't you agree, Ruri?"

"U-umm…," the girl replied, also looking slightly unsettled.

With long hair tied in twin ponytails and determined eyes, she was Mushiki's younger sister, Ruri Fuyajoh. Like him, she was holding a full teacup, but something must have been bothering her, because she hadn't yet taken a sip.

"Oh? Is it not to your liking? This is my very best Darjeeling."

"N-no, it's not that…," Ruri mumbled. After a moment's hesitation, she continued. "Uh, can I ask something?"

"Hm? Go ahead."

"Why are you talking so grandiosely today, Mushiki?"

"Huh?"

He let out a gasp.

The next second, Mushiki dropped his teacup onto the saucer with a loud clatter.

But he had no time to worry about that. He patted his cheeks, then stared into the teacup.

The face reflected back at him in the ruby-colored liquid was that of a young man, perhaps seventeen years of age. His features could be described as gentle or, if one was less charitable, as unreliable.

"…"

There was no mistaking it—this was his normal face.

After kneading his cheeks for a few seconds, he slowly looked up.

"…Sorry. My bad."

"What?!" Ruri exclaimed, banging a fist on the table.

To be fair, her reaction made perfect sense. As far as Mushiki was concerned, if their roles had been reversed, he would have been just as confused as she was.

Mushiki's circumstances were unique, to say the least.

Ever since merging with the dying Saika Kuozaki a few months earlier, he had been living a double life, at times as Saika, at others as himself.

He'd gotten too caught up in his own thoughts and mixed up the two personas and voices.

"…"

Kuroe fixed him with a piercing look.

She didn't say a word, but her eyes eloquently conveyed what she was thinking: *What are you doing? I can't believe you could be so careless. I'll need to punish you later…* (However, that last one might have just been Mushiki's imagination.) Ruri was aware that Mushiki's and Saika's bodies had been fused into one. However, she was under the impression that Saika's consciousness was in control while he was in his Saika state, so naturally, it would invite suspicion if he pretended to act like her. Mushiki struggled to come up with some sort of plausible explanation.

"Um, well… It's complicated."

"*What's* complicated?"

"Uhhh, I've been secretly practicing imitating Saika's mannerisms…"

"Mushiki?" Kuroe warned, her voice filled with reproach. He could all but hear her say, *There is no way I'll accept such an absurd excuse.*

And yet—

"…Oh, I see. That explains it."

Ruri nodded in understanding.

Kuroe's expression remained as deadpan as ever, yet she looked like she might collapse face-first onto the table.

"Ah! Are you okay, Kuroe?" asked Ruri.

"Didn't you get enough sleep? Take it easy," Mushiki said.

"…I'm fine," replied Kuroe. "More importantly, why are you satisfied by that excuse?"

"I mean…hasn't everyone tried copying Madam Witch's voice at least once in their lives?" Ruri said, folding her arms.

"No."

"Really? Maybe it's a regional thing."

"I'm not aware of any such region," Kuroe said, narrowing her eyes.

Ruri, however, paid her little mind, gracefully crossing her legs. The next moment, she gave the maid a composed look and broke into a smile.

"Don't be so closed-minded, Kuroe. The world is so much bigger than you think," she said in a slightly deeper tone than normal.

Her demeanor, her bearing, her voice—they were a perfect re-creation of Saika when she spoke.

"Wow…! You've even nailed the angle of her feet!" Mushiki exclaimed, clenching his fists.

"Heh. I would expect nothing less of you, Mushiki. I knew you would pick up on that," Ruri replied in Saika's voice.

Seeing his sister like that, Mushiki started to feel restless. He took on the same composed look as Ruri, and his lips curled in a faint smile.

"…I'm honored by your praise. You have done a splendid job, likewise."

"As have you. I take it you've been watching me closely to reach such a level."

"Oh-ho-ho."

"Oh-ho-ho."

Mushiki and Ruri boldly smiled at one another.

"…"

Kuroe looked on with an indescribable expression.

Just how much time passed while she was standing there like that? Finally, Ruri's phone rang, dispelling the strange atmosphere.

"Hello? Is something amiss? …Uh, no, there's no mistake. It's me. *Me.*"

Ruri immediately switched back to her usual tone after answering the phone still speaking like Saika.

The person on the other end probably thought they'd dialed the wrong number.

"…Mm-hmm. Yeah, got it. Okay."

After exchanging a few more words, Ruri hung up.

"Who was that?"

"Hizumi. She said they're short-staffed preparing for the Spirit Festival. She needs help," Ruri said, then put her phone back in her pocket.





From what Mushiki remembered, the Spirit Festival was the name of an event that would be held at the Garden that month. It was a ceremony to pray for the souls of mages whose goals had gone unfulfilled due to the mages perishing from illness, accident, or battling annihilation factors. Their classmate, Hizumi Nagekawa, was part of the organizing committee.

"Mushiki, Kuroe. Could you lend us a hand if you're free?" Ruri asked.

"Ah, sure. That's fine, right, Kuroe?"

"Yes," she said with a nod. "However, there is something that Mushiki and I must do first. Would you mind going on ahead, Ruri?"

"Huh? What've you got to do?"

"It's nothing major. We will catch up to you shortly."

Ruri wore a dubious look, but she eventually let out a small sigh and shrugged. "Fine. I'll be in the main auditorium of the central school building." With a wave and a "See you later," she left the Kuozaki mansion garden.

"Now then." Kuroe exhaled and turned to face Mushiki.

Why had she done that? Filled with a vague sense of foreboding, he began to stand up from his chair.

That moment, however, Kuroe pinned him down by the shoulders.

"U-um, Kuroe?" Mushiki stammered.

She leaned forward, fixing him with a hard stare. "Isn't there something you're not telling me, Mushiki?" she demanded in a completely different tone of voice—one very similar to his and Ruri's imitations.

Yet she wasn't emulating Saika. Kuroe Karasuma was, in fact, the real head of Void's Garden and the world's most powerful mage, Saika Kuozaki herself.

Mushiki averted his gaze and let out a sigh of resignation.

"…While in Saika's body, I secretly made molds of her hands and feet—," he confessed.

"That isn't what I mean," Kuroe-Saika cut him off. "It's unlike you to be mixing up personalities. You seem preoccupied. Tell me what's

bothering you. What exactly is weighing so heavily on your mind?”

“Well…,” Mushiki murmured hesitantly.

The reason was simple: Just as Saika had said, the reason he’d made a mistake like that was because he’d let his mind wander, on account of a certain something…

“…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.”*

Erulka’s words back on Nirai Island echoed in the back of his mind.

Right. Just the other day, Saika had been given a death sentence.

“Well *what*?”

Saika peered into Mushiki’s eyes. It felt like she was probing the depths of his soul, and he looked away.

Unsure what effect this revelation might have on Saika’s mind and body, Erulka had persuaded him not to tell Saika until she’d completed a more detailed examination.

But that didn’t mean he could outright lie to her.

After much anxious deliberation—

“…I can’t tell you. Not yet,” he answered honestly.

“Oh?” Saika furrowed her brow, both surprised and slightly amused by Mushiki’s show of defiance. “Knowing you, you’re saying that because you think it’s for my own good, yes?”

“Yeah,” he answered without hesitation. This time, he looked her straight in the eyes.

She let out a soft chuckle, probably intrigued by his up-front response. “I see. In that case, I’ll refrain from asking any further questions.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. If you ever did something to betray me, it would only be a sign of the extents of my talents.”

"I would never betray you, Saika."

"I know. That's why I trust you," she said, letting go of his shoulders.

It was a carefree, reassuring response, yet in those simple words, Mushiki felt a wave of intense emotion. Before he knew it, tears were welling up in his eyes.

Saika seemed to notice this because she let out a wry chuckle, then changed the subject. "By the way…"

"Yes?"

"What are the hand and feet molds for?"

"Oh! You want to know?" he asked with renewed enthusiasm.

"…No. Save it for next time." Perhaps sensing trouble ahead, Saika shook her head. "—We are currently keeping Ruri waiting."

In the middle of speaking, her expression suddenly became emotionless.

Just like that, Saika Kuozaki, headmistress of Void's Garden, had switched places with her attendant, Kuroe Karasuma.

"Now then. Let's go, Mushiki. The main auditorium of the central school building, wasn't it? We cannot afford you getting distracted and making another mistake. Only Ruri would have bought that last excuse."

"Right. I'll be careful," he answered obediently as he let Kuroe lead the way.

After passing through one of gateways set up to move around the Garden, they arrived at the central area of the school. From there, it didn't take long to get to the main auditorium.

Several other students were already inside, neatly writing something on papers spread across the desks.

"Ah! Kuga! Karasuma!"

Amid the hustle and bustle, a female student noticed their arrival and called out to them. She had gentle features framed by hair that reached just down to her shoulders—Mushiki's classmate Hizumi Nagekawa.

"Thank goodness! We needed more help. Here, take a seat!"

Hizumi prompted Mushiki and Kuroe to sit at a pair of desks. Her expression conveyed a mix of urgency and reassurance, as if she was both relieved to have more helpers and determined not to let them get away.

"You came," said Ruri, sitting in the seat next to Mushiki.

It seemed she was already hard at work, copying out a design with a familiar hand.

In front of each of them were blank sheets of paper and well-used pens.

"Umm, these are…?"

"They're pieces of paper we use for the soul lanterns in the Spirit Festival. The pens are filled with magic-sensitive ink, so I want you to use them to copy the composition formula as it's shown in the example," Hizumi said, opening a textbook of some kind.

The page showed a complicated design that could be called neither writing nor a pattern.

"Y-you want us to copy that?"

"Yes. This part is for luminescence, and this is for levitation. Pay special attention to the angles around here. If you make a mistake, it could light up in a strange color or fly off in the wrong direction."

After that brief explanation, Hizumi seemed to spot something and turned to the person in front of them.

"Hey! No slacking off. We don't have a lot of time before the big day."

The student seated there, supposed to be hard at work, was instead playing a video game on his smartphone under the desk.

Caught red-handed, he flashed them an embarrassed smile. "Um, can I just have a minute? I haven't logged in today yet…"

"No. Not until you've met your quota."

"Okay…"

Sharply reprimanded, the student reluctantly put his phone away.

Hizumi let out an exasperated sigh and crossed her arms. "I mean it. There's no room for carelessness here."

"Ah-ha-ha… Looks like you've got a lot on your plate."

"No kidding. Some smartphone game called *Argento* is all the rage right now. People keep trying to shirk work and play it where I can't see them. It's causing us a real headache."

"Ah…," Mushiki murmured, thinking back.

He'd heard of that game before. A classmate had invited him to join not too long ago, but he politely turned them down because he'd been focusing on improving his own Saika-themed card game with Ruri at the time.

"I'm not worried about either of you slacking off… But it's easy to make mistakes while you're multitasking, so please be careful."

"G-got it…," Mushiki said with a nod. He picked up a pen and started carefully copying the design on a blank sheet of paper. "Whoa… This is pretty nerve-racking. How many of these do we have to make?"

"Around three thousand, I believe," Kuroe replied nonchalantly.

"You're kidding me." Mushiki's palms started to sweat.

Effortlessly tracing the design, she continued, "Lady Saika values efficiency, so she has suggested on several occasions to simply print copies."

"And?"

"Many others argued that it would not be appropriate to prioritize efficiency for something used in prayers for the dead."

"I see…," Mushiki responded with a tight smile.

…Yeah, he couldn't say he didn't understand where they were coming from.

But at the same time, he couldn't disagree with Saika's position, either. While it might come off as a little cold, she would no doubt reason that if they had time to spare, they would be better off honing their skills for the battles to come. Based on her way of thinking, *that* would be the best way to honor their fallen comrades whose aspirations remained unfulfilled. Saika Kuozaki wasn't the sort of person to suggest using photocopies just to save time.

Nonetheless, it wasn't in her nature to force her opinions on others, and she had a great deal of respect for those with opposing

views. People couldn't be moved by reason alone. No doubt she had decided that leaving this matter be was in the best interests of the Garden as a whole.

What a generous heart! What calm judgment! Mushiki breathed an awestruck sigh as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"You're the best, Saika."

"Why are you crying?" Kuroe demanded with an exasperated look, before quietly turning back to her work.

Following her lead, Mushiki wiped away his tears with the back of his hand and resumed copying out the composition formula.

It was a third-generation invocation—a spell that produced an effect by channeling magical energy through characters or patterns engraved on an object. While not as complex as fourth-generation magical techniques, which used computers, they were more robust and easier to use by the general populace.

Well, they might have been easier to handle, but for a novice mage like Mushiki, understanding the meaning of a composition formula gave him no shortage of trouble.

After a few more minutes of writing, he raised his head at the sound of a faint noise.

"Hmm…?"

Glancing across the auditorium, he noticed that the door he and Kuroe had entered through was slightly ajar. Through that tiny gap, he sensed someone peeking into the room.

"Do you need something?" he called out.

"…!"

The door suddenly slammed shut, leaving Mushiki staring back in wide-eyed surprise.

"What's the matter, Mushiki?" Ruri asked.

"I thought someone was looking inside just now…," he said, scratching his cheek.

A moment later, the door slowly cracked open again.

The gap was a little wider this time, and he caught a sharp glint on the other side—probably the reflection from a pair of glasses.

"Um, can I help you?" he called again.

"…!"

Once more, the door slammed shut.

Then, around ten seconds later, as gingerly as could be, it slowly began to open.

"Um…"

"…!"

The door shook slightly at the sound of his voice.

This time, however, it remained open.

"How many times are you going to do that?"

The reason was simple: Kuroe, unable to stand this charade any longer, had grabbed the inside handle and yanked it wide open.

"W-waaa…!"

Losing her balance, a woman who looked to be in her early twenties fell headfirst into the room.

She had long silver hair, pale skin that probably only rarely saw the sun, and a slightly hunched posture. Despite her well-proportioned face, the eyes behind her glasses almost made her look as if she was groveling. She towered in height, and her proportions were arresting. Yet those attributes were obscured by a jet-black dress, which clung to her body as if to keep every inch of skin under wraps.

"Hilde! What are you doing there?" Mushiki asked.

The woman—Hildegarde Silvelle, head of the Garden's technical department—went rigid, her eyes swimming as her lips twisted into a vague smile.

"Ah… Um… Uhhh…" Finding herself the center of attention, she squirmed uncomfortably under everyone's gazes. "It's nothing. Sorry to have bothered you…," she whispered in a hushed voice, hunching and turning to leave.

The next moment, however, Kuroe held her back by the shoulders.

"Where are you off to, Knight Hildegarde? You came here to help, didn't you?"

"…E-eeek…" Hildegarde let out a voice that sounded like the buzz of a mosquito as Kuroe dragged her into a seat.

As if lying in wait, Hizumi placed a pen and paper on the desk in front of her.

"Thank you so much, Hilde. Let's all do our best."

"Ah… Y-yeah…" Hildegarde nodded weakly.

She didn't seem to have any objection to the work itself. Without complaint, she picked up her pen and started copying out the composition formula.

"Ooh…," Mushiki said, impressed by her technique.

Despite her obsequious gaze and unflattering posture, the composition formula she was drawing was so beautiful, it seemed to glow.

"Amazing," Mushiki exclaimed. "You copied it so neatly…"

"…"

"Knight Hildegarde," Kuroe whispered into her ear. "Mushiki praised you just now."

"Wha…?!" Hildegarde jumped back, as if the thought of him commending her was beyond comprehension. "Y-you think so…?"

"Yes. It's beautiful," Mushiki said sincerely. "How did you learn to draw like that?"

Hildegarde wore a complex look, at once pleased, embarrassed, and doubtful.

Ruri, seated beside her, answered in her place. "Well, she *is* the head of the Garden's technical department. Her skills as a sorcery engineer are top-notch, and her expertise in fourth-generation magic is nothing to scoff at."

"I see. You're so reliable."

"Um… Er… U-uhhh…"

"Mushiki. Ruri. Please stop that. You'll make her mess up her composition formula," Kuroe said flatly.

Looking at it closely, Mushiki noticed that the lines Hilde was drawing had wavered slightly.

"Ah…"

"Sorry. I'll get back to work."

With that, the two of them returned to their seats and to their own tasks.

"…It's kind of unusual, though," Mushiki murmured.

"…Wh-what is?" Hilde answered.

"I mean, I didn't think you were the kind of person to take part in an event like this. Did you come because they needed more help?"

"Oh… No… Not exactly…," Hildegarde whispered in a voice so quiet, it almost vanished.

Kuroe glanced up, looking at her. "True, Knight Hildegarde rarely participates in campus events. She didn't even make an appearance at the interschool exhibition match, opting simply to watch from a monitor in her own room. In fact, it's so uncommon for her to roam the Garden that some students say seeing her is a sign of good luck, while others claim she brings misfortune."

"U-ugh…" Hildegarde hung her head.

"However," Kuroe continued, "she has never once missed the Spirit Festival."

"Really?" Mushiki asked.

Hildegarde was silent for a long moment, then gave a small nod.

"I had a younger sister… She died of illness…"

"…I didn't know. I'm sorry. That was insensitive."

"Ah… No. Don't worry. It was a long time ago." Hildegarde waved her hands and shook her head, then scratched her cheek. "I don't really believe in an afterlife, and I don't think these lanterns will actually reach her, but… I don't know why, but I just keep following this ritual… Maybe it's more about me than her…," she said, forcing a smile.

Mushiki sat there, unsure how to respond, when Kuroe spoke up.

"I think that's fine, if you ask me."

"…Huh?"

"This isn't something one should say out loud all too often; however, I regard the Spirit Festival as an event not for the sake of the dead but for those left behind… At the very least, so long as one

person feels like these soul lanterns we've created have brought them peace, then it won't be in vain."

"Kuroe…"

Hildegarde closed her eyes at those words, sinking into contemplation. "You're so kind… I love you…"

"There's no need to go that far," Kuroe answered with a blank stare, waving her hand as if to shoo off a dog.

Hildegarde slumped in dejection. She was a shy woman, and communication was far from her strong suit, but once she opened up to someone, she became unusually dependent on them. It was a rather dangerous personality trait, actually. Mushiki forced a bitter smile as he tried to change the topic.

"Was your sister also a mage?" he asked.

"Oh…yes," she answered with a slight nod. "Like me, she specialized in fourth-generation magic… Li'l Saika scouted both of us to join the Garden… We were in charge of managing the campus."

"Wow. If she was your sister, I'm guessing she was super talented then," Mushiki said.

Hildegarde stared off into the distance. "…She was nothing short of amazing."

"Oh?"

"She…was a genius. I could never measure up to her…"

Mushiki was taken aback by Hildegarde's self-deprecating response.

"Don't say that. You're amazing, too, Hilde. You made Silvelle, and she's still managing the Garden today, right…?"

Hildegarde shook her head. "It's true that I made her…but the self-learning AI that served as her prototype was a collaborative effort between me and Edel, my sister. There are a few things about the inner workings I still don't fully understand. Without Edel, Silvelle would never have been born…"

"Really…?"

"…If I had designed one hundred percent of it, she wouldn't have taken on that appearance and personality…"

"Ah…"

A complicated look came to Mushiki's face. It was an incredibly convincing argument.

"Oh? Did you call your big sister just now?"

No sooner had that voice echoed around the room than a woman dressed in clothes like those of a shrine maiden appeared before Mushiki and the others. She had long, flowing silver hair and fair skin —the spitting image of Hildegarde.

It was the Garden's administrative AI, Silvelle.

"Silvelle…Sis," Mushiki called out, his eyes widening in surprise.

It went without saying, but Silvelle wasn't, in fact, his sister.

Due to a quirk in her personality matrix, she would only respond when addressed as the user's older sister. Mushiki thought it was an odd peculiarity for an administrative AI to have.

"That's me! How can I help?"

"Um, no one called you…," Hildegarde said wearily.

Though they looked like mirror images of each other, their expressions and postures were so different that the two of them gave off very different impressions.

As for the AI Silvelle…

"Oh, hello… You're here, too, Hildegarde. I'm glad to see you're doing well."

The second she laid eyes on Hildegarde, her expression turned blank. She greeted her in a flat tone of voice.

"You're giving me the cold shoulder again…!" Hildegarde grimaced, banging her fists on the desk in front of her.

The two of them were always like this, Mushiki thought with a wry smile.

"Are you still giving Hilde trouble, Silvelle?" he asked.

"It isn't like that… I'm the big sister of all mankind, so talking to someone who's older than me is a no-go. And she looks just like me, even though we're not twins. It's scary."

"*You're* copying *me*…!" Hildegarde cried out in disbelief.

Though usually so shy and reserved, Hildegarde could talk normally with the AI she'd created. It was refreshing to see.

"I'm just kidding," Silvelle said, spreading her hands wide. *"I might be a little sensitive to older people, but I've recently found a new way to cope: by thinking of myself as a big sister AI created by a skilled technician who wished she had an older sister and eventually ended up creating one after tons of hard work… So in a way, you're my splendid little sister, too, Hilly."*

"…That's kind of weird…," Hildegarde grumbled, her lips coming together in a pout.

Before he could stop himself, Mushiki let out a chuckle. "By the way, why *did* you use Hilde as the model for your interface, Silvelle?"

The question had been on his mind for a while now.

"Huh?" Silvelle's eyes widened in surprise. *"Hmm… That's a difficult question. It's not like I did it on purpose. Before I knew what I was doing, I had already settled on this look…almost as if I was programmed to mimic my bleep."*

"I don't remember programming you that way…! Hold on, what was that bleep just now?!"

"Sorry. It's a filtered word."

"You're treating me like an obscenity…?!" Hildegarde wailed in indignation.

Maybe it was because she didn't usually speak so loudly, but Hildegarde's voice was oddly strained.

Ruri, who'd been listening in so far, looked up from her work.

"If you didn't program her that way, do you think this might be one of those 'inner workings' of the prototype you mentioned?"

"Huh…?" Hildegarde stared back, wide-eyed. "…Right. Edel probably would have found it amusing…"

"I see. Edie was *like that."*

"Did you know Hilde's sister?" Mushiki asked.

Silvelle folded her arms as she sank into thought. *"Unfortunately, I never met her in person. I only know her from the records in my database. Being Hilly's sister, her hair and facial features must have*

been very similar to mine… I wish I could have met her. I wish…just once… Gaaah!" She screamed in frustration, the cry welling up from the deep inside her.

Silvelle really did consider herself the big sister of all mankind. Her admiration for the younger sister of the woman she'd been modeled after was extraordinary.

"My apologies. I got carried away. Well, if there's nothing else, you'll have to excuse me…," she said, starting to fade away.

At that moment, Hizumi raised her hand as if just remembering something. "Ah, Silvelle? Sis? Do you have a minute?"

"Of course. What can I do for you?" Just like that, Silvelle brightened up, turning acrobatically to Hizumi. She seemed delighted to be asked to help.

Hizumi let out a soft giggle at this overreaction. "Actually, a few members of the Spirit Festival organizing committee haven't shown up. Can you help me find them…? They're not answering their phones, and they haven't read my messages, either."

"Hmm… The absent members. That would be Hanji and Nat, yes?" Silvelle glanced around, then folded her arms. *"Of course! Silvelle here is your super big sister! I can easily track the whereabouts of my adorable little siblings using their smartphones, but there* is *the question of privacy…"*

"I'm sure you can do something about that. Please, Sis? ♡" Hizumi asked in a sweet, pleading voice as she put her hands together in front of her face.

"Honestly," Silvelle said, squirming her body happily. *"I suppose there's no helping it. Just this once, okay?"*

"Really…?"

"You really shouldn't, though…"

"I wish you wouldn't do things like that while wearing my face…"

Mushiki and the others were taken aback, but Silvelle responded with a wag of her finger. *"You're all using the devices provided to you by the Garden, yes? The terms of service include a clause permitting the use of your location information in the case of an*

emergency. You really should have read it properly before you hit Agree.*"*

"Huh? They do?"

"I guess that does sound familiar…"

Ignoring their murmured responses, Silvelle lowered her gaze in concentration. Then, after a few seconds, she opened her eyes.

"Bingo. I've found them. It seems both Hanji and Nat are in their dormitory rooms. Signs indicate they've been playing video games on their smartphones."

A moment later—

"…What?" Despite her faint smile, Hizumi's voice was unbelievably cold. "They're in their dormitory rooms? Playing games? When we're so busy…? Ah…" She paused for a moment, her tone softening. "Yes, I see. Come to think of it, Munakata and Mabuchi *have* been playing that game a lot lately. It must be really addicting. They were even playing it under their desks while pretending to work. I warned them time and time again, but they wouldn't stop. Now they've chosen to abandon their duties altogether."

Another moment later, Mushiki heard a small creaking sound. He glanced over to see that the pen in Hizumi's grasp was bent out of shape and ink was dripping down onto the sheet of paper.

"Eeep…"

"Oh? I must have worn out my pen. I've stained the paper. I do really need to be careful, especially when we're so short on manpower. But it's okay. Things will work out if I do my best."

Her voice and demeanor were as calm as always, but for some reason, Mushiki felt an icy chill course down his spine, and he shivered.

"…Uh, um, Nagekawa? I'll head over to the dormitory and fetch Munakata, okay?"

Something told Mushiki he couldn't leave this situation alone, and so, filled with trepidation, he offered to go look for one of the committee's missing members.

Wiping the ink from her hands, Hizumi flashed him a bright smile. “You will? That’ll be a huge help. Thank you.”

“N-no problem. Leave it to me,” he said, standing up from his chair.

A second later, Ruri and Kuroe likewise rose from their seats.

“You can’t go alone, Mushiki! I’ll come with you!”

“Indeed. There’s no telling what you might find. I’ll accompany you.”

“Huh? I’ll be fine by—”

But he stopped before finishing what he’d been going to say, recognizing the silent appeal in their gazes: *I can’t work when things are so tense.*

He understood how they felt all too well. And if he raised any further questions, Hizumi might change her mind. Holding his tongue, Mushiki headed for the exit.

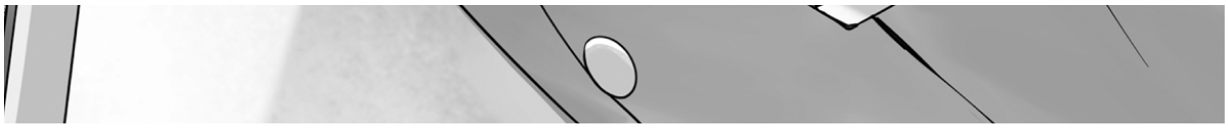
Hildegarde was giving him a teary-eyed look, but her naturally timid nature kept her from speaking up.

…It wasn’t as if he didn’t feel sorry for her, but Hildegarde was indispensable to their preparations for the festival, so he was sure Hizumi wouldn’t let her go. And so, offering her a silent apology, Mushiki opened the door.

“Oh, Kuga?” Hizumi called after him.

“Y-yeah?” he asked, his shoulders trembling slightly.





"Just make sure he can still use his hands, please," Hizumi said, beaming.

Mushiki had to force a smile. "Wh-what do you mean…?"

"Nothing. Our medical department is excellent… Once I'm finished here, I'll check on Mabuchi myself."

"……"

At a loss for words, Mushiki and the others scurried outside.

"Room 205. This one…"

A few minutes later, they arrived at the boys' dormitory and knocked on the door.

"Hello? It's me, Kuga. Are you in there, Munakata?" Mushiki called out in a loud voice.

They waited and waited, but no response came from inside the room.

"He's not answering…and the door's locked. Do you think he might've gone somewhere?" Mushiki wondered out loud as he tried the handle.

Ruri breathed a tired sigh. "If he is slacking off, he wouldn't be so stupid as to answer us."

"Right. Then what should we do?"

"Break the door down," came Ruri's caustic reply.

"Always so quick to solve things with your fists…," Kuroe murmured behind her. "Luckily, I already explained the situation to the dorm supervisor and borrowed the key. Here."

"Thanks, Kuroe."

Mushiki took the key card from her and touched it against the device on top of the handle. With a beep, the door unlocked.

Cautiously, Mushiki tried the handle again, then slowly pushed the door open.

"Excuse us…"

The second he stepped inside, Mushiki's eyes shot open.

The reason was simple: Munakata was lying face down on top of his bed.

Was he asleep? Even when the three of them had entered his room, he hadn't reacted.

Mushiki approached the bed, placed a hand on the other boy's shoulder, and shook him slightly. "Hey, Munakata. Wake up. Nagekawa's mad at you… Like, a lot. Seriously."

But no matter how many times he called out to him, Munakata didn't budge.

He was completely motionless. It was like his soul had been ripped out of his body.

"…Mushiki?" Kuroe called out. "Look at that."

"Huh?" he replied, raising his eyebrows.

Munakata's hands were stretched out over his head like he was cheering—and not too far from them, his smartphone had fallen to the floor beneath his bed.

"What's that doing there…?"

Mushiki picked it up and glanced at the screen.

It wasn't in sleep mode, and an app had been left running. It showed elaborate character models set against CGI backgrounds, various gauges and values, and controls…

"It's a game screen…"

"Hmph. Falling asleep while playing video games? Must be nice," Ruri grumbled as she crossed her arms.

"…"

Mushiki, however, continued to stare silently at the screen.

Why was he doing that? It was just a normal video game screen, but something about it seemed slightly off.

The next moment—

"…Huh?"

Ruri's phone rang out with a cheerful tune, indicating she had an incoming call.

She tapped the screen and placed her phone on the bed, putting it on speaker mode to share the call with Mushiki and Kuroe.

They heard Hizumi's voice on the other end of the line.

"Hello? How are you doing over there, Ruri?"

"Ah, well. We found him," Ruri replied. "He's asleep in his room. But he won't wake up…"

"Huh? Munakata, too?" Hizumi answered mysteriously.

"You mean…?"

"Yes. I'm in Mabuchi's room right now… She won't wake up at all, either… Ah, not that I've done anything yet, though, just so you know."

"…O-okay."

"She was lying in bed still holding her phone. I checked to see if there were any clues, but it looks like she was playing a video game right up until she fell asleep…"

"…Huh?" Ruri muttered, her brow furrowing.

But just then—

"This is an urgent message for Headmistress Kuozaki and all Knights of the Garden. Please report to the central administrative building immediately. I repeat, this is an urgent message for Headmistress Kuozaki and all Knights of the Garden. Please report to the central administrative building immediately."

Outside the window, a broadcast played throughout the Garden.

"An emergency meeting…?"

"Something must have happened. Let's go, Mushiki," Kuroe said.

"…Y-yeah," he answered, snapping back to his senses.

◇

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Around ten minutes after leaving the boys' dormitory, Mushiki entered the command center in the central administrative building, accompanied by Ruri and Kuroe.

His voice and demeanor were completely different from how they had been a moment ago, but that was only to be expected. After all, he'd just transformed into a woman of unparalleled beauty.

Hair like silken threads, a face that positively radiated brilliance, and iridescent eyes that seemed to catch the viewer's gaze and refuse to let go. Every element came together in perfect harmony, transcending into a beauty nothing short of divine.

This magnificent figure was the Garden's headmistress, the most powerful mage in the world, Saika Kuozaki.

Yes. As Saika was among those summoned to the command center, Mushiki had undergone a state change en route from the boys' dormitory.

"Don't worry. I'll act like myself this time."

"What are you talking about, Saika?"

Greeting them was a petite girl in a white lab coat, very much out of place in the tense command center. Yet none of those gathered there today would dare underestimate her. This was Erulka Flaera, the oldest mage at the Garden and the head of its medical department.

"…Hmm? What happened to those two?" she asked, fixing the figures behind Mushiki with a puzzled look.

Her response was understandable. After all, Ruri and Kuroe were both unusually tense.

…No. That wasn't quite right. Ruri was glaring across at Kuroe, who remained coolly unruffled, while Ruri was breathing so heavily that her shoulders heaved up and down. She looked like a cat ready to pounce at the slightest provocation.

"Oh. Well, it's complicated," Mushiki said, brushing the question aside with a tight smile.

Nothing serious had happened, as such. In order to undergo a state change from his own body to Saika's, an external source of magical energy was required—and a kiss combined with a spell was the quickest and most efficient option. That was all.

Yet when Ruri had seen Kuroe kiss Mushiki, she'd cried out in rage, "Wh-what's this all about?!"

…She ought to have known by now that this was how they triggered his state changes, but it seemed she hadn't quite come to

terms with it yet.

"Hmph… Well, never mind," Erulka said, no doubt deciding that there were more pressing matters. "More importantly, how are you feeling, Saika? Nothing's troubling you?"

Mushiki sensed a deeper meaning behind that question, and his breath caught in his throat.

"…Hmm. I'm fine," he answered.

"…I see. That's good," Erulka replied. She must have decided not to probe too much with everyone else present, because she looked away and changed the subject. "In any event, we're facing an emergency. Sit down. Anviet's already here," she said, gesturing to a seat at the back of the room.

There, a tall, menacing man was slouched over lazily. He had tanned skin, and his hair was tied back in braids. He wore a well-tailored shirt and slacks, and gold jewelry gleamed on his neck and hands.

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

"Hey, Anviet. You're always quick to arrive. I don't see your wife with you today," Mushiki commented.

"…Hah? She's a middle schooler. She's in class," he answered, grumpily resting his chin on one hand.

His answer sounded quite problematic at face value, though no one pointed it out. Everyone present was aware that Anviet's wife, Sara, had been reincarnated after various twists and turns of fate and was now studying magic as a middle school student at the Garden.

"Now we're just waiting on Hilde— Oh." Erulka glanced around and fell silent, her brows coming together in a frown. "Never mind. Looks like she's already here. Come and sit down," she said, beckoning toward a corner of the room.

Looking closely, Mushiki caught a glimpse of long silver hair, the hem of a black dress, and the tip of a chest peeking out from the shadows.

"O-okay…"

At Erulka's urging, Hildegarde slowly emerged from the shadows. She walked toward them as cautiously as if she were being targeted by assassins, then took a seat.

With that, Mushiki and the remaining knights followed suit, while Kuroe continued to stand at attention behind him.

"Now, you've no doubt realized why I called you here," Erulka began, glancing at each of them in turn. "The Garden has found itself in the midst of a mass psychogenic illness. Already, fifty-two students, teachers, and staff members have fallen comatose, and none of them have awakened."

"…!"

Mushiki's eyebrows twitched in alarm.

There could be no doubt about it: That must have been what happened to Munakata. Mushiki had no idea it had affected so many students and teachers.

"And that's not all. I have received reports of the same phenomenon from the Tower, the Ark, the City, and the Peak."

"What…?" Ruri exclaimed, furrowing her brow.

Her surprise was understandable. Those were the names of each of the other mage-training institutes located in Japan.

"Wait a second. Are you saying this is deliberately targeting people at the mage-training institutes? But that's—"

"No, that isn't entirely accurate," Erulka interrupted.

"Huh…?" Ruri stared back wide-eyed.

"The same phenomenon has been reported among the general population, on the *outside*," Erulka continued with a grim expression. "It seems to have affected a few hundred thousand people already."

"Wh—?!"

"Th-that many…?"

Both Ruri and Hildegarde visibly shuddered at this shocking news.

In truth, Mushiki was as shaken as they were. The only reason he was able to maintain a semblance of composure was because he

was already trying so hard to act as the physical embodiment of serenity.

"…What the hell's goin' on? Have you figured out the cause?" Anviet asked.

"Yes," Erulka said with a nod. "We can't be entirely sure yet, but it seems…" She paused there and called out into empty space, "Play the recording."

In response to her voice, an image was projected above the table. It showed a stylish title logo displayed over the top of a computer-generated image of a grassy field and a huge castle.

"Argento Tírnanóg…?"

"It looks like a video game title screen," Kuroe observed.

"A game…?" Mushiki's breath caught in his throat.

Ruri seemed to have come to the same conclusion as him, because she raised her head with a start. "You're saying this game put them all into a coma?!"

Erulka nodded. "Everyone we've discovered comatose from last night through to this morning was playing this game at the time. I ordered an immediate investigation, and we've discovered that fourth-generation magic was incorporated into the game's programming."

"…!"

At this, all the faces around the table suddenly turned grim.

The history of magic was punctuated by five major discoveries.

The discovery of the powers of magical energy was considered the first generation, and the realization of how to manipulate that energy with spells, the second. The ability to draw composition formulas using patterns, diagrams, and characters to impart various magical effects was the third.

The fourth generation had come after that and had been developed only in modern times. That made sense, however, as fourth-generation magic referred to methods of controlling and operating composition formulas through computer technology.

As a result, it was possible to store composition formulas of immense scale on even the smallest of devices, allowing people to effortlessly use complex techniques that in previous ages would have been considered closely guarded secrets by the various schools of magic.

"Wait a minute. You're saying this is the work of a mage?"

"We don't know all the details yet. However, we *are* certain these comas are caused by spells embedded in the game. This *Argento Tírnanóg* was launched just last month. Its high production values attracted a considerable number of users at a rapid pace, and once the game had a large-enough player base, the spells were activated for all users simultaneously. We're still investigating, but it seems the company that produced and operates it exists only on paper," Erulka said, reading from the documents in front of her.

Ruri broke into a nervous frown. "You're saying they're not even using dedicated devices to do it, but people's own phones? Normal people on the *outside* I might be able to understand, but how does a mage get knocked out cold just by looking at a screen?"

"Hmm. They aren't just sleeping, I'm afraid."

"What does *that* mean?" Ruri demanded.

A troubled look crossed Erulka's face. "We've hospitalized several victims, but we're unable to detect any brainwaves. It's like their souls have been ripped from their bodies."

"Their souls…?"

"It's a terribly complex, delicate technique. As far as I know, only the City's Shikimori or our own Hilde would be capable of such a feat."

"Huh?"

"I-it wasn't me…!" Hildegarde, suddenly finding herself the center of attention, frantically shook her head.

Erulka let out an exasperated sigh and shrugged. "Of course not. If I thought it was, I would've had you arrested."

"E-eeep…" Hildegarde shrank back in fright, her entire body trembling.

"The same goes for Shikimori. He may be reckless, but he wouldn't go this far."

"Right. I can't imagine the City's headmaster doing something like this," Ruri added.

"Hmm. More like he wouldn't commit the sort of crime that would point to himself as one of the chief suspects."

Ruri grimaced. She probably hadn't considered that side of the equation.

"At any rate," Erulka continued, showing little concern, "a sorcery engineer of their caliber must be involved here."

"Hmm… That would be quite a problem. How should we respond?" Mushiki asked.

"Naturally, we'll have to leave that to the experts," Erulka answered matter-of-factly with a nod.

"Experts?" Mushiki repeated, when—

"This! Is! Unforgivable!" boomed a voice as Silvelle appeared before him. *"I don't know who's responsible for this, but no one messes with my sweet little brothers and sisters! I'll make them pay…! No forgiveness—not until they get down on their knees and apologize!"* she shouted, her fists shaking with anger. That extra touch wasn't entirely necessary to get her point across, but it was a fine piece of emotional artistry nonetheless.

"Right. Big sister Silvelle will be more than up to the task," Mushiki said with a satisfied nod.

The cyber world was Silvelle's territory. No matter how skilled a sorcery engineer they were dealing with here, a flesh-and-blood body would be no match for the AI's reaction speed and computational capabilities.

"Yes! Leave it to me!"

"Hmm. We're counting on you, Sis… Hilde, do everything you can to support her."

"Let's get started, Hilly! With your big sister Silvelle on the job, nothing will stand in our way!"

"…Well…I guess I have to…"

Roped into helping out by Erulka, Hildegarde rose unsteadily to her feet. She still didn't seem entirely happy being treated as a younger sibling by the AI she'd created, but she didn't have any objections to providing support.

With a somewhat disgruntled look, Hildegarde glanced around at her surroundings.

"…Mm, I guess this should be fine. We could go wireless, but who knows what's out there? I'll borrow a cable just to be safe…"

She gently stroked the console already set up on the table, then narrowed her eyes.

"Second Substantiation: Medium."

No sooner had she uttered those words than a gleaming silver pattern unfolded over her back, taking the form of a delicate set of fairy wings with all the technical details of a complex circuit diagram. It was her world crest—a magical crest that appeared whenever a mage activated a substantiation power.

At the same time, spherical objects that looked almost like video game controllers enveloped both her hands. As she manipulated them, tendrils of light made up of what looked like computer code flowed from the orbs to the console on the table, and several holographic screens shot up around her.

"Whoa…" Mushiki sucked in a breath in admiration.

Kuroe, standing at attention behind him, leaned in and whispered so that only he could hear, "That's Knight Hildegarde's second substantiation, Medium. It's said to possess the ability to access any electronic device."

Mushiki responded with a subtle nod, careful not to react too loudly or obviously.

"…Mm. I'm all set. Go ahead, Silvelle."

"Okay… I'll be off, then. I know you might feel lonely without your big sister around, but try to bear with it just for a little while," Silvelle replied with a playful wink.

Everyone else in the room observed with an amused smile, an awkward grin, or an expression of exasperation.

Silvelle's form began to break apart into blocky fragments, with each piece being sucked into the console Hildegarde was accessing.

The next moment, she appeared again on one of the holographic screens.

It looked like Hildegarde had used her second substantiation to send Silvelle into cyberspace, though as an AI, she was already a denizen of the digital realm. Maybe Silvelle had just wanted a little dramatic flair. She did like to show off at times, after all.

"…Can you trace the network to infiltrate *Argento Tírnanóg*?" Hildegarde asked.

"Yes. Leave it to your trustworthy big sis!" Silvelle answered with a thumbs-up.

A second later, a flurry of numbers and letters danced chaotically across the screen, gradually transforming into a breathtaking 3D landscape.

A familiar meadow. An ancient castle. There was no mistaking it: This was *Argento Tírnanóg*.

"I'm in. Hee-hee. They put a lot of effort into security, but your big sister Silvelle is quite literally on another dimension!" she joked, spinning around in high spirits.

Hildegarde breathed a gloomy sigh. "…Enough chitchat. Focus on digging up what's behind all these comas. And try to figure out where the servers are and who's administering them."

"Yeah, yeah, I know…," Silvelle answered, when—

Without warning, a wave of static surged across the screen, and a discordant screech began to echo around the room.

"Huh…?!"

"Wh-what's going on? What happened?!"

"J-just give me a second…!"

Hildegarde, her eyes open wide in surprise, quickly maneuvered the spherical controllers covering her hands. The screen, however, didn't return to normal. Stark confusion rippled through the room at the abruptness of it all.

At moments like this, it was essential to remain calm. So, trying to keep his racing heart in check, Mushiki called out to Hildegarde.

"Relax, Hilde. First—"

But before he could even finish his sentence, he was drowned out by a deafening alarm that rang throughout the command center—no, throughout the Garden.

"What's going on?!" Erulka cried, shouting over the noise.

"S-something's hurtling toward the Garden at incredible speed…!" a staff member operating a console in the back of the command center responded in a panic. "Three hundred and sixty seconds until impact…!"

"An annihilation factor?!"

"I—I don't know…!"

"…Lady Saika?"

"Yes."

Grasping Kuroe's meaning at once, Mushiki took a quick breath and spoke in a clear, resonant voice.

"This discussion can wait. For now, we must protect the Garden. I will deal with the threat myself. I need everyone else to evacuate the students."

"R-right!" Ruri answered.

"…Tch!" Anviet responded with an annoyed click of his tongue.

"Kuroe?"

"Yes. It's already done," she said, opening the door at the back of the command center.

Beyond was a view of the outside. This was one of several gateways installed throughout the Garden for immediate transportation between its key facilities.

Mushiki and Kuroe passed through it, instantly finding themselves in front of the central school building.

With perfect timing, a voice sounded over the loudspeakers throughout the Garden. "*This is an urgent announcement from Knight Erulka Flaera. An unknown entity is approaching the Garden.*

Saika Kuozaki will lead the response, so all students and staff are to evacuate to the underground shelters. I repeat…"

As soon as the announcement was made, they could hear the commotion and footsteps of students coming from the direction of the central school building.

Overcome with a strange sensation, Mushiki glanced up at the clear blue sky.

There wasn't a cloud to be seen—perfect weather for an outing. It was hard to believe that, in just a few minutes, an unknown entity would come crashing toward them.

"Lady Saika. Two hundred and forty seconds until arrival. If I may be so bold, may I propose countermeasures?" Kuroe asked in a measured tone as she glanced at her pocket watch.

"Of course," Mushiki responded confidently, placing his hands on his hips. "Let's hear it."

"Thank you. Considering the speed the object is flying at, you won't be able to wait until it is in visual range. As such—"

"I should deploy my fourth substantiation as widely as possible to contain the target," he said, still watching the sky.

Kuroe startled, visibly impressed. "I wasn't expecting that. How did you know?" she asked in her true voice.

Mushiki's lips relaxed into a faint smile. "I just asked myself what Saika would do. She would want to do more than just make sure the Garden is safe."

"Well done. Then all you have to do is make it so," she said with amusement.

Mushiki let out a soft chuckle, focusing as he raised his hands in front of him.

"Time to arrival, sixty seconds… Fifty… Forty…"

"……"

"…Now."

Right as Kuroe gave the signal, Mushiki let power fill his hands.

"The creation of all things. Heaven and earth alike reside in the palm of my hand."

He intoned those words, activating the greatest and most powerful technique of Saika Kuozaki, the Witch of Resplendent Color.

"Pledge obedience…"

Magical energy surged through his body.

Above his head, a four-layered world crest unfolded, taking on the shape of a witch's hat.

"For I will make of you my bride."

It took only an instant. Just like that, the world was painted over, a new landscape stretching out with Mushiki at its center.

A vast azure sky, continuing without end.

In that realm, countless skyscrapers towered in the sky and on the ground like the jaws of some mighty beast awaiting unsuspecting prey.

Fourth substantiation. The ultimate form of magic, in which one reshaped their surroundings with their own manifestation magic.

"…There!"

Substantiation magic was but a reflection of one's inner self. No matter how grand its scale, that never changed.

The shape of the flying object, all but impossible to detect with the naked eye, was suddenly rendered with startling clarity.

"…?!"

Mushiki saw the threat for what it was. Not a dragon or any other annihilation factor—but an inorganic cylindrical object.

"…A missile…?!" he stammered.

"What in the world…?" Kuroe gasped.

It wasn't an unreasonable reaction to have. Missiles, after all, were human-made weapons. Unlike biological annihilation factors, they had to be launched by human hands.

In other words, someone had decided to attack the Garden.

That wasn't an easy proposition to accept, however. The Garden was located in Ohjoh City in Tokyo, a bustling metropolis with millions of inhabitants. No rational mind would fire a missile at such a target. It was foolish in the extreme, practically a declaration of war against the entire world.

"…!"

But this was no time to waste his mental energy on such thoughts.

Now that Mushiki knew the threat was an explosive device, he had to adjust his plans to counter it. Simply crushing it like an annihilation factor wouldn't contain the blast. If, by some chance, his concentration wavered and his fourth substantiation was disrupted, the explosion would spread to the outside world.

"Hah…!"

Mushiki sharpened his focus and clenched his fists, beads of sweat forming on his brow. In response, the towering clusters of skyscrapers hanging overhead like sentinels began to close, moving to crush the missile between them as it tore through the air.

An explosion, a blinding flash, and a deafening roar buffeted the area.

"Ngh…"

Yet this was a fourth substantiation. Here, the laws of nature, of logic, of divine providence, bent themselves to the will of the practitioner. Mushiki distorted the very fabric of space itself, enveloping the missile and suppressing the shockwave.

As a result, this weapon of warped science ended its existence not by burning Mushiki's eyes, piercing his eardrums, or buffeting his skin, but merely in a twinkle of light.

"…Haah… Haah…"

His breathing ragged, Mushiki slowly unclenched his fists.

Then, as if on cue, his world crest vanished, and the azure sky surrounding him melted away.

"Lady Saika…"

Kuroe reached out to steady him.

"Well done. That was splendid."

"Ah… Looks like I pulled it off…," he muttered, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Kuroe nodded in appreciation, only for her expression to harden once more. "Let's return to the command center. We need to find out what's happening."

"Madam Witch!" Ruri's voice greeted him as they returned to the command center. "Are you okay?! You aren't hurt, are y—"

All at once, her worried voice cut off, and she jumped back in realization.

"I mean, of course you aren't! I would never, *ever* doubt you, Madam Witch…!"

"I know. Thank you, Ruri," Mushiki answered as he patted her on the head. Her cheeks turned red, and her face transformed into a look of bliss.

Now that Mushiki had neutralized the missile, it was almost as if the earlier chaos had never happened, and the members of their meeting were already back in the command center.

That being said, there was one exception. At the main table, Hildegarde, still using her second substantiation, continued to stare at the static display in front of her.

"Silvelle…! Respond, Silvelle…!" she called out, carefully manipulating the spherical controllers with her hands.

The only response, however, was deafening static.

"So we still can't reach her? Erulka, about that flying object…"

"Hmm. I wasn't expecting a missile. We still don't know what exactly happened. We've tried reaching out to the facility that launched it…but the network is dead. No information is getting through."

"Hmm…?"

Furrowing his brow, Mushiki pulled his phone from his pocket. Just as Erulka had said, the words *No signal* appeared in the upper-right corner of the screen. He tried making a call, but all contact with the network seemed to be down.

He continued to stare suspiciously at the screen when the doors to the command center unexpectedly swung open. A panicked staff member rushed in.

"Madam Witch! Lady Erulka!"

"What's all the commotion?"

"A-apologies! We couldn't get through over comms, so I had to report directly…!"

"I see. Very good. Now, speak. What is it?"

"R-right! Electronic devices are malfunctioning both within the Garden and on the *outside*! Everything from disaster alarms to control units in cars…! The entire city is in an uproar!"

"What…?" Erulka furrowed her brow in disbelief.

The others wore their shock similarly etched on their faces.

"We've lost control of most of the equipment in the medical department, and the doctors are overwhelmed with patients! We need your help…!"

"…I understand. Thank you for informing me," Erulka answered succinctly before joining her fingers together to make a sign.

The next moment, her world crest appeared over her hands, and a pack of wolves materialized around her—her second substantiation, Horkew.

"Go on ahead. I'll be right there."

"Right…!" The staff member nodded with relief, then ran from the room accompanied by the pack of wolves.

"…Tch. What is all this?" asked Anviet.

"It cannot be a coincidence," replied Kuroe. "A video game that puts the people who play it into a coma, a sudden communication blackout, electronic devices going haywire…and a missile launch from a military base. They are all electronically controlled."

"But who would do something like this?" Erulka demanded, a dark shadow falling over her face.

Just then—

"…! Ah…"

Hildegarde groaned as the static faded from the screen, revealing a distinct image.

It was an elaborate 3D landscape, probably a backdrop from the video game in question. The reason Mushiki couldn't be entirely sure was that the grassy meadow from earlier was gone, replaced by the ominous interior of a dark castle.

In the middle of the frame was a figure—Silvelle, arms and legs bound, staring helplessly at the floor.

"Is that…?"

"Silvelle…?!"

Everyone in the room gawked, taken aback by the sudden scene.

"Hold up a sec. What the hell's goin' on here? You're tellin' me Silvelle got herself caught?" Anviet demanded.

"Silvelle is an AI. Her physical appearance, modeled on Knight Hildegarde, is merely an interface to interact with humans. There's no way she could be restrained by chains," said Kuroe.

"I get what you're sayin', but how do you square *that* with *this*?"

Hildegarde's lips moved, a cold sweat on her brow.

"…It's probably…a message…"

"Hah?"

"…It seems to me…that this is about getting a message to the people watching this video…to us…in a way that's visually intuitive… At the very least, there's no doubt it's aimed at humans…," Hildegarde explained in a faltering voice.

As if response, a clapping sound played from the display.

"Bingo. I knew you'd get it."

A moment later, a figure appeared on the screen, walking slowly from the foreground toward Silvelle.

They couldn't make out her face with her back turned to them, but with her petite frame and slender limbs, there was no mistaking it was a young girl. Her long silvery hair swayed from side to side with each step, almost brushing the ground.

"But of course, it's not just about the visuals. Silvelle is now completely under my control. Oh, and it's not just Silvelle; every

electronic device connected to your network is currently at my mercy. The Garden is in a bit of a pickle, huh?"

The girl paused and slowly turned around.

Her impeccably crafted features seemed to smile at Mushiki and the others.

In that moment, Hildegarde's eyes shot open in disbelief, and a trembling voice escaped her lips.

"Edelgarde…"

The woman's smile—Edelgarde's—widened.

"Uh-huh. Long time no see… I've missed you, Sister."

Chapter 2
Into the RPG World

Long ago, Saika Kuozaki once paid a visit to a certain European locale.

"…Is this the place?"

If one had to describe the city, the words *chaos* and *disorder* might spring to mind. Those familiar with literature or poetry might craft witty metaphors or clever allusions for it, but terms like *lakefront* or *angelic* would certainly never make an appearance. The buildings were haphazardly packed together and crawled with an unruly tangle of pipes, the walls were coated with colorful graffiti, and the people—most likely drug addicts—cowered on the edges of the roads, their bodies hunched forward.

Being so close to the slums, it was far from safe. Since arriving, Saika had already been accosted twice by rough-looking men trying to block her path. Well, she made sure they quickly lost interest in her, turning them into fervent enthusiasts of the asphalt beneath their feet.

She made her way down the street, the hem of her long cloak swaying gently behind her as she turned down a narrow alleyway.

"Hey," a tough-looking street vendor camped by the roadside called out to her.

For a moment, Saika thought he might be cut from the same cloth as the men who'd tried to harass her, but that didn't seem to be the

case. As he looked her up and down, the street vendor's gaze was marked with distrust and wariness.

"Yeh shouldn't go down there. If it's the main road yeh want, it's best to take the next one up."

"Thanks for the heads-up. But I'm looking for someone. I'm told they live down here."

Hearing Saika's response, the street vendor furrowed his brow, and his wariness seemed to deepen.

"What would an outsider want with the Fairies?"

"Fairies?"

"Yeah, that's what folks 'round here call 'em. They're a wild bunch. Innocent on the surface, but full of tricks…and beyond anyone's control. Not even the toughest folks here dare mess with 'em."

"Hmm… So they're like mischievous little pixies?"

"Nothin' as cute as that. They look like *leannan sídhe*, but deep down, they're savage redcaps. Cross 'em, and next thing yeh know, yer phone's spillin' secrets all over the web, yer bank account's wiped clean, and yer mug's in the police database like some sorta criminal."

"Oh? That's quite something."

"I'd count meself lucky if that's all they did to me. One day, this drunk hoodlum trips over a Fairy's feet, yeah? So whattaya think happened next? Outta nowhere, there's this video uploaded to the guy's social media. There he is, braggin' 'bout how he made off with the money from a drug deal. And just for kicks, he's takin' shots at the head honcho, sayin' what an idiot he is and callin' him every name under the sun." The street vendor paused for a moment, then waved his hands in an exaggerated gesture. "I ain't gonna sugarcoat it. Yeh don't know what kinda game yer playin' at. It's best to steer clear."

"I would love to, but unfortunately, I received a direct invitation to this little Fairy kingdom."

"Eh…?" The vendor gawked, backing down without further resistance. "Well then, ain't nothin' more for me to say. Do what yeh

want.”

“You’re sure?”

“If yer lyin’, yer just gonna get yerself killed. But if yer tellin’ the truth, what sorta mischief do yeh reckon the Fairies will pull on this old fool for turnin’ away their guest?” the man said with barely masked fear.

Saika nodded in understanding and briefly thanked the man before stepping into the narrow alleyway.

With a mental map in her mind, she walked toward her destination —the lair of the hackers known as the Fairies.

A few days earlier, the administrative system of the mage-training institute Void’s Garden had fallen victim to a cyberattack.

The damage itself wasn’t too severe—just a few log files locked and their viewing permissions restricted, as well as folder icons and names given fanciful replacements. If anything, it was more like a child’s prank.

However, that wasn’t any reason for optimism. The very fact that the Garden’s administrative system, which had been crafted by dedicated sorcery engineers, had succumbed to unauthorized external access was a threat against the school.

The Garden’s technical department launched an immediate investigation, but they had been unable to pinpoint the culprit’s whereabouts.

So why had Saika come here of all places? The answer was simple. Rearranging the altered icons and filenames had revealed the coordinates to this city and a string of text inviting her to visit.

Of course, there was no way to judge the culprit’s honesty. Yet lacking any other leads, she’d done as the message bade her.

“This must be it.”

Within a few minutes, she arrived in front of the building. It was a warped structure that loomed above her like a pile of boxes haphazardly stacked on top of each other.

The door was unlocked. Unafraid, Saika stepped into the Fairies’ lair.

Inside, the building was a ruin. The dim, cavernous space was littered with scattered desks and chairs and was filled with an air of eerie abandonment.

At first glance, it seemed uninhabited. Closer inspection, however, revealed footprints and wheel tracks amid the dust. Someone was clearly coming and going on a frequent basis.

"I suppose I should check upstairs."

But just then—

"…Oh?"

Reaching the middle of a deserted room, Saika came to a halt.

Her finely tuned instincts as a mage sensed something vaguely amiss.

The next moment, a faint sound came from the shadows—and a barrage of gunfire was unleashed straight at her. Bullets rained down from all directions, most likely from automatic sentry guns, which fired when a target triggered their sensors.

"Hmm."

Yet not one among those several hundred bullets reached Saika.

Perhaps it was a sensor malfunction, or the barrels of the guns had deteriorated, or the bullets had collided in midair, disrupting their aim. Or maybe it was all of those factors combined. Whatever the case, the projectiles all swerved away from her, ricocheting around the room in a fantastical display.

Permanent substantiation. Though Saika had hidden her world crest, which was too conspicuous to keep activated in a town like this, her first substantiation had remained active since the very moment she'd set foot in this territory.

When used to attack, the technique could deliver a surefire blow—but when turned to defense, it served as a shield of accumulated *coincidences*. It might not have the power of a third substantiation, but it was next to impervious against this level of nonmagic attack.

That said, the only reason she was still standing was because she was *Saika Kuozaki*. Injuries would have been unavoidable if she had

been a lesser mage, and if she'd been an ordinary person, the consequences would have gone without saying.

Had the Fairies set these traps anticipating her visit? Or were they just naturally cautious?

Either way, they clearly weren't ordinary people.

"Interesting."

Feeling faintly cautious and tense—as well as irrepressibly curious and exhilarated, Saika pressed forward.

"The next floor should to be the top one," Saika murmured to herself as she ascended the staircase to the final floor.

Around thirty minutes had passed since she first entered the building.

"…!"

The next moment, she stopped and frowned slightly.

The reason was simple: The second she'd reached the top of the steps, the dimly lit floor had flickered to life.

Lit by a spotlight, two figures were clearly illuminated at the back of the room.

The first was a small, thin girl seated in a wheelchair.

The second wore glasses and was huddled over, like she was trying to hide behind her companion's back.

Judging from the color of their hair and eyes, they were probably sisters. Their features were strikingly similar, yet while the girl in the wheelchair exuded a calm composure, the one with the glasses was visibly restless, her gaze darting about and her body trembling.

"Greetings. It's an honor to finally meet you, Madam Witch," said the girl in the wheelchair. She was impeccably calm and looked as if she'd been awaiting Saika's arrival.

After taking a long, hard look at the both of them, Saika returned the smile.

"You're the Fairies, I take it? I appreciate the warm welcome."

Yes. The building was twelve stories high, and each and every floor had been rigged with an array of relentless, troublesome booby traps.

When Saika had reached the center of one room, the ceiling had started to descend, and the walls had closed in—but that had only been the beginning. The windows had suddenly sealed, toxic gas had filled the room, decorative suits of armor had sprung to life and attacked, and to top it all off, a grid of laser beams had bored down on her.

The traps had been like something from out of a video game, brimming with creativity and murderous intent. Saika was so awestruck that her caution had given way to admiration.

"We are," the girl in the wheelchair answered, her lips curling in a grin. "We weren't the ones who came up with that name, but it has stuck. Please forgive any lapses in our hospitality. We just wanted to make sure you were everything we had heard."

"Oh? Then I take it I've met your expectations?"

"Exceeded them, rather. Those traps could annihilate an entire special forces unit. I wasn't expecting anyone to overcome them so easily." The girl in the wheelchair nodded deeply, then gently placed a hand over her chest. "My name is Edelgarde Silvelle. This is my older sister, Hildegarde."

"Ah… Yes… Uh, h-hello…" At the sound of her name, the bespectacled girl—Hildegarde—bowed in a fluster. Judging by her behavior, she seemed to be extremely shy.

The Fairies' true identities were a stark contrast to the malicious rumors Saika had heard on the way here.

"You're the ones who hacked into the Garden's administration system?" she asked.

"Yes. That would be us."

"I was tempted to brush it off as a cute little prank, but I'm afraid I can't do that. First, I need you to remove the locks you placed on the log data. Would you do that for me?"

"Of course. We'll unlock it immediately. We have no intention of butting horns with the Garden and are prepared to face the consequences of our actions."

"In that case, why did you do it?" Saika asked.

Edelgarde paused for a moment as she pondered her next words. "I suppose because it seemed interesting. I wanted to see how capable we were, if our skills could break through the security of the famed Garden."

Hearing this response, Saika narrowed her eyes.

The girl didn't seem to be lying, yet at the same time, she wasn't telling the full story.

"More importantly, Madam Witch, if the security of the training institute led by the world's most powerful mage was breached this time, you must be worried about the same thing happening in future battles. So we would like to make you a proposal."





"What kind of 'proposal'?" Saika asked.

Edelgarde smirked. "Would you consider hiring a genius to work at your Garden?"

◇

"…Edelgarde…," Hildegarde whispered as she sat there, stunned, staring at the screen.

Behind her glasses, her eyes were wide with shock and disbelief, and her slightly parted lips quivered ever so slightly.

To be fair, it wasn't just Hildegarde who was taken aback. Every Knight of the Garden present in the command center was visibly shaken to one degree or another.

"Impossible…"

"Edelgarde…?"

"Ridiculous. She died years ago."

From their reactions, as well as the appearance and actions of this girl who'd called herself "Edelgarde," Mushiki understood.

She was Hildegarde's sister, who'd passed away due to a tragic illness.

Yet her reappearance seemed to contradict that assertion. Mushiki furrowed his brow, lost in thought.

It went without saying, but Hildegarde's sister was dead. What they were watching on the holographic display were ultimately just images from inside the game.

The same questions seemed to be racing through everyone's mind. Unable to make heads or tails of the scene in front of them, they all watched with uncertainty.

Amid the confusion, Hildegarde gasped in realization.

"…! She's an AI!"

"Huh?" Ruri responded.

Hildegarde's gaze remained locked on the display. "She's a self-learning AI… Just like how Silvelle was modeled on me, she's taken on Edel's appearance…!"

"Well done," Edelgarde said, putting her hands together in mock applause. *"I'm a personality-forming AI created by the sorcery engineer Edelgarde Silvelle, but please, feel free to call me Edelgarde. In life, my master referred to me as her* other self*, and I inherited all her memories and thought patterns. But most importantly…"* She paused, flashing them a charming smile. *"Her name belongs solely to me now."*

"……"

Hearing this, Hildegarde was left at a loss for words.

Mushiki could understand how she must feel. In that moment, she'd been thrown into turmoil by the dissonance between Edelgarde's voice and expression, devoid of any malice or ill intent, and the chillingly stark substance of her words.

"Hilde," he called out.

She jolted upright. "…! Wh-what? Li'l Saika…?"

"What do you think? Is what she said possible?"

The question itself didn't hold any particular significance; Mushiki had just wanted to give her a moment to regain her composure. Hildegarde must have sensed his intent, as she took a long, deep breath, then gave the question some thought.

"It isn't impossible… *I* would be able to do it, so there's no reason Edel couldn't." She paused there, her eyes narrowing as she fixed her gaze on the display. "Answer me. Are you behind the network outages and all these people slipping into comas?"

"Yep. That would be me," Edelgarde answered, admitting it openly.

Taken aback, Hildegarde gulped in fright, but she quickly recovered and hardened her expression. "Why? If Edel created you, why would you do all this?"

"Why…? Well…" Edelgarde made a dramatic show of resting her chin on her hand in thought, her head tilted slightly to one side. *"Because it's fun?"*

"…!"

Hildegarde's breath caught in her throat. Judging by her expression, she seemed surprised to hear the AI had such trivial

motives—although her answer was entirely as Hilde had expected.

"Look." Edelgarde laughed, spreading her arms wide.

The next moment, videos of various different locations appeared on the display. There were magnificent grasslands, crumbling castles, scorching sand dunes, snow-laden peaks, bustling townscapes—an array of fantastical landscapes appeared one after the next.

And among them all were a large number of human figures.

Adventurers, perhaps. They were dressed in armor, robes, and all sorts of other distinctive equipment.

"…?"

A strong sense of unease gnawed at Mushiki.

Some of the adventurers were walking across the harsh terrain or battling terrifying monsters, but most seemed simply overwhelmed, talking to each other or slumped over in despair.

And that wasn't all. Mushiki couldn't help but think he recognized more than a few familiar faces.

"Those people…"

"That's right."

The video feed switched back to Edelgarde's castle.

"This is my world, Argento Tírnanóg*, currently home to 395,291 adventurers."*

"…"

Mushiki's eyes shot open in alarm.

The others present must have grasped her meaning, as their faces filled with increasing levels of distress.

"Hold on. You're saying all those people who fell into comas in real life are somehow trapped in the game?" Ruri exclaimed.

"Soul capture… It's theoretically possible, but on this sort of a scale…?" Erulka murmured.

Edelgarde's features broke out into a self-satisfied grin, and she nodded dramatically. *"Yep. This is perfect timing, so let me explain. A lot of you don't seem to fully get the point of this."*

She leaped playfully into the air, and the image shifted once more—this time, to a large town square filled with adventurers. They were huddled together talking over each other, probably trying to get a grasp of the situation in which they had inexplicably found themselves.

"Here we go!"

Edelgarde suddenly appeared amid the confusion.

"Huh…?! Wh-what the…?!"

"Some girl just popped up out of nowhere!"

"Is she one of the characters…?"

This sudden turn of events only added to the adventurers' collective dismay.

Yet Edelgarde paid them no heed, calling out in a loud, clear voice: *"Testing, testing. Can you hear me? How about all you adventurers outside the plaza…? Good, seems like you're reading me loud and clear. Don't worry, this isn't a bug or anything. I'm about to spill some super-important deets, so make sure those ears are wide open, okay?"* She paused dramatically for a moment, taking a deep breath. *"Greetings. I am your Fairy Queen, Edelgarde. Just so you know, I've gone and trapped your souls inside this video game."*

She delivered the devastating news in a light, breezy tone.

A panicked murmur rippled through the crowd of adventurers.

"Hah…?"

"What? Is this some sort of event?"

"Beats me… I don't even know what I'm doing here."

Edelgarde continued, unconcerned, *"So there's only one way to get back to your original world: You have to beat me, the Fairy Queen. The clock's ticking. You have two hundred and forty hours, to be exact. If you can't take me down by then, well, you'll be stuck in this realm forever."* Her lips curled up into a smirk. *"Or should I say, you won't have any other world to go back to?"*

"…You little punk," Anviet growled, his gaze turning razor sharp.

That response was hardly unreasonable. Edelgarde wasn't making some tasteless joke.

Right now, she had taken complete control over the world's communication networks and electronic devices. To put it bluntly, she could unleash a rain of global nuclear devastation if she so wished.

In the center of the crowd of stunned adventurers, Edelgarde's attitude remained utterly carefree. *"That's that. Time to level up and take down the Fairy Queen! If you don't, your precious family and friends might just meet an untimely demise. So—"*

But before she could finish speaking, a voice rang out and a new figure appeared on the screen.

"Raaah!"

It was a boy clad in light armor, raising his sword into the air as he charged straight for Edelgarde.

"What's going on?"

"Is that…?"

Mushiki's eyes widened in dismay.

But that was only to be expected. After all, the boy was one of the Garden's comatose students, Hanji Munakata.

"Munakata…?!"

"Hmm, not bad. You're quick on the uptake. So you've decided to come for me? You've got more guts than your average gamer. You're a mage, then?"

Effortlessly dodging Munakata's strike, Edelgarde soared gracefully through the air and stretched out one hand.

"In most games, that kind of attack is a big no-no. But honestly? I kinda love it. So, as a reward for your bravery, how about I give you a small glimpse of what else I have up my sleeve?" she said with a snap of her fingers.

At that moment, it seemed as if a faint static flickered across the screen—from which some shadowy figure emerged.

"Hngh…?!"

Just like that, Munakata groaned out in anguish and collapsed to the ground, leaving the surrounding adventurers shrieking in shock.

"Huh…?"

"What on earth…?"

The sudden turn of events had left Mushiki and the others puzzled.

All they could say was that Munakata had been knocked down. But it had happened so quickly that there was no telling who had done it or what had been done to him.

The answer, however, was soon made abundantly clear.

"Are you hurt, milady?"

With that ominous line, the mysterious shadowy figure finally revealed itself.

"I'm fine. Thanks to you."

"That's a relief. I would have driven a dagger through my own throat if he had so much as scratched your beautiful skin."

"What…?"

"You gotta be kiddin' me…"

"…"

The assembled knights in the command center cried out in shock and alarm. After all, projected on the display was…

"You're a bad boy. How dare you turn your blade against my dear Edel?"

The world's most powerful mage, Saika Kuozaki.

Everything, from her neatly tied-back hair, to her figure, concealed by an outfit that made her look like a young noble, to her delicate features and vivid, iridescent eyes, was unmistakably Saika's.

"Saika…?" Erulka murmured.

"No way!" Ruri exclaimed. "You're telling me Madam Witch got herself sucked into that game…?!"

Mushiki shook his head, pointing to his own chest. "I'm right here, Ruri."

"Oh…! R-right! Who's that gorgeous Madam Witch clone, then…?!"

Kuroe narrowed her gaze. "I suspect she is what you would call a non-player character—an NPC. Edelgarde likely created her as a sort of in-game monster. It's in incredibly bad taste, however, copying Lady Saika's appearance like that."

"Ha-ha. A monster*? That's terribly rude. Think of me as Edel's guardian,"* the Saika on the screen said with an exaggerated shrug.

But Kuroe just ignored her. "Knight Hildegarde. I'd like to hear your assessment of the situation."

"……"

Hildegarde, however, didn't react at all. Her gaze remained fixed blankly on the screen, her mouth agape and her eyes open wide in surprise.

…Mushiki could only speculate on her state of mind; however, the AI left behind by her sister seemed to have struck a nerve. She must have been flustered, of course, but something told him Hildegarde's feelings of fear, anger, and sorrow alone weren't enough to account for the expression that had settled on her face.





"Knight Hildegarde?" Kuroe repeated.

"……Hm?" This time, she jolted back, waking up. Cold sweat formed on her brow, and her eyes darted about as she forced herself to reply. "N-no… Th-that's… It can't be…"

"You don't think she's an NPC?"

"Eh…? Ah, no… I think she's an NPC…"

"…?"

Kuroe tilted her head to the side at Hildegarde's halting response. Yet she didn't pursue the matter any further. Instead, Edelgarde, up on the screen, broke out in a mocking laugh.

"Hee-hee-hee. Well, that's about the gist of it. If you can send my guardian packing and defeat me before time runs out, then you all win. But if you can't, then I win. Simple, don't you think? New entrants are always welcome! If you start playing Argento Tírnanóg *on your PC or smartphone, the magic will trigger automatically and whisk you right into my world. If you consider yourself a capable adventurer, come try your luck,"* she said with a wink.

It was clear that those words were directed to this side of the screen—to Mushiki and the others.

"Come on. Let's play, Sister," she said with a cheerful wave.

A second later, the screen turned black.

"…"

A long, drawn-out silence filled the command center.

It was Erulka who spoke up first.

"…'Let's play,' huh?" she muttered with a frown as she crossed her arms. "Whatever her motives, we don't seem to have any other choice. If she can control any electronic device at will, she's effectively taken over the whole world. The missile incident just now suggests she's already in control of military facilities. It isn't hard to imagine what will happen if she isn't stopped."

"Damn it…! You've gotta be kiddin'… She wants to play games? Fine! I'll crush her!" Anviet roared, slamming his hands on the table.

"Crush her? How, exactly?" Erulka asked.

"She's an AI! She can't exist without havin' *somethin'* here in the real world. I'll smash up her servers and computers and—"

"Indeed. Yet no doubt that was why she lured Silvelle out and rendered her inoperable—to prevent us from pinpointing her physical location."

"Ugh…!" Anviet grimaced. "So whattaya sayin'? You expect us to just jump into that little game world of hers?"

"…I agree we will need to complete her game; however, it would be too dangerous to just blindly follow her instructions," Kuroe said.

"Huh?" Anviet furrowed his brow.

"Edelgarde is in complete control of *Argento Tírnanóg*," she elaborated. "To enter through conventional means would be to submit ourselves to her rules. It would be like setting foot in someone's fourth substantiation without taking appropriate countermeasures."

Anviet tilted his head to one side, as if he wasn't quite following. "So how the hell are we s'posed to beat her game, then?"

"Lawlessness begets lawlessness…," Kuroe answered cryptically. "Knight Hildegarde?"

Hildegarde, flustered, shook her head. "…?! I—I didn't…"

"You've been meaning to say something for a while now. What is it?" Kuroe demanded with an impassive stare.

Hildegarde shrank back, a feeble apology escaping her lips. "S-sorry…"

"Never mind that. More importantly, Knight Hildegarde, with your second substantiation, you should be able to access *Argento Tírnanóg* by force as you did earlier, correct?"

"Ah… Yes. I think I can do that…" Her worried frown, however, remained etched into her forehead. "But it's hard to say where Edel is or any of the servers…"

"That isn't the concern," Kuroe continued. "I have a different request."

"You do…?"

Kuroe locked eyes with Hildegarde, giving her a slow nod. "I want you to reverse-engineer Edelgarde's code so we can send our own mages into *Argento Tírnanóg*—while still retaining their abilities."

"Huh…?" Hildegarde blinked in surprise.

"Retaining their abilities…?" Mushiki repeated, pulling a face similar to Hildegarde's.

Kuroe nodded before continuing. "Yes. Do you recall how Munakata attacked Edelgarde?"

"Huh? Of course…" At that moment, his breath caught in his throat. "He didn't use his second substantiation…"

"Precisely," Kuroe answered, keeping her gaze cast down as the nodded. "It's highly unusual for a modern mage, one who predominantly relies on manifestation magic, not to use their second substantiation when initiating an attack. I cannot say whether it was to curtail the mages' power or to protect the game's internal narrative, but it seems likely that they were stripped of their magic when they were taken into *Argento Tírnanóg*—or at the very least, that restrictions were placed on its usage… Which is to say that if a mage can enter the game world while retaining their abilities, they would hold a significant advantage."

"I see…" Mushiki put a hand to his chin in contemplation.

If Kuroe was right, it did seem like an effective approach. He glanced toward Hildegarde. "It's an intriguing idea. Can you do it, Hilde?"

She shrank back again. "S-so…you're saying everyone's going to enter the game…?"

"Yes."

"But then…we'll probably have to fight that handsome, princely Saika…right…?"

"So long as she's protecting Edelgarde, I'd say that's quite likely," Mushiki said.

"……"

Hildegarde fell silent for a long, drawn-out moment.

But just because no words left her lips, that didn't mean she was devoid of reaction. Her eyes darted about restlessly behind her glasses, her breath came in sharp, ragged gasps, and her brow was coated in a sheen of sweat. It was so bad that she risked passing out if she kept that up.

"Hilde. Hilde. Are you okay?" asked Mushiki.

"Ah…! Um… Y-yes…," she replied in a panic. Her glasses had already fogged up to an alarming degree, and she somehow seemed slightly thinner than before.

Clearly, something was amiss.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, tilting his head slightly to one side.

"…?! A-a problem?! N-no! Not at all!" Hildegarde responded in a strange tone of voice as she thumped her chest with one hand.

"…? Really? Well, if you're sure…"

Mushiki would be lying if he said he wasn't concerned about her, but right now, time was of the essence.

"We're counting on you, Hilde," he continued. "The fate of the world is in your hands."

"O-okay…" She nodded, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Then I'll be back soon…"

She started deploying her second substantiation, but Kuroe called out to stop her.

"Knight Hildegarde. No matter how much magical knowledge you possess, it's still dangerous to go alone. Since when have you been a fighter?"

"S-since always. I'm a one-woman army…!" she said, making a show of throwing a few punches through the air.

Hildegarde's actions, so uncharacteristic of her, left everyone looking on in utter bewilderment.

She must also have noticed the discomfort after a few seconds, because her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and her shoulders drooped. "Ah, um…I was just joking…," she murmured.

"Enough fooling around. Please get ready," Kuroe chastised her. "We have a strict deadline, so we cannot afford to stand around."

"I—I know. Sorry… So anyone coming with me will need to be able to use their abilities…?"

"Yes."

"Will it be all right if I turn off visual and auditory information instead…?"

"Do *you* think that sounds like we'll be 'all right'?" Kuroe asked with a hard stare, a hint of irritation entering her voice. "Why would you go out of your way to cut off sight and sound? We would lose any advantages that having our abilities might give us."

"B-but, um… They say that by deliberately cutting off certain senses, you can sharpen your other ones. Or something like that…"

"I won't deny some masters may be capable of that, but this is hardly the time for improvisation." Thoroughly exasperated, Kuroe stormed up to Hildegarde with her arms crossed. "What is it you're so averse to? This is no joke. The world is facing a crisis here. I understand you don't want to fight an AI that looks just like your sister, but—"

"Ah… Well… That's part of it, I suppose…"

"Only *part* of it?"

"…! N-never mind…!" Hildegarde's head moved back and forth, shaking off the question.

Watching from the sidelines, Erulka let out a weary sigh. "What? Do you really have so little confidence? I don't want to do this, but if you won't budge, we'll have to ask Shikimori to step in and—"

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaahhh?!" Hildegarde shrieked, cutting off Erulka. It was so sudden, it caught everyone by surprise.

Her shoulders shook, and her body swayed uneasily, until finally, she breathed a resigned sigh.

"…I…I understand. Okay. I'm fine. I'd rather do it myself than let *him* take my place… I'll even put together a proper party. This is for the good of the world, after all… Damn you, world…"

Mushiki thought he'd heard something strange at the end of all that, but he decided to ignore it for the time being.

"In that case, Hilde, what should we do?" he asked.

"Ah… Um…" She seemed put off for a moment as everyone's attention fell on her, but she soon feigned a cough to regain her composure. "I'm just guessing…but I think we'll only be able to send four people into the game world, including myself."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Simply put, there are limits to my second substantiation… Also, parties in *Argento Tírnanóg* are limited to four players…"

"…Oh?" Mushiki cocked his head.

The others must have had the same question in mind. Kuroe leaned forward, a suspicious look on her face. "That's awfully specific. Don't tell me…"

"Oh… Yes. I've been playing it, too. I mean, I have to stay in the loop with all the trending titles, you know?" Hildegarde answered matter-of-factly. "I'm at level fifty-four, and I've collected a hundred and eight relics. I think I've finished most of the currently available content…though I haven't had a chance to log in today as I've been busy with the Spirit Festival…"

"…"

"…"

Without saying anything, Mushiki and Kuroe exchanged looks.

…That was a close call. If the Spirit Festival hadn't been going on today and Hildegard had launched the game, her soul might have been trapped in the virtual world like all the other players. If that had happened, they would've lost all means of reaching Edelgarde in her digital realm. A cold chill ran down Mushiki's spine at the thought.

He couldn't say whether Hildegarde herself was aware of that, though, as her voice showed no sign of concern. "So…we'll have to decide who will go into the game…"

"Now we're talkin'. Let *me* go," Anviet said, pointing to himself with his thumb.

Hildegarde, however, appeared reluctant.

"Ah… Um… Well…"

"Hah? You got a problem with that?"

"The thing is… Um… With men…it's a bit tough…"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Anviet yelled.

Shrieking, Hildegarde clung desperately to Mushiki's arm. Startled by her touch, he had to remind himself that he was currently Saika. And so, maintaining his composure, he patted her gently on the head.

"Anviet. There's no need to frighten Hilde," he said.

"Perhaps Knight Hildegarde has her reasons," added Kuroe. "Shall we ask her?"

"…Ah, damn it. Fine. I get it. So who're we pickin', then?" Anviet hung his head in surrender—though judging by his expression, he still wasn't fully convinced.

"Now, Hilde. Tell us who you think would be best to take with you."

"R-right…," she said with a nod. After a brief moment of hesitation, she turned to Mushiki. "First…Li'l Saika…I think."

"Hmm. All right. I'll do my best," Mushiki answered in a relaxed tone.

To tell the truth, he wasn't at all surprised. When stepping into an unknown world to confront an unknown enemy, it was only natural to choose Saika Kuozaki, the world's most powerful mage, as your ally.

Mushiki felt as if he was about to be crushed by the stress and worry of it all, but of course, he couldn't let even a hint of that show. Right now, he was Saika, and there was no way Saika would succumb to such inner turmoil.

There was just one thing bothering him.

"…We're talking about sending souls into the game… Will that be okay?" he whispered to Kuroe.

He might have been inhabiting Saika's body, but his soul was still his own. What would they do if the moment he stepped into the

game, he reverted to Mushiki?

Kuroe, sensing his apprehension, gave a slight nod. "The technique is etched into one's body. If Knight Hildegarde can enter the game while maintaining her second substantiation, then there shouldn't be any issue. The fusion binding the two bodies is, ultimately, nothing more than a spell."

"I see…," he murmured.

Hildegarde turned to face their next companion. "Second is…uh… Ruri."

"Oh yeeeeah!" Ruri shouted, clenching her fist and striking a triumphant pose. A second later, she snapped back to reality, feigned a cough, and straightened her posture. "I'm honored. I shall endeavor to be of service."

Kuroe fixed her with a piercing stare. "Ruri, if you run into the fake Saika in the game, remember not to ask her for a picture or a handshake. Understood?"

"Ugh… I—I would never do that!" she shouted, her voice rising in pitch as her eyes darted from side to side.

Kuroe breathed out an exasperated sigh.

…That said, Mushiki couldn't say he didn't understand how Ruri felt. Right now, he was in his Saika form, so he had to keep his emotions in check—but honestly, the second that noble Saika appeared on the screen, he'd almost reached for his smartphone. It would have been a close call if Kuroe hadn't been here.

"…"

Anviet's eyebrows twitched. It seemed he couldn't stomach the fact that he'd been rejected while Ruri wasn't. All the same, he said nothing, no doubt waiting for the conversation to be over.

"Then, finally…the third member…" Hildegarde glanced around at each of the faces in the command center until her gaze settled on a certain individual. "Kuroe…would you mind?"

"Of course not," she answered without a hint of hesitation.

"Just wait one second!" Anviet roared, unable to hold back any longer. "I get that Fuyajoh ain't too shabby, but why the hell isn't the

last party member me or Erulka?! Why are you pickin' Saika's attendant?!"

"My name is Kuroe Karasuma."

"Ah. My bad… No, hang on!" He gave his head a rough shake. "Karasuma! You just transferred in not too long ago, right?! What's your mage rank?!"

"I'm C-rank."

"You see what I mean?! She's gonna be pushin' up daisies if she goes in there!"

"C-rank is brimming with possibility. The only way to go from there is up," Kuroe said.

"You sure got a knack for spinnin' the truth, huh?!" Anviet shouted, giving the back of his head a vigorous scratch.

Despite his words, he seemed less worried about sending an unprepared student into danger than annoyed he hadn't been selected himself.

C-rank was bestowed upon mages certified as capable of manifesting their first substantiation. It also served as the minimum standard for students to be admitted to the Garden. Under the circumstances, one could hardly blame Anviet for taking Hildegarde's decision as a personal affront.

That being said, in Kuroe's case, it was probably just that she hadn't been certified for any higher levels…though there was no way Anviet could know that.

"Take it easy, Anviet," Erulka urged. "It would be foolish to spread our resources too thin without knowing Edelgarde's true intentions. Besides, this is Hilde's domain. We should trust her judgment… Now, I'm going to the medical wing. Anviet, you wait outside. With that AI in control of the military bases, there's a strong likelihood of further attacks. After Saika, you're the mage most capable of responding to a diverse range of combat scenarios."

"Y-yeah, but c'mon…"

"What? Are you telling me you don't feel up to it? Maybe I misjudged you. Neutralizing weapons hurtling toward you at those

speeds is no easy feat. Saika managed it, but maybe it would be too much for you to handle…"

"…Hah?!" Anviet shouted, veins bulging from his forehead as he barely contained his rage. "Who the hell says I ain't up to it?! Cut the crap! I could've stopped that thing blindfolded!"

"Really? Unlike Saika, you've been known to crumble under pressure. Are you sure you won't spiral into a panic at the thought of what might happen to the students if you fail?"

"You'll see! I'll show you!" Anviet yelled angrily. He jumped up from his seat and jabbed a finger at Kuroe. "…I dunno what's goin' on here, but fine, go without me. And you, you trumped-up C-rank! Don't you go sullyin' the Garden's reputation out there!"

"I understand," Kuroe answered with a polite bow.

Still not fully satisfied, Anviet let out a loud huff.

Seeing him like that, Ruri leaned close to whisper in Mushiki's ear, "He's always like this. If he's worried about her, he should have just said so."

"Yes. Deep down, he probably sees the logic of it but is unable to back down. And it didn't help that Erulka kept fanning the flames," Kuroe added.

"Just so you know, he treats me to lunch whenever I help him out of one of these situations," Erulka chimed in.

"Oh yeah?"

"That's very conscientious of him."

"You know I can still hear you?!" Anviet roared, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "A-anyway! I'm leaving this to you guys!" And with those words still hanging in the air, he stormed out of the command center.

Watching him leave, Mushiki breathed a shallow sigh and turned back to Hildegarde. "We're counting on you, Hilde."

"O-okay… Saika, Ruri, Kuroe. Could you sit side by side over there…?"

The three of them did as instructed, settling into a row of chairs—Mushiki in the center, Ruri to his right, and Kuroe to his left.

"I-I'll get started then… Second Substantiation: Medium…," Hildegarde intoned with both hands raised in front of her.

Once more, her world crest lit up, and countless cables extended from her fingers like writhing tentacles, inching toward the three of them.

The sight was enough to make Ruri break out in a nervous sweat.

"Hold on… Isn't there an easier way to do this?"

"S-sorry. Just bear with it for a minute. I need to absorb everyone's information…," Hildegarde said apologetically. The tips of the cables crawled around their bodies as if examining them, before transforming into patches and sticking to their foreheads, necks, and arms.

"All right… I'm all set. A-are you all ready to go?" Hildegarde asked, still operating the spherical controllers on her hands.

There was no turning back now.

"Of course," Mushiki replied.

"I'll see you in the game, Madam Witch," Ruri said.

"We're counting on you, Knight Hildegarde," Kuroe added.

Hildegarde gave a firm nod. "Commencing submersion into *Argento Tírnanóg*!" she said, twisting the controllers on her hands.

"…"

The next moment, as if his power supply had been abruptly cut, Mushiki blacked out.

◇

"…Come, adventurer. It is time to wake up…"

"Ngh… Ugh…"

An unfamiliar voice echoed from somewhere in the distance.

Feeling a mild headache, Mushiki opened his eyes.

"…This is Tírnanóg, a world composed of three islands…"

All the while, the mysterious voice continued to speak with resounding clarity. He thought it might have been speaking directly

to him—but no, that didn't seem to be the case. It didn't wait for him to respond but continued as if reading off a script.

As the seconds passed, his hazy consciousness began to make sense of his surroundings. Only then did he remember what had happened: Hildegarde had used her second substantiation to send him into the world of *Argento Tírnanóg*.

"Let's begin by creating your avatar!" came another voice, different from the one he'd heard before.

"—!"

The next moment, the darkness enveloping him lit up, catching Mushiki off guard.

It was a strange place, the ground smooth and unmarred. He could make out the area bathed by the light, but nothing beyond that. It was like an endless expanse stretched out all around him, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he might immediately end up running into some unseen wall.

"Ngh…"

Only then did he realize that something unusual had appeared before him. Floating in the air was a projection of a screen that seemed to serve as a name-entry field, with *Saika Kuozaki* already entered as the default choice.

Uneasy, Mushiki tapped the DONE button.

With that, the next screen popped up, showing the words *Warrior*, *Mage*, *Priest*, *Thief*, *Fighter*, *Gambler*, and more, each accompanied by simple illustrations.

"So I've got to pick a job…?" he murmured, casually selecting the *Mage* class.

He was well aware that one's job in the video game world didn't need to correspond to their real-life profession, but he knew the real Saika would probably stick to the obvious choice.

Next, icons appeared all over the screen, along with a huge mirror.

"Hmm. I see…"

There were options for *Hairstyle*, *Eyes*, *Nose*, *Mouth*, *Ears*, *Physique*, *Voice*, and *Other*. It looked like he could adjust the options

to customize his appearance however he liked.

That being said, there was no need for him to make any changes. He didn't have time to make any minute adjustments—and more importantly, the figure reflected in the mirror before him was already flawless from every angle. He didn't *need* to change a thing.

"Heh."

Letting out a small breath, he reached out to tap the DONE button, when—

His finger froze in place.

Indeed, Saika's beauty was nothing short of perfection. Her mesmerizing eyes, her long lashes, her refined nose, her lips like delicate cherry blossoms. Each feature was a marvel in its own right, yet combined, they conjured up a vision more enchanting than paradise on earth. There was nothing here he could hope to improve upon.

And yet. And *yet*…

Of the options before him, the *Hairstyle* box was glowing (or so it seemed).

…I could adjust her hairstyle.

Of course, it wasn't like Mushiki had never considered doing so before. He just hadn't gotten around to trying anything yet.

He'd been entrusted with the body of the person he revered above all others, so he couldn't just change things on a whim. Plus, Kuroe strictly governed every aspect of his appearance, so he didn't have a great many options to begin with.

There was her basic straight hairstyle, the sporty ponytail she wore while exercising, and a casual up-do after a bath—but that was the extent of what he'd seen so far.

He certainly wasn't dissatisfied with those three looks. In fact, he worshipped them in his heart and secretly referred to them as the *three sacred treasures* (and when he subtly asked Ruri about them, he discovered that she did the same).

Here in the game world, however, he could adjust Saika's hairstyle at no risk.

If she were to adopt a different look—say, twin ponytails, or a braid, or a chignon—then maybe…

"…N-no. Calm down. Calm down already," he muttered, trying to talk himself out of it. It was dangerous to fantasize any further.

The world was facing a crisis. Every second counted. There was no time to waste on something like this.

Taking a deep breath to calm his racing heart, he tapped the DONE button.

The next instant, the space around him was bathed in light.

"Then let the journey begin… Welcome, brave adventurer, to Tírnanóg!"

The voice sounded once more, and Mushiki's vision was dyed white. It was so bright that he had to squeeze his eyes shut.

"…"

How many seconds passed before it changed?

Before he knew it, a warm breeze was caressing his cheeks. He slowly opened his eyes.

"…! This is…"

Gasping in astonishment, he glanced about. It was only natural he'd be shocked. After all, in the few seconds he'd had his eyes closed, the scenery around him had changed completely.

In stark contrast to the inorganic space he'd found himself in just a few short moments ago, a vibrant meadow rich with nature now unfurled before him. A gust of wind swept over it, sending ripples across the green carpet.

The sky was clear, a dazzling sun casting shadows from the sparse clouds onto the ground. In the distance, a road seemed to stretch on indefinitely, while massive snow-capped mountains loomed on the horizon. In front of him, a cluster of buildings—probably a town—shimmered into view.

It was so vivid, so real, that it was hard to believe it was all a fabrication. Perhaps his perceptions had adapted to the 3D graphics when his soul was sucked into the game, giving him the sense he was actually seeing all this firsthand.

It wasn't just sight and sound—the scent of fresh grass teased his nostrils, and the soft breeze fluttered against his skin. His senses were united, conveying the world with perfect clarity. He was certain that if he were to put food in his mouth, it would be filled with flavor.

"…I see. You could probably call this a pseudo–fourth substantiation," Mushiki murmured, his voice tinged with excitement.

Checking his body, he glanced down and clenched and unclenched his fists.

Nothing seemed out of place. He could move exactly the same as in the real world.

"Oh…?"

That was when he realized something.

The clothes he'd been wearing had been replaced with what looked like a mage's robe. No doubt this was the default selection for the job class he'd selected on the character-creation screen. Come to think of it, the people trapped in the game had all been wearing an assortment of fantasy costumes.

He wished he could see himself in the mage's robe…but that would have to wait. There was something else he had to check first.

"Hmm…"

He took another look around. The surrounding landscape stretched out tranquilly. There was no sign of anyone else around.

"I can't see Hilde, Ruri, or Kuroe. We should have entered the game together, though…"

He had assumed they would all start from the same location, but perhaps their starting positions were randomized? Or had Edelgarde intervened in some way? Unfamiliar with *Argento Tírnanóg* as he was, he couldn't say for sure.

"Anyway, I need to find them all first."

There was no point staying put. Hoping to gather more information, he set on a course for the town off in the distance.

But—

"…!"

He stopped abruptly in his tracks.

A sound effect rang out signaling impending danger, and a presence emerged behind him without warning. At the same time, a gauge indicating his total health points appeared before him.

He needed no help understanding what it all meant—this was an enemy encounter.

This grassland was the first stage of the game, which meant it was probably filled with weak monsters to serve as a tutorial for the battle system.

"I see. This is starting to feel like a game, all right."

His lips curled in a fearless grin. He turned to look over his shoulder.

While his primary objective was, of course, to rendezvous with Hildegarde and the others, it was also true that he had to learn the basics of the game's combat system as quickly as possible. It wouldn't be a bad idea to hone his skills against weaker monsters in this opening stage before taking on stronger foes.

And yet—

"…Huh?" When he saw what was behind him, Mushiki's eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

For good reason.

Usually, a new player's first enemy encounters in a grassland stage were low-tier monsters.

Yet standing behind him…

"Hello there, *me*. Welcome to Tírnanóg.

"And now… Goodbye."

Standing there, with her hair like radiant sunshine neatly tied up and dressed in an aristocratic outfit, was the other Saika Kuozaki.

Chapter 3
Victory Lies in a Dating Sim

"Huh…?" Mushiki gaped at the figure before him.

It was an entirely reasonable response. After all—

"Oh my, that's quite a face you're making. You must already know about me, then, I assume. I'm Lady Edel's guardian, Saika Kuozaki."

There she was. The noble Saika was supposed to be protecting Edelgarde.

"…This is an extravagant welcome," Mushiki replied, fighting to keep his nerves from showing. "Are you one of those low-level fodder characters that appear early on in the game?"

"Ha-ha. So you *are* the person I'm modeled after," the noble Saika said with a light laugh. "Rest easy. I take pride in standing among this world's strongest beings. You should know I'm not a character from *Argento Tírnanóg*. I'm something of an irregularity, introduced by Lady Edel from the outside to serve as her protector."

"So you're saying she modeled her strongest character after me?"

"Hah. I suppose that was her intention. Your face and name hold special significance to mages," the other Saika said, a hint of a joke in her voice.

Mushiki's smile remained unwavering. "Well, I'm honored. But I take it you've never heard of personality rights?"

"Ha-ha. I'll admit, I wasn't expecting that criticism. I think there are more important legal charges worth pursuing at this point…

Besides, Lady Edel didn't craft this body of mine; she simply borrowed what was already there."

"What…?" Mushiki furrowed his brow.

The other Saika, however, obviously had no intention of elaborating, waving her hand in an exaggerated gesture. "Let's return to the topic at hand… Now, Saika. Have you ever wondered why enemies in role-playing games start off weak and grow stronger as the story progresses? A dark lord aiming for world domination could easily dispatch stronger monsters to beat the heroes before they have a chance to grow—or better yet, crush them himself."

"…"

The noble Saika's abundance of confidence had Mushiki breaking out into a cold sweat. She hardly seemed like the sort of person to exchange small talk or frivolous pleasantries.

"The reason, of course, is that it's a game. The ultimate goal is to let the player enjoy themself, with the computer merely a slave to their entertainment… But think about it. If the two were to compete in earnest, the computer would crush the player without qualm. It would be merciless. Wouldn't you agree?" The other Saika spread her arms wide, her expression brimming with absolute confidence and sadistic amusement.

Yet Mushiki flashed her a defiant grin. "I see. You're right. But you're only seeing it from the computer's perspective. You've overlooked an important element."

"Oh? And what might that be?" the noble Saika asked amusedly.

Mushiki lifted his right hand in front of him and raised his voice. "If the players don't care about enjoying the game, there's no need for us to start the adventure at level one!"

Focusing, he let his magical energy flow through him.

"Second Substantiation: Stellarium!"

At Mushiki's cry, a two-layered world crest appeared over his head, and a huge staff materialized in his right hand. It was the second substantiation of Saika Kuozaki the Witch of Resplendent Colors:

gardener’s shears for pruning the fabric of reality as she (or he) saw fit.

This power shouldn’t have existed in this world, yet it had been brought in thanks to Hildegarde’s hacking.

“Hah…!”

Channeling his might through his hand, Mushiki thrust the tip of the staff firmly into the ground. The next second, the model of Earth surrounding him was suffused with a dim glow, and the ground warped. The grassy plain undulated like a living creature, forming into a colossal wave that threatened to engulf the other Saika.

“Oh…?!” she exclaimed in surprise, twisting her lips into a smirk. She quickly curled her body into a ball, almost as if she was going to roll forward, just before the wave completely covered her.

It took Mushiki only a moment to grasp her intentions—the other Saika had crouched low not to escape or brace for the impact, but to draw her weapon from her hip.

She let out a sharp breath, light dancing in all directions through the mound of earth that had swallowed her whole. The earthen cage collapsed into a pile of cubes, revealing the other Saika holding an exquisitely ornate rapier.

“I see. It’s an intriguing power. And yet…” The noble Saika pointed her rapier at Mushiki, lunging straight ahead. “It seems you still don’t understand how reckless you are, taking on the strongest character in this world!”

“Ngh…!”

She came at him with speed beyond anything human legs should have been capable of. He had only the briefest of moments to respond.

With barely a fraction of a second to spare, Mushiki transformed the world around him into a barrier—yet the other Saika pierced it with ease.

The tip of her blade flashed before his eyes. Several strands of hair from his bangs fluttered away on the wind.

"Oh, I understand," the other Saika said. "I'm sure you really are the most powerful mage alive. In the real world, no one would be able to match you. But this world was created by Lady Edel. Every detail, every grain of sand, is infused with her will. Every phenomenon, every law of nature, is defined by her! In this world, *I* am the strongest!"

In the blink of an eye, Mushiki's barrier was torn apart, his opponent's blade striking like a raging storm. He leaped backward, his feet skimming the ground as he conjured several vividly colored streams of light.

"Fall…!"

His first substantiation, Dominacraft. A volley of dazzling lights traced paths closing in on the other Saika.

Those lights would select the best outcome based on the multitude of observed possibilities. Once it was fired at a hostile opponent, it would inevitably strike true.

The lights converged on the other Saika, and a deafening roar filled the air.

And yet—

"It's no use!"

Her cloak flapping in the wind, the other Saika emerged from the smoke of the explosion. She didn't seem to have taken any damage. In fact, not even a single speck of dirt marred her lustrous hair, her beautiful skin, or her elegant clothes.

"What…?!"

"All of my stats are maxed out. No attack will be able to chip away at my HP!" The other Saika crouched low, as if summoning every ounce of strength into her legs. "No one can beat me in this game!"

Bullets. No other word could better describe the coming volley of sword thrusts.

Up until now, her attacks probably hadn't been serious. This time, she closed the distance in the blink of an eye.

Even sharpening his senses as much as possible, Mushiki only barely managed to catch her movements. His body, however, wasn't

fast enough to respond—and her silver blade was about to sink deep into his unguarded throat.

But just then—

"Watch ouuuut!"

A voice sounded behind him, and Mushiki's vision was turned upside down.

"Huh—?"

For a fleeting moment, he had no idea what had happened.

Only when he felt the pain of his face hitting the ground did he understand.

Someone had pulled his legs out from under him a fraction of a second before the other Saika's rapier could pierce his throat.

Thanks to that, he'd been saved from a killing blow—but thrown off balance by the sudden force, he'd fallen face-first on the ground.

"Whoa…! Uh-oh…! S-sorry, Saika…," said a panicked voice as something tugged at his legs once more.

It wasn't a hand that pulled his legs up, but rather the code from Hildegarde's second substantiation.

"…Hilde," he said, hanging upside down.

"Um, yes…! I'm here to help, Saika…!" She nodded, sweat beading her face and her world crest glowing at her back.

Yet something about her struck Mushiki as odd.

"…What are you wearing?" he asked, looking her over.

Indeed. There were countless things he wanted to convey—thanks, shock, a warning—but none of them tugged at his mind so much as that question.

And of course it did. After all, Hildegarde was sporting an outfit entirely unsuited for a battlefield.

A tight-fitting bodysuit crafted from glossy enameled fabric; fishnet tights, which clung to her legs; a collar and cuffs around her neck and wrists, which served no purpose other than ornamentation; and a decoration resembling a pair of rabbit ears atop her head.

To put it simply, she was a bunny girl.

Given Hildegarde's physique, it was a look that packed quite a punch.

"Ah…!"

She gasped, as if only now realizing it for herself.

In that moment, the tendrils that were tangled around his legs loosened their grip, and Mushiki fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

"Ooft."

"Ah! A-are you okay…?!"

"…Yeah. I'm fine. It's far better than getting my neck cut open."

Striving to maintain his composure, Mushiki got up off the ground. In truth, he wanted to cry at the top of his lungs at the thought of Saika's beautiful face hitting the ground not once, but twice—but he knew Saika herself wouldn't have been fazed by it.

Though she was clearly relieved to see him getting up, Hildegarde's eyes darted about as she struggled to come up with an excuse. "Um… Er. I mentioned I'd been playing this game before, right…? When I logged in, I thought maybe I could use my old save data… B-but I never meant to expose myself in this video game world or anything…! I'm sorry you have to look at this ugly, flabby body of mine…," she said, hunching her shoulders in an effort to conceal herself. That did little to hide her figure, of course. "But you know…?! I'm a proud gamer! I can't turn down super-powered gear just because it looks embarrassing!"

"You're saying that outfit reflects the equipment you already had in the game?"

"Exactly…! This gear is amazing! The stat boosts and resistances it gives are incredible, but the best thing about it is the charm effect it adds to normal attacks! There's a chance you can disable the enemy when you hit them! Plus, it's so cute, don't you think…?! I went crazy over it when it came out! You wouldn't believe how much I had to spend to max it out… Ugh…!"

Her words came out rapid-fire, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. Mushiki had a hard time following her explanation, but

whatever the case, it sounded like she'd been through a lot to get it.

They couldn't keep talking forever, though. After brushing the dust from his clothes, Mushiki raised his gaze.

The other Saika looked on a short distance away, her eyes narrowed in amusement.

"This *is* a surprise. I wasn't expecting reinforcements. It looks like fortune favors you, after all."

"…Indeed. The goddess of luck has been smiling on me for the past five hundred years," Mushiki joked.


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The other Saika's lips twisted in a smirk. "But that doesn't change anything. You must realize merely increasing your numbers won't improve your chances."

"Ahh." Mushiki broke into a fearless grin. "That's a relief… So you *are* a fake, after all."

"Oh…?" The other Saika's eyes narrowed in a piercing squint.

Though undeniably tense, Mushiki strove to maintain his composure. "So you think I've brought in a knight just for a larger head count? It seems your master didn't give you the ability to assess the true strength of your opponents."

"I can overlook you disparaging me, but I won't turn a blind eye to anyone who dares insult Lady Edel," the other Saika said. She drew her rapier, her movements as precise and as fluid as an actor in a play.

"She's coming for you, Hilde," Mushiki warned, his voice filled with alarm.

Hildegarde herself, however…

"Hnnnngh!"

For some reason, her face had turned bright red, and she squirmed back and forth.

If Mushiki had to guess, she was writhing either in joy or in shame.

"…Hilde? What on earth are you doing?"

"Ah…?! Er… I'm just… Um…," she mumbled softly, her eyes darting about. "I feel like I'm dying with both Prince Saika and the real Saika looking on. It's like some weird rush in my brain, like I'm on some sort of drug… I'm sorry for being like this…"

"…What?" Mushiki asked with a frown. He couldn't even begin to decipher all that.

The next moment, Hildegarde let out a dry laugh, as if she'd finally broken free.

"Heh, hee-hee… I guess I've come this far… You know… I feel kind of okay about it… Yeah… If it doesn't work out, I can always just

die… Right…?” With that, she straightened her back and extended her arms, looking as if she was setting her fingers on a keyboard.

The other Saika lowered her position, a smirk playing at the corners of her lips.

“Interesting. I don’t know what you’re hoping to achieve, but my sword will cut through all your little tricks.”

Slowly and deliberately, she readied her blade to deliver a sharp thrust.

“Hilde!” Mushiki shouted.

Hildegarde nodded, keeping her gaze locked on the other Saika. “Prince Saika’s stats outshine everyone else’s in this RPG combat system.” She paused for a brief moment, a hint of nerves flickering across her face. “But games are more than just fighting.”

Before Mushiki knew what was happening, she started chanting in a hushed voice. *“Please, please, hear my entreaty… A land of dreams awaits across the empty sea. May we find a moment of peace in the unyielding echoes.”*

She seemed to be muttering to herself, yet her words flowed smoothly.

“Come forth from my chambers and take form! Transient pleasures, offer yourselves on the board!”

These words were all new to Mushiki, yet in the back of his mind, he sensed what she was trying to do.

Yes. Hildegarde’s aura now was much the same as Ruri’s, Anviet’s, Erulka’s—or indeed, any Knight of the Garden when unlocking the secrets of their magic.

Her eyes shot open.

“Fourth Substantiation: Fanatikarheim…!”

No sooner had Hildegarde intoned that name than a four-layer world crest in the shape of a circuit diagram appeared on her back—and the world was rewritten, swallowed up by blocky static.

The grasslands and blue skies that had stretched out all around them only a moment ago vanished, replaced by an inorganic white

space filled with a grid of equal-size squares. It was almost as if the game's background textures had been stripped away.

This was a fourth substantiation, the culmination of magic that used manifestation abilities to transform the landscape around the caster.

"What is this place…?" the other Saika asked. She glanced about, clearly taken by surprise.

Hildegarde drew a deep breath, pushing her glasses up on her nose. The lenses caught the light, glinting for a brief moment, before a strangely intense aura completely unlike her usual timidity began to emanate from her.

"My fourth substantiation, Fanatikarheim, enforces new rules on any subject caught inside it…"

"Rules…?"

"Yes…"

Hildegarde reached out, putting her hands into the spherical controllers that had appeared before her, which she started manipulating with complex finger movements.

"Game type: Dating sim…!" she shouted, and the landscape shifted once more. "Situation: Royal Memoria Academy High School!"

With those instructions, the background took shape, transforming into the inside of a huge school building. It wasn't a modern one, like the buildings at the Garden, but a classical Western castle. Specifically, it was a fantastical structure, the likes of which you might see in a video game or an anime that doesn't nitpick over fine architectural details or historical accuracy.

"Target: On. Status: Open."

The next moment, a translucent window unfolded in front of Mushiki.

Looking it over, he saw the other Saika's face alongside various numerical values. It seemed to be a status display of some kind.

"Hm…?"

Noticing something unexpected, he arched an eyebrow.

Typically, RPGs used stats like HP, MP, attack power, defense, and the like. Yet the attributes featured in the window—affection, mood, intimacy level—were all irrelevant to combat…

"Game: Start…!" Hildegarde shouted loudly despite his confusion.

Surveying her surroundings, the noble Saika shrugged her shoulders and breathed a dramatic sigh. "I see. Extraordinary. Who would have thought you could completely alter the world's textures? But what exactly is the point of this? Regardless of the battlefield, I'm still the strongest being in this game!"

No sooner had she finished speaking than the other Saika started sprinting down the velvet carpet of the school building, her sword poised to strike.

"…!"

Her speed was blindingly fast, as impressive as before.

The steel tip of her rapier came flying with unerring precision, piercing all the way through Mushiki's neck.

Or at least, it should have.

"Huh…?"

"Wh—?"

The stunned voices of both Mushiki and the noble Saika sounded through the vast school building.

Their surprise was entirely warranted, though. After all, that strike should have been fatal, yet Mushiki didn't bear so much as a scratch.

There was no pain. None at all. Nor was the other Saika's sword broken. Its silver blade still shone as bright as ever, unmarred.

An overwhelming sense of dissonance swept over Mushiki. It was as if some unspoken law of nature forbade them from harming each other.

"That won't do, Prince Saika," Hildegarde said, gently shaking her head and adjusting her glasses. "You're in a different genre here."

"…What…?" the other Saika said in bewilderment.

Then, with perfect timing, a new window appeared in front of Mushiki, complete with the following text:

1. Respond: "Hey, what're you doing? You could hurt someone."

2. Fall on your backside: “Hyaaaaah! Help meee!”
3. Commend her: “Your skills are impressive. And your sword is even more brilliant.”
4. Respond uncertainly: “Eeep… Er… What was that…?”

There were four options to choose from.

“Is this…?” he began, his eyes shooting open in surprise.

“Um… You might not have played this type of game before, Saika. It’s a dating sim… You make different choices with the characters to influence things like their affection and intimacy levels. Your decisions change how they react and even the storyline itself…”

“You’re saying I need to choose the option that would best work on me?”

“…! Right! I knew you were a quick learner!”

“Shouldn’t *you* be the one playing it?”

“Um… I—I…don’t think I can do it in front of people…,” she mumbled.

Mushiki didn’t know exactly what the issue was, but Hildegarde clearly had her reasons.

“A-anyway, please!” she said. “There’s a time limit, so you have to choose!”

“Hmm…”

He’d have been lying if he said he didn’t feel giddy at this sudden turn of events. But all the same…

“All right. I get the idea.”

It wasn’t his brain but his soul that immediately grasped the situation.

Mushiki sharpened his gaze and placed his fingers on his forehead. Behind him (in his mind), innumerable mathematical equations, graphs, and Saika’s pictures and profile appeared and disappeared at a dizzying pace.

“If this is a dating sim, and the target is the noble *me*, then I would be wary of anyone who tried to flatter me, exploit me, or cling to me. When I was a child, I might have had friends I could play with freely, but as I grew up, everyone would have become more

aware of our social divide… People might think I was born with everything, but the truth is I haven't obtained anything I really want. So what would *I*—Saika Kuozaki—want? Hmm. I'd be looking for someone who sees me just as a person, who isn't concerned about rank or status."

Whispering at a rapid-fire pace under his breath, Mushiki elegantly reached out and tapped the first option.

"What on earth are you doing? Don't you realize you could hurt someone like that?" he said, rephrasing the words to match Saika's way of talking.

"Hnngh…?!"

Despite suffering no damage from his previous attacks, the other Saika suddenly staggered as if struck by some invisible force.

"Th-this feeling… What *is* this…?!" she cried, her voice somewhere between ecstasy and anguish. She pressed a hand to her chest.

"W-wow…!" Hildegarde exclaimed, clenching her fist. "Spot on! And on your first try…! How were you able to analyze her in such detail…?!"

"Heh. I'm constantly researching every variation of myself," Mushiki answered.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," he said, feigning a cough. "More importantly, Hilde, is this your fourth substantiation?"

"Y-yes. In this fourth substantiation, the genre of the game isn't RPG anymore. It's a dating sim… There's no attack or defense here… The only way to win is to conquer your opponent's heart…!" she explained fervently.

Mushiki let out a sigh filled with a myriad of emotions.

"What a magnificent technique," he said, completely serious.

"…Eh? W-well… Y-yes, it is… Hee-hee-hee…" Hildegarde blushed, a smile spreading across her face.

Mushiki hadn't said that to flatter her. Her technique, which could impose a different set of rules on an enemy unable to be defeated through conventional means, was undeniably powerful. More

importantly, its brilliance lay in the fact that he didn't need to defeat the other Saika but could instead make her his own.

The other Saika, however, seemed far from pleased. Her calm and composed expression from just a moment ago had been replaced with fiery rage.

"Don't screw with me…! A different genre?! I'm Lady Edel's chosen protector! The strongest character in the game…! There's no way this stupid ability is going to—"

At that moment, the translucent window reappeared before Mushiki with four new options:

1: "Please don't get angry. You're scaring me…"
2: "That's right. You're the chosen one. So don't let something like this upset you."
3: "You were chosen? You're the strongest? Don't be an idiot. You're you."
4: "Eh-heh-heh… You're even cute when you're angry…"

"Saika!" Hildegared called out.

"…On it," Mushiki said with a nod.

It took him only a moment. In his mind, he wove together Saika Kuozaki and the archetype of the noble prince until a clear picture surfaced.

According to his profiling, there was only one choice capable of thawing this noble Saika's heart.

With a soft smile, he tapped on the window.

"Don't you think it's rather silly to be talking about being chosen, about thinking you have to be the strongest?" he said in a gentle voice. "When it comes down to it, you're *you*. Right?"

"…!"

The moment he finished speaking, the other Saika recoiled as if struck by lightning.

"N-no… It's like my heart is unraveling…" She groaned hoarsely, bending forward and clutching at her chest. "I've defeated countless enemies, faithfully carried out Lady Edel's will, but I've never felt this

way before. Ah… I see. This…this isn't a role given to me. I'm my own…"

She turned to Mushiki, smiling softly as if released from all worldly ties.

"You truly are…a very interesting…woman…"

And with that, she dissolved into a haze of digital noise and faded away.

A moment later, the school building setting around them reverted to its original state of sprawling grasslands.

Mushiki's eyes narrowed as he sank deep in thought.

"I wish we could have met under different circumstances. Now you can finally rest in peace…"

"Li'l Saika…," Hildegarde whispered, her eyes downcast. "Yes…I think you saved her. Prince Saika was born to the third queen, who gained the king's favor, and has been a tragic pawn in political disputes ever since she was a child. All she ever wanted was for someone to see her for who she was regardless of her position…"

But as Hildegard was elaborating on the intricacies of the dating sim's setting—

"Well done, Lady Saika, Knight Hildegarde."

A voice rang out from behind them.

With a jolt, both Mushiki and Hildegarde spun around.

No, it wasn't right to describe their reactions in the same terms. Mushiki registered the new arrival with a look of surprise, while Hildegarde lost her footing, falling to the ground with a loud, "W-w-waaah!"

"Don't act too surprised. I'm not a monster."

"Kuroe!" Mushiki called out, and she responded with a respectful bow.

Kuroe was dressed in a light, practical outfit—a hooded cloak. If he had to guess, she had chosen the job class of thief.

"Yes. That was remarkable, Lady Saika… You too, of course, Knight Hildegarde," she said, extending a hand to the woman on the

ground. Hildegarde took a deep breath to steady her racing heart, then accepted the gesture and slowly got to her feet.

"How long were you there?" Mushiki asked.

"I've been here ever since Knight Hildegarde rushed in. I refrained from speaking up so as not to distract you, but I was inside the fourth substantiation from the very beginning."

"Right." Mushiki nodded.

Kuroe said she hadn't wanted to distract them, but something told him she'd probably just been watching them, knowing that he and Hildegarde could take care of the other Saika by themselves.

"Regardless, it's nothing short of a blessing that we were able to neutralize the noble Saika so swiftly. I should have expected no less from you, Lady Saika. And from you, Knight Hildegarde." She gave another bow.

A moment later, Hildegarde seemed to realize she'd just been praised, because she squirmed around as a blush rose to her cheeks. "N-no… It was nothing special…"

"However, there *is* one thing that concerns me," Kuroe began.

"Huh…?"

"You seem to know an awful lot about that noble Saika, Knight Hildegarde."

"……"

The other woman looked away, beads of sweat appearing on her forehead.

"Knight Hildegarde? Why won't you look at me?"

"…I-it's my astigmatism…"

"In both your eyes?"

"I—I mean, Li'l Saika here had incredible analytical skills…"

"Lady Saika is a special case. She's already a little peculiar."

"O-oh…," Hildegarde murmured weakly, unable to question her logic.

Kuroe, however, continued to press the attack. "I don't mind how trivial it is. If you know something, please share it. It may be the key to a future strategy."

At that moment, Mushiki's eyebrow twitched as he remembered something. "Come to think of it, she did say something a little strange."

"Oh?"

"She said that Edelgarde didn't make her body, only borrowed something that already existed."

"It already existed?" Kuroe echoed, adopting a pose that suggested she was deep in thought. "I see. Edelgarde now controls most of the worldwide telecommunication network. It would be a piece of cake for her to steal and repurpose a character model made by someone else." She paused there for a moment. "The question is, who would have made a model that so intricately mirrors Lady Saika?"

"……"

Again, Hildegarde averted her gaze, all but turning a full one hundred and eighty degrees. Her face was slick with sweat.

"Knight Hildegarde? You still won't look at me."

"…I-I've always been shy…"

"Were you an owl in a past life?"

Kuroe all but forced her to turn back around, and Hildegarde let out a resigned sigh.

"…You won't get mad?"

"Of course not."

"…You won't get creeped out?"

"That depends on your answer."

"Eeep…!" Hildegarde's eyes glistened with tears.

Mushiki patted her gently on the head. "It's okay. I promise. Go ahead, you can tell us."

Wiping away her sweat and tears, Hildegarde answered haltingly, "A-actually…I know who made the Prince Saika model… It was me…"

"Yes, I suspected as much," Kuroe answered. "May I ask what for?"

"…Um… A video game…"

"A game?" Mushiki asked in confusion.

"Yes…," Hildegarde said with a reluctant nod before continuing. "A dating game I made for my own private use called *Saika-delic Days*…"

"*…What?*" Mushiki and Kuroe uttered as one.

"Eeek!" Hildegarde squealed, teary-eyed. "Y-you promised…! Y-you said you wouldn't get creeped out by it…!"

"We aren't. Are we, Kuroe?"

"No," she answered with a shake of her head. "Just a little surprised. So, Knight Hildegarde. What kind of game is it?"

"…Um, it's just a normal dating game… The only twist is that the character model for the love interest is based on Saika. Also, I integrated a simple conversational AI so the characters can freely express their own personalities, though it isn't as sophisticated as Silvelle. There's a rough storyline, but their individual responses are pretty much all created automatically, so even I, its creator, can enjoy it… Hee-hee, hee-hee-hee…"

That certainly didn't sound like a "normal" dating sim, but Mushiki decided to keep that thought to himself. There was a more pressing question he had to get off his chest.

"…Why Lady Saika?" Kuroe asked, evidently thinking along the same lines. "With such advanced technology, wouldn't it be better to create original characters?"

"…I—I get nervous…"

"*…What?*" Mushiki and Kuroe exclaimed in perfect sync for the second time today.

"I know they're just characters in a game, but when they talk to me in a way I'm not expecting, it makes my heart race and I can't make any headway… Especially with male characters. I end up panicking…"

"So you made a character who looks like me?"

"Y-yes… Y-you're easy to talk to, so I thought I could manage that way," she said, blushing as she finally met his gaze.

"I see…," Mushiki murmured, crossing his arms and heaving a sigh. "Hilde?"

"Y-yes…?"

"Once this is resolved, I want you to let me play it."

"Lady Saika?" Kuroe gave him a sharp look.

He flashed her an ambiguous smile by way of response, and she let out a small sigh.

"Anyway," Kuroe continued, "I understand the situation. I still have a good many concerns, but right now, we should focus on locating Ruri."

"Ah, right." Mushiki nodded. "I hope she hasn't strayed too far."

"Uh…" Hildegarde's eyebrows twitched as if she wanted to say something.

"What is it?" Kuroe asked.

"Um… Well, it might not be big deal, but, er…"

But as Hildegard was struggling awkwardly to make her point—

"Hmph. Prince got taken down, did she?"

"Well, she *was* the weakest of us…"

"That's no reason to act complacent."

Three enemy characters had appeared before them.

"What…?"

"Is that…?"

Mushiki and Kuroe adopted battle stances, their eyes wide in alarm.

And for good reason: All three of the new arrivals bore Saika Kuozaki's face.

The first wore a suit of armor, the second a traditional kimono, and the third a black eye patch. It was a well-rounded lineup capable of responding to a wide range of needs. Also, they were all dressed as men.

"Knight Hildegarde? What is *this*?"

"U-um… That's Imperial Guard Saika. That one's Eastern Isle Saika. And that's Pirate Saika…"

"…Are they also characters in your game?"

Hildegarde hesitated for a few seconds before nodding. "It's a dating game…so there needs to be more than one target for your

affections… I thought it would be nice if they all fought over me…” She let out a weak laugh, averting her gaze.

Mushiki looked the three new Saika NPCs up and down.

“I see… Not bad at all…”

“Lady Saika?” came Kuroe’s ice-cold voice.

Feigning a cough, he turned back to Hildegarde. “How many characters *are* there in your game?”

“Um… Five, if you include the hidden character…”

“Hidden character?”

“Y-yes… If you complete all four main routes and meet certain conditions, you can unlock a special path…”

“In any event, you’re saying there should only be five?” Kuroe asked.

Hildegarde’s cheeks beaded with sweat. “Yes… Five…in the first game…”

“The *first* game?” Mushiki exclaimed.

“Just how many games are there?” Kuroe pressed.

“Um… Heh-heh… ♡” Hildegarde responded weakly with a strained smile.

“…In any case, all these questions won’t solve anything,” said Kuroe. “They’re coming. Prepare yourselves.”

“Right.”

“O-okay…!”

Mushiki and Hildegarde readied themselves to face off against the three approaching Saika NPCs.

◇

“…Tch.”

Standing atop one of the towering walls surrounding the Garden, Anviet clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Below, the city was engulfed in chaos.

Yet what else could be expected? Global communication networks and all electronic devices connected to them had been taken over by

a malevolent artificial intelligence. It was no laughing matter and could very well mean the end of civilization itself. Security and disaster-prevention systems were malfunctioning, telecommunications had been severed, and transportation networks had all ground to a halt. In all likelihood, even more alarming scenes were playing out all across the world.

Other staff members from the Garden were also on guard, along with students from the higher grades. One and all, their expressions were marked with dread, confusion, and anger.

"Bear with me, Anviet," a reassuring voice said from behind him.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed a small figure in a white lab coat.

"…Erulka. What about your patients?"

"I've taken all necessary steps to look after them. The wolves and medical officers can see to the rest," she answered, turning her gaze on him to steer the conversation back on track. "With a disaster of this magnitude, the world system will no doubt classify it as an annihilation factor. If we can eliminate the root cause, there's a strong chance we'll be able to reverse all damage done on the *outside*. It wouldn't do to act rashly and squander our resources. We need to prioritize protecting the students."

"…I don't need you to spell it out for me."

"I know, yet you still seem inclined to act. That's why I'm saying this."

"…Tch."

Once more, Anviet clicked his tongue in annoyance.

A few seconds later, four owls descended from the sky, drifting on their large, graceful wings.

Kotankur. One of Erulka's second substantiations.

"Ah, you're back. Good job," she said, opening the tubes attached to the owls' feet and retrieving a piece of paper from each.

"What's that?"

"Reports from the other schools. With communications cut off, this is the fastest and most reliable method we have."

A scowl fell over her face as she unfurled the papers and read their contents.

"What do they say?"

"I suspected as much, but it seems the other schools are all facing similar situations. The Ark, for instance, was forced to surface after its environmental system was disrupted. We can't expect any support from them."

The mage-training institute Hollow Ark was a mobile academic city that navigated the world's oceans. If something had gone wrong with its environmental systems while submerged, then that would definitely be a major issue. They would have no choice but to surface for air, even at the cost of weakening their security and defense.

"The City intends to take countermeasures against the game after regaining control of their campus. I hope they'll be in time to help Saika and the others…"

At that moment, a bell tolled in the distance.

It was a fully analog alarm, but that was the best they had, given the current circumstances. The radar wasn't working, so mages with the ability to see long distances had taken to the air and were relaying important messages down to the ground.

With a huff, Erulka lowered her gaze and called out to the mages assembled on the wall.

"Multiple suspicious objects approaching! Be on the alert!"

The mages adopted battle stances.

Anviet raised a quizzical eyebrow. "You can hear that?"

"Heh. Don't underestimate my ears," Erulka said, wiggling her ears with a proud grin. She squinted up at the sky. "Now then, here come our guests."

At that moment, countless tiny silhouettes materialized in the distance. Their oddly shaped shadows filled the air, bringing to mind a horde of annihilation factor dragons.

Yet these were something else. As the nebulous shadows took on more solid forms, it became apparent that their wings and bodies

were more rigid and angular than those of dragons.

"They're—!"

"Fighter jets," Erulka finished for him. "Or rather, unmanned drones. Don't let your guard down. It's easy for a mage to underestimate technology, but in terms of sheer destructive power, modern weapons are just as potent as magic."

"Who d'you think you're talkin' to? Unmanned, electronically controlled drones? That's like a match made in heaven for me!"

"Heh. Indeed. I'll leave them to you, then," Erulka said, crouching low.

"Eh?" Anviet furrowed his brow, only then realizing what she was doing.

The iron wings soaring toward them weren't the only threat closing in on the Garden.

More silhouettes began to emerge with a distant rumble, weaving through the gaps between buildings. Blunt, intimidating shapes, their treads crushed the asphalt beneath them and anything else in their way. Each had a turret locked straight at them.

Tanks—the champions of modern warfare on land. The enemy, it seemed, had sent these, too.

"I'll handle the ground threat," Erulka said casually as she hunched over.

The next instant, her lab coat–draped figure grew bigger.

It took only a few seconds. Gone was the petite girl of a moment ago, replaced by a tall, beautiful woman with wolf ears and a tail.

This was the true form of Erulka, Lord of the Forest.

And that wasn't all. A ribbon of darkness coiled around the outer edges of the Garden, from which wolves, bears, and countless other beasts slowly emerged.

"…!"

This was Erulka's fourth substantiation at work, which boasted immense power. Anviet only had to see the four-layer world crest covering her body to understand. After she activated her fourth

substantiation, Erulka had opened the edge of the barrier to call forth a horde of beasts into the world.

Even if it was only for a brief moment, activating one's fourth substantiation and connecting it to the outside world was no simple feat. It was completely different from manifesting one's second substantiation in the real world. Anviet understood the theory behind what Erulka was doing, but his head spun at the sheer amount of magical energy at work and the elaborate composition formulas necessary to activate it.

Perhaps sensing his apprehension, Erulka flashed him a mischievous grin.

"Oh? You've suddenly decided to show some respect for your elders?"

"Show-off," Anviet growled dismissively as he activated his own three-layer world crest. Golden armor enveloped his body. "Let's go!" he shouted. "We're headin' up!"

"R-right…!"

"Roger!"

Following suit, the mages around him activated their own substantiations.

Once they were all ready, Anviet glared back at Erulka. "You've got a big mouth. Just don't let anythin' slip through."

"Ha-ha. I'll do my best."

"Heh."

And with those parting words, the battle began.

Each group raced toward their respective foes: Anviet and the other mages in the sky, Erulka and her beasts on the ground.

"Hah… Wouldja look at all this junk? Come on! I'll take you all down, damn it."

Once in the air, Anviet positioned himself with the sun at his back and faced down the approaching fighters. He doubted the machines were responding to his provocation, but all the same, the lead fighter launched a cylindrical object from beneath one wing.

An airborne guided missile. A terrifying invention wrought by modern science, carrying death and destruction at immense speed through the power of jet propulsion.

And yet—

"Vajdola!"

Anviet raised his hands in the air, and one of the pairs of vajras floating around him shot ahead as if possessed of their own free will, unleashing sharp electric blasts from their tips.

An explosion rang out. The missile, unable to reach its target, blossomed instead as a fiery shockwave, sending violent tremors coursing through Anviet's body.

The shockwave could well have rippled down to the surface—or worse, debris could have rained from above—but the barrier protecting the Garden should have been enough to block it. Anviet tried not to think too hard about it, instead turning his attention to his next objective.

Armed with machine guns and missiles, more than a dozen fighter planes opened fire all at once.

The mages of the Garden were putting up a good fight, but they weren't used to facing this sort of foe. Many were beginning to tire. It would be best, Anviet knew, to settle this as quickly as possible.

"What a pain. I'd better wrap this up quick," he muttered, spreading his palms wide and thrusting his arms into the air.

"…I command you. Construct my fortress in the golden garden, where heaven and earth hold no sway, beyond even the reach of the gods."

His world crest shone like a halo behind him, and at its edge, a fourth layer appeared.

"Fourth Substantiation: Aksara Nirsvarna!"

No sooner had he finished invoking the name than the world began to transform, a new landscape encompassing the area around him and the fighter jets.

A sea of clouds, each shimmering with light. His golden palace peeked out from the gaps between them, along with countless

floating vajras.

This was Anviet's fourth substantiation, Aksara Nirsvarna, a paradise of thunder and lightning in which all was placed at the mercy of his magic.

Human beings, for instance, would be rendered immobile.

And as for electronically controlled drones…

"It's over," he muttered, sending the fighter jets plummeting into his golden palace, colliding with his vajras, or else flying right into each other to create massive explosions.

There, in his paradise of light, sound, and heat, Anviet breathed a small sigh and lowered his outstretched hands. The next moment, the world returned to normal.

"…All right."

After checking to make sure the other mages were safe, he descended to the ground, landing back on the wall surrounding the Garden's perimeter.

Down below, the tanks had been halted by Erulka's army of beasts. Some had been turned upside down, while others had had their turrets wrenched off by brute force. It was sheer savagery.

"The hell? She's takin' longer that I thought. I guess I'm gonna have to go and give her a hand before—"

He stopped mid-sentence.

The reason was simple. The weak electrical field surrounding his body had detected a foreign object.

It was tiny, most likely an unmanned drone. The cold, mechanical assassin appeared soundlessly behind him equipped with only the bare essentials—propellers, a processor, a battery, and a gun.

"Tch…"

Faster than he could react, the gun barrel locked on to him.

But at that moment—

"Watch out, An!"

A voice shouted out from somewhere, and the drone hovering behind him fell out of the sky, shot down in a shower of sparks.

"Huh…?"

Anviet's eyes burst open at this unexpected development. He was surprised not just that he'd been caught off guard, but that someone had rescued him. Yet the question now dominating his mind was why *she* was here.

"Ah… An. Thank goodness you're safe. Are you hurt?"

Ignoring his dismay, the girl broke into a run and threw her arms around him. She was petite, with blond hair as bright as the sun. Judging by her appearance and stature, she should have been in elementary school—middle school at the most.

"…Sara. What're you doin' here?" Anviet asked in a strained voice as he fought off dizziness.

The girl was Sara Svarner, the reincarnation of his late wife. After a series of twists and turns, she had come back into his life as an apprentice mage studying at the Garden's middle school.

"And look at you…," he murmured, wrinkles etched into his brow.

Sara was dressed in a red-and-white garment, while surrounding her were several chakrams, one of which she'd presumably used to down the drone. At her feet, a three-layer world crest glowed brightly.

"Yeah. It just happened. I knew I had to help you, and then I could," she said innocently.

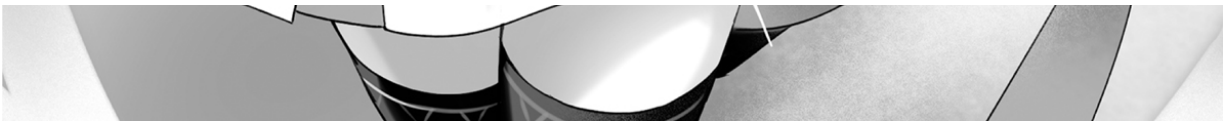
"…"

Anviet was rendered speechless.

Learning to use a second substantiation was difficult enough, but third substantiations were something else entirely. They were such a rare and extraordinary phenomenon that only very few mages were able to pull them off.

But it wasn't impossible. Sara had once manifested a pseudo-substantiation through the power of the Fortuna, an annihilation factor. Her mind and body had already experienced the mysteries of magic, so it wasn't surprising that the spark might ignite again under the right circumstances.





But that wasn't the real issue. Anviet shook his head, hoping to clear his thoughts.

"…What're ya doin' here? There's s'posed to be an evacuation order out."

Sara fixed him with a charming smile. "I came here for you! ♡"

"I don't care how cute you try to act; some things just ain't gonna fly."

"Huh? What was that?"

"I said it ain't gonna fly—"

"No, before that. Hm? I didn't catch what you said. Hey, can you say it again?"

"…No way," Anviet grumbled. His cheeks burning, he averted his gaze.

"Awww," Sara said with a pout.

"Anyway, it's dangerous out here. Get back into the shelter and don't come out till I say it's safe."

"How can you say that? You would have been in real danger if I hadn't shown up."

"…Nah, it was only small-caliber, and I've got my third manifestation here. Even if I took the hit, it wouldn't have done much damage, and…"

Anviet's voice trailed off.

He'd noticed Sara's nose was red, and her eyes were moist with tears.

"Ugh. Right… You're strong, An. You didn't need my help."

"Eh? No, that ain't what I meant… What I'm tryin' to say is you gotta—"

But before Anviet could explain, a voice drifted up from below.

"You're flirting at a time like this?"

Looking down, he spotted Erulka poking her head out, having climbed up the outer wall.

"E-Erulka…?! How long've you been there?!"

"From around when you said, *I guess I'm gonna have to go and give her a hand*."

"But that was way back!" Anviet wailed, his face flushed crimson.

Erulka pulled herself up over the edge of the wall. "Just get whatever you're doing over with. The second wave is coming," she said, glancing over her shoulder.

Sure enough, the silhouettes of another wave of aircraft were visible in the distance, and more tanks were approaching on the ground.

"…Hah. Talk about stubborn. Fine. I'll knock 'em down all over again," he muttered, glancing back at Sara.

Her unwavering gaze, however, left him fumbling for his next words.

"An," she began. "Please. I'm a student of the Garden now. I want to be of help."

"Sara…" He scratched the back of his head, his thoughts spinning around inside his skull. "Ugh. Damn it… Listen up. That drone we saw earlier? It wasn't packin' much power, but if more of 'em have slipped into the Garden, they're gonna freak out the kids… So if you spot any, take 'em down. You got that?"

"…! An! You mean—"

"Don't go overboard. This ain't about wipin' the enemy out. The real objective here is to hold our ground till Kuozaki and the others take down the AI drivin' 'em all."

"…Right!" Sara answered with a happy nod.

Anviet scratched the back of his head, completely drained of any negative thoughts at the sight of her innocent reaction.

"Knowing Madam Witch and Ruri, I'm sure they'll win."

"…Hah? She pushed me outta the way to get into that game. No way I'm gonna let it slide if she goes and makes a fool of herself," Anviet grumbled before once again taking off into the sky.

◇

"Sleep, my lovely princess."

"Mm… Mmmrowr…"

In the very first town on the very first island of Tírnanóg…

Ruri, clad in the armor of a warrior, was putting on a disgraceful show.

She was practically transformed into a cat, with her head resting on Saika's lap (herself in a dazzling white lamé suit) as if offering herself up on the chopping block.

Her cheeks were bright red, all manner of fluids dripped from her face, and her eyes stared blankly off into the distance. Each time Saika stroked her head, Ruri's body would twitch in response. It wasn't something she would have wanted anyone to witness.

But before long—

"Ruri…"

"…"

"Ahh…"

Mushiki, Kuroe, and Hildegarde found themselves watching Ruri, each lost in their own thoughts. More specifically, their expressions read: *I'm kind of jealous…*, *What on earth is she doing?* and *I understand. I really do, Ruri…*

Mushiki and company had arrived in the town not ten minutes earlier, having managed to overcome the Saika NPCs they'd encountered in the grassland. They had decided to try to find information on Ruri in the town square, but to their surprise, they'd stumbled on her all but transformed into a cat lounging on a bench.

On top of that, the lap on which Ruri was resting her head belonged to another Saika NPC.

Mushiki, visibly apprehensive, leaned closer to Hildegarde.

"What's this one…?" he whispered.

"Um… One of the possible love interests in *Saika-delic Days II*. A sorrowful butterfly of the night who doesn't know true love yet lavishes affection upon others. She's my Number One Host Saika," Hildegarde explained, slightly embarrassed by having her Saika series of dating sim games laid bare. That said, she was much calmer than she had been before. Perhaps something had changed

when she'd conquered the Saikas in the grasslands. She had a certain air about her, like that of a seasoned warrior.

"Wasn't your game based on a fantasy world?" Kuroe asked skeptically.

Hildegarde clenched her fists. "Part II unfolds as two worlds collide, bringing fantasy characters into the modern era! Among the love interests, there's a sadistic glasses-wearing teacher Saika, a world-weary office worker Saika, a young yakuza underboss Saika, and even a delivery worker Saika! Ha-ha-ha… What *will* I think of next?!" she said, even more passionate on the subject than usual.

"Is that so?" Kuroe responded coolly, having completely given up on her. "At any rate, Ruri may well melt away if we leave her here. Knight Hildegarde?"

"Y-yes…!" she answered, unfurling her winglike world crest.

"I'm so sorrrrry!!"

Ten minutes later, Ruri was on her knees bowing deeply to them in the town's central plaza.

She wasn't doing it just because she felt obliged to. No, this was a heartfelt expression of apology, shame, and regret too immense for her soul to contain, and it possessed an unmistakable beauty.

Yes. When Mushiki had borrowed Hildegarde's power and defeated the Number One Host Saika, Ruri had suddenly returned to her senses, turning pale and pressing her forehead against the ground.

"I'm a mage tasked with helping to save the world! And I let myself fall into the enemy's trap…! I, Ruri Fuyajoh, will never live this down! I shall spend my life trying to atone for my ineptitude…!"

"Calm down, Ruri," Mushiki urged, afraid she might end up committing seppuku if she kept this up. With a wry smile, he tried to console her. "Saika is the most powerful character, and Edelgarde has increased her stats to the maximum level. I'm relieved to see you're safe and sound. Why don't we just celebrate the fact that we found you?"

"M-Madam Witch…" Ruri looked up, her eyes glistening with tears.

"It's all right," he continued, stroking her flushed forehead.

"I'm amazed to see you're unscathed…," Kuroe said, sounding surprised.

Mushiki tilted his head to one side. "Is something on your mind?"

"I feel like that last Saika NPC wasn't particularly hostile toward us," Kuroe answered, still looking somewhat unsettled. Perhaps realizing that she might never solve this mystery, she decided to change the subject. "In any event, we're all here now, so let's keep going… Knight Hildegarde, do you know where Edelgarde is?"

"Ah… Y-yes," Hildegarde said, nodding and tapping the air with her finger.

The next moment, a window popped open before her, revealing a map of three large islands—no doubt the setting of the video game.

"Um, right now, we're here at this icon. The first town on the first island."

"Hmm."

"And, er, Edel refers to herself as the Fairy Queen, right? So I think we'll probably find her here, at the Unseen Castle."

"The *Unseen Castle*?" Mushiki echoed.

"Yep." Hildegarde nodded, pointing to a spot in the sea between the three islands. "It should be around here on the map… It's a castle shrouded by clouds that floats over the sea here. It's meant to be the home of the ruler of Tírnanóg. That is the Unseen Castle."

"Okay. So how do we get there?"

"Leaving out the fine details…we have to defeat the boss on each of the three main islands to get the keys. Then we'll need the flying ark, Titania, to break through the cloud barrier…," Hildegarde explained.

Kuroe's expression darkened. "That sounds like it'll take a while."

"Y-yes… Well… It's still a work in progress…" Even though she wasn't to blame for their predicament, Hildegarde gave an apologetic shrug.

Mushiki looked around at his three companions, flashing them a smile. “It doesn’t sound like an easy journey, but knowing us, we can do it. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, of course!” Ruri answered with a firm nod.

Kuroe and Hildegarde glanced at one another before responding in kind.

Thus began an adventure that would determine the fate of the entire world.

◇

“So this is the Unseen Castle…?”

“Pfft. Fairy Queen or not, I’ll show you a thing or two.”

“D-don’t let your guard down, Ruri.”

At long last, the band of adventurers had reached the Unseen Castle.

Floating over the three islands of Tírnanóg, the huge fortress was shrouded in clouds far above the sea. Magnificent yet ominous, it exuded an intimidating aura meant to deter anyone who dared approach.

“Wait a second,” Kuroe said, sounding vaguely uncomfortable.

“Wh-what, Kuroe…?”

“How did we get here so quickly? Didn’t we leave the first town just a few minutes ago?”

“Um…,” Hildegarde murmured nervously. “With fast travel…”

“Fast travel?” Kuroe asked, raising an eyebrow.

Using fast travel, players were able to warp to any checkpoint they had previously visited. It was a feature common to video games with large, sprawling maps.

“I told Saika this earlier, but when I infiltrated the game world, I was able to sync my previous save data…,” Hildegarde explained. “If we came in through the normal way, we probably would’ve had to start over from scratch…”

“I see. I thought I didn’t recognize your job class,” Kuroe said.

Saika Kuozaki was a mage, Ruri Fuyajoh a warrior, Kuroe Karasuma a thief, and Hildegarde Silvelle a sage. One of those clearly stood out as being far more advanced than the others.

"It's a great help, don't you think, Kuroe? Anything that saves us time is something to be thankful for, if you ask me," Mushiki said.

Kuroe let out a small sigh. "You're right. I apologize for nit-picking. Let's keep going."

"R-right…!" With a firm nod, Hildegarde walked up to the Unseen Castle's towering double doors and held out her hand.

The next moment, three keys—red, green, and blue—sprang from her palm. The doors glowed before swinging open with a deep, loud noise.

Cool air wafted from inside, gently brushing against their cheeks. The entrance to the dim, endless corridor called to mind a great serpent lying in wait for its prey, mouth agape.

"Ah. It's open. We'll have to go on foot from here on out. Also, Edel might have altered the game mechanics. We'll have to be careful…," Hildegarde said, her brow glistening with sweat.

Kuroe stepped forward, peering into Mushiki's face. "There you have it. We should expect danger up ahead… What shall we do, Lady Saika?"

Kuroe's eyes bored into his own, and Mushiki gulped. He would be lying if he said he wasn't afraid. But that fear belonged to Mushiki Kuga.

And so, as Saika Kuozaki, he responded with a serene smile. "If the enemy is waiting for us, we'll seek her out and face her head-on. If she's laid traps for us, we'll handle those, too. That's the Kuozaki way—overcoming everything in our path."

"Precisely," Kuroe said with a nod, as if that was exactly the answer she'd been waiting for.

As well as testing his resolve, Kuroe had wanted him to come out with a rallying cry for Ruri and Hildegarde. Indeed, on hearing this, the two puffed out their cheeks and clenched their fists with renewed determination.

“Let’s go, everyone,” Mushiki said. “We’ll show this irreverent ruler what true leadership looks like.”

“Understood.”

“Right!”

“Y-yes…!”

The four of them stepped into the castle. Ruri led the way guarding their front, followed closely by Kuroe, who watched out for traps. Mushiki and Hildegarde trailed a few steps behind them.

The castle was silent, still, devoid of life. The lighting set within the walls wasn’t from torches but from some mysterious source that emitted a dim blue glow. There wasn’t even the sound of fires burning. The only noises were their own breaths and their footsteps on the cold, hard floor.

How long did they go on like that?

“Stop. Everyone, stop,” Kuroe called from in front.

“Kuroe? What is it?” Mushiki asked.

“A moment, please,” she answered, inspecting the walls and floor.

Then, after a few seconds, she nodded to herself and pointed to the floor. “Knight Hildegarde. Please step right there.”

“Huh…? H-here…?” she whispered, stepping where Kuroe had pointed.

The next moment, an arrow shot from out of nowhere, narrowly grazing her face before embedding itself into the far wall.

“Eeep…!” Hildegarde squealed, falling flat on her backside.

Kuroe, however, was unperturbed. “Hmm,” she murmured, resting a hand on her chin. “I see. So it *was* a trap.”

“…Y-you could have said that!” Hildegarde wailed, slumped over on the ground.

“My apologies,” Kuroe said, bowing her head. “That was the first one, so I wasn’t entirely sure.”

“Even so…why did you make *me* step on it…?”

“I simply thought that, among us, you are the most well versed in this game. It certainly wasn’t that I thought your reaction would be the most entertaining to watch.”

"Hnnngh! That's *definitely* what you were thinking!" Hildegarde flailed her arms and legs about on the cusp of tears, and Ruri crouched down to soothe her.

"I see now," Kuroe continued. "It seems the stat boosts from one's job class aren't entirely meaningless. I had a gut feeling there was a trap nearby, and here it was."

"Really? That's good to know," Mushiki said. "Can you sense any others?"

"Yes. Everywhere."

"…Huh?" he said, confused. "*Everywhere?* What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. From here on, every single section of the path is filled with traps. It doesn't even feel like a path anymore—more like an execution site," she said matter-of-factly.

Ruri broke into a concerned frown. "Hold on. So how are we supposed to keep going?"

"It would be impossible—for any *ordinary* adventurer, that is."

Kuroe stared at Mushiki.

He immediately understood what she was implying. With a deep nod, he stepped forward.

"Stand back. I'll handle this." He raised his right hand in front of him as a two-layered world crest appeared above his head. "Second Substantiation: Stellarium."

With that, a huge staff came into being in his hand, which he used to strike the floor.

With a sharp echo, a vibrant spectrum of magical light rippled throughout the castle. Once it had spread far enough, Mushiki dispelled the substantiation.

"Now then, shall we continue?" he suggested, leisurely stepping into the area Kuroe had just told them was filled with traps.

Ruri gasped in shock. "Madam Witch! It's too dangerous!"

But nothing happened.

Her eyes shot open in astonishment. "H-huh…? What's going on?"

"It's simple. I used my Stellarium to *reconstruct* the castle."

Saika Kuozaki's second substantiation, Stellarium, was a technique that interfered with the world around her, bending it to her will. If she so wished it, the land could be transformed into a cage, trees into spears—and trap-laden corridors into smooth, effortless paths.

"If her goal was to make an enjoyable video game, then it wouldn't be commendable behavior. But if she just wants to thwart us no matter what, then we'll respond in kind," Mushiki said with an undaunted grin.

"Way to go, Madam Witch!" Ruri exclaimed, pressing her hands together in adoration.

In any event, the traps had been cleared, and Mushiki and company continued on in the same formation as before (though Hildegarde seemed visibly apprehensive after setting off the trap earlier).

That didn't mean, however, that they were about to let down their guard. While the traps were no longer a concern, they weren't the only threat. Edelgarde, they had to assume, was on the lookout for them.

"…!"

And as expected, a new threat revealed itself soon enough.

Just as Mushiki's party entered a large hall, several voices called out to them.

"…Hmm. You're finally here. We've been waiting for you."

"I always knew you'd be the first ones to reach us."

"But sadly, your journey ends here."

"The four of us shall spell your doom."

The next moment, a wave of static rippled in front of them to reveal four figures.

"What…?!" Mushiki gawked, his breath catching in his throat.

But what other option did he have? The four figures were Saika NPCs, though this time, they were dressed not as men but in adorably cute outfits.

The first wore a school-issue swimsuit, looking like she'd just climbed out of the pool.

The second, a school uniform with a hoodie over the top.

The third, a maid outfit with cat ears and a tail.

And the fourth, glasses and a suit that she clearly wasn't used to wearing.

Each Saika Kuozaki was a lethal force in her own right—and in fact, Ruri was already succumbing to the weight of their auras, barely managing to stay on her feet.

"Huh? Those four…!" Hildegarde gasped in recognition. "They're the love interests from *Saika-delic Days: Boys' Side*! Swimming Club Ace Saika! Lone Gamer Saika! Cat-Eared Maid Saika! And the clumsy Trainee Teacher Saika…!"

"Oh?" Mushiki murmured, his interest piqued.

Kuroe, however, responded in a perplexed tone. "Why does a dating sim game you created for your own amusement have a 'boys' side'?"

"…Tsk-tsk-tsk. Don't you know? Sometimes, even women want to admire cute girls…," Hildegarde said, before launching into explanations of all the characters. "Swimming Club Ace Saika is super cheerful and comes from a completely different background from your player character, but she's secretly a huge fan of anime. One day, the player accidentally drops their anime character keychain, and that's the first step toward a budding friendship… Lone Gamer Saika can be pretty scary at times, and she's got a reputation as a bad girl—but while hanging out at the arcade, she challenges you to a match, and you become rivals…! Cat-Eared Maid Saika is a model student in class, but you stumble on her working a part-time job—which is against the school rules—and then find yourself in a secret relationship with her…! And Trainee Teacher Saika's hobby is cosplaying, which you accidentally find out! Hee-hee-hee… Which one to choose…?!"

"Hmm." Kuroe nodded, devoid of all emotion. "It seems all of these relationships are forged through a chance discovery that someone outside your community shares your interests, or else that

you stumble on a secret of theirs. A curious dynamic—and no doubt a reflection of their creator's own personality."

"Y-you don't have to analyze it like that…!" Hildegarde stammered, shaking her head as her cheeks burned scarlet.

Kuroe must have also realized this was no time to keep discussing it, because she changed the subject back to the task at hand. "In any case, they are our enemies… You know what to do, Knight Hildegarde."

"Y-yes…!" Hildegarde raised her hands in front of her. "Fourth Substantiation: Fanatikarheim!"

The world warped around her, just as it had done the previous times she'd used this technique.

"Game type: Dating sim! Situation: At school after class!"

The dim dungeon changed around them into a school building bathed in sunset, leaving Mushiki and the others in their fantasy costumes feeling utterly out of place.

"Game: Start!"

"All right."

A translucent window popped up in front of Mushiki.

While it had taken him some time to get used to, Hildegarde's substantiation ability came as second nature to him now. All he had to do was pick the most appropriate options to conquer the four NPCs' hearts.

"Oh, no you don't!"

Just then, Swimming Club Ace Saika lunged toward Mushiki, intent on stopping him before he could make a decision. Her strategy, however, belonged to a different genre. Physical attacks had no meaning in the domain of a dating sim.

And yet—

"Oh, sorry. I'm feeling a little light-headed."

Her actions were a world apart from what he'd been expecting.

Rather than attacking him, she came crashing forward…forcing him to catch her in an embrace.

"Gah…?!"

Mushiki writhed at the unexpected shock… And that was exactly what it was—a *shock*. Quite literally, he felt like an electric current was coursing through his flesh.

No. That wasn't all.

"Hmm… Not bad. Why don't we play another game tomorrow, just you and me?"

"No one knows I work here. You can keep a secret…can't you?"

"Stay back after school… It seems you need some extra lessons."

The other three Saika NPCs launched a relentless barrage of attacks one after the next.

Mushiki's vision flickered, and he almost blacked out.

"S-Saika…!" Ruri gasped.

"…I was afraid it would come to this," Kuroe said with a frown.

"Wh-what do you mean, Kuroe?!"

"In Knight Hildegarde's fourth substantiation, attacking an opponent is an act of aggression…but that goes both ways. The enemy is bound by the same rules we are."

"Wh-what…?!"

"I should have realized this after what happened with the Number One Host Saika. The enemy is learning to fight like us."

Kuroe's expression was unusually grim, and she appealed to Mushiki directly. "Keep your wits about you, Lady Saika. You need to make a decision."

"Y-yeah…"

His vision fading, Mushiki reached out to the list of options. But—

"Oh? And where do you think you're going?"

"U-ugh…!"

More shocks coursed through his body as the four Saika NPCs continued to jostle him.

He had to think. There was Swimming Club Ace Saika, Lone Gamer Saika, Cat-Eared Maid Saika, and Trainee Teacher Saika. All of them naive, driven by their desires…and yet so wonderful.

Ever since diving into this game, Mushiki had been inundated with elaborate Saika reproductions. They might have just been NPCs, but

with so many of them, he was close to reaching his limit…

And there it was, right before him, tangible and real. A world that existed only in fantasy—no, that he was afraid to contemplate even in his dreams! He was so close to heaven!

"Lady Saika! You mustn't!"

"…"

At that moment, he reached his limit.

His skin emitted a brilliant glow—and Saika Kuozaki was replaced with Mushiki Kuga.

A state change, a phenomenon that affected two forms merged into one. When Mushiki in his Saika mode was subjected to intense stimulation and became mentally unsettled, he reverted to his original state. That principle seemed to hold even in the video game world.

"Mushiki!"

"Mushiki…!"

"Wh…? Whaaa?!"

Three distinct voices sounded in his ears, the loudest belonging to Hildegarde, who was unaware of his and Saika's situation.

"M-Mushiki…?! Wh-what…?! H-how?!" Perhaps due to her emotional shock, or else in a deliberate attempt to mitigate the damage Mushiki was taking, Hildegarde's fourth substantiation fell away, and the after-hours classroom transformed back into the castle's dim interior.

"Hmm. Good."

Although they seemed startled by this turn of events, the four Saika NPCs leaped backward, flashing defiant grins.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a loud, resonant voice called out.

"Master Edel! Now!"

With that, the castle began to rumble and shake.

"Wh-what's going—?"

"We have to retreat before—"

Shouting at the top of their voices, both Ruri and Kuroe were cut off mid-sentence. A wall had appeared from the floor to the ceiling,

dividing the room straight down the middle. And that wasn't all. Similar walls had emerged in front and behind them, blocking their path.

Within seconds, Mushiki found himself trapped in the room with Hildegarde.

"…Ngh…"

Fighting the pain as it abated, Mushiki forced himself to sit up.

Hildegarde peered back at him, her face awash with worry.

"A-are you okay…? Mushiki…? Or are you Saika…?"

"…Mushiki."

"A-all right… But what just happened…?" she asked, confusion writ large on her face.

Mushiki gave her an understanding nod. "…Sorry. I'll explain later. For now, we need to figure out what—"

But that was as far as he got.

On the wall in front of Mushiki were words that hadn't been there a moment ago.

Hildegarde, sensing something was amiss, turned to see what had startled him—and froze.

Anyone would, seeing that message:

None shall leave this room without falling in love.

Chapter 4
Escape from an Enclosed Room

"Hnnnggghhh…!"

Mushiki pushed against the wall with all his might, beads of sweat running down his forehead.

"*Haah… Haah…* It's no use… It won't budge…" he said, breathing heavily as if he'd used up all his strength.

Yes. Mushiki had been trying to find a way out ever since getting trapped in this room, but his efforts had all been in vain.

The chamber was only around twelve square meters in size. Walls had sprouted up seemingly from out of nowhere to partition off the huge hall, creating this cramped, constricting space.

The walls and floor were sturdy, and there weren't any ventilation holes, either. It was completely sealed. Fortunately, it was just a video game. If they had found themselves trapped in a place like this in real life, they would have suffocated in no time.

"Is that supposed to be some kind of hint…?" Mushiki wondered out loud, his gaze drifting back to the writing on the wall.

The words, *None shall leave this room without falling in love*, stared back at him.

"What do you think it means, Hilde?" he asked.

"Hyaaah?!" She startled, taking a step back.

"Um, Hilde?"

"Gyaaargh?!"

"I haven't even said anything yet."

"Kyaaauuugh?!" She continued to retreat backward, still letting out those strange cries.

The room, however, was only so big, and there was nowhere to escape. Cornered (though Mushiki had no intention of cornering her) and with tears in her eyes, Hildegarde let out a high-pitched whistle that could have been either a scream or a threat.

"Th-this is a problem…"

She had always been uncomfortable around men, and their sudden confinement together had probably begun to fray her nerves.

Nonetheless, they couldn't very well discuss the matter like this. Mushiki leaned quietly against the wall, deciding to wait for her to calm down.

He turned his attention to what they should do next. Were Ruri and Kuroe okay? How on earth were they supposed to get out of here? And even if they could get out…

"…There are still those four Saika NPCs…," he mumbled.

"…"

Hildegarde, slumped in a corner of the room, twitched faintly in response.

"They're all such high quality… I never thought there could be so many sides to her. They're works of art, no doubt about it. I just can't stop thinking up all sorts of different encounters they've probably never experienced before…"

"…!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Mushiki saw Hildegarde stir slightly. Had he caught her interest, perhaps…?

He had to tread carefully. This was no time to rush.

Continuing, Mushiki recalled a wildlife documentary he remembered watching about how to approach wary animals.

"*Saika-delic Days: Boys' Side* is set in a modern-day school, but I wonder if they're all the characters. Maybe there's an extra hidden one," he mused, crossing his arms as he thought. "There are two girls in the same year-level as the protagonist, one senior, and a

student teacher…but what about a junior? Hmm… What sort of underclassman personality would suit Saika, though…?”

“…W-well…,” Hildegarde began, as though hesitantly treading on uncertain ground. “…She’s a childhood friend who’s older than the player character. She wakes up from a long coma after an accident and enrolls in high school…and when she reunites with the protagonist after so long, she playfully says, ‘Hee-hee… Long time no see.’”

“…?! Really?!” Mushiki felt his hands trembling. “I—I see… By putting her in a coma, she’s both more mature than the protagonist *and* an adorable underclassman…!”

“Y-yeah… A mature underclassman. Perfect, right…?”

“Yes. Amazing… Um, you said she’s mature, but she’s just one year older, I’m guessing?”

“…Huh?! H-how did you know?!”

“I knew it! I didn’t have any proof, but that Cat-Eared Maid Saika is one year older than the protagonist! I knew you wouldn’t pass up an opportunity for them to have some sort of connection!”

“W-wow…! You’re right! Cat-Eared Maid Saika and Mature Underclassman Saika used to be best friends! Depending on the route you take, they can even end up working together at the same part-time job…!”

“Gah…?!” Mushiki croaked, all but coughing up blood. He turned to face Hildegarde, straitening his back and giving her his full attention as she went on with more tales of the various Saikas.

He lost track of how much time they spent chatting like that.

“…Ah!”

Hildegarde let out a loud gasp. It seemed she’d finally realized she was actually speaking with a man. Now that they’d talked a bit, though, the tension was at least somewhat dispelled. This time, rather than letting out a strange cry and trying to bolt, she bowed her head in apology.

“…S-sorry. I was caught off guard earlier and lost my composure…”

"No, I'm just glad you've calmed down. And I enjoyed hearing about all those Saikas. Now I know the ending with the Mature Underclassman Saika… Thank you, master."

"*Master…?*" she repeated, confused.

Mushiki cleared his throat, realizing that perhaps he'd been too direct with his outpouring of respect.

"Anyway, let's assess our situation and figure out how to get out of here," he suggested.

Hildegarde nodded before timidly adding, "Um… Er… Can I say something…?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"…What happened to Saika…? One second she was there, then you were…"

"…Right."

Her question was only natural. Mushiki heaved a deep sigh.

If possible, he wanted to keep his and Saika's situation under wraps. It was too late for that now, though, so he might as well come clean.

And so, almost like he was talking about someone else, he explained how he and Saika had come to be in a state of fusion.

"…So that's what happened."

"…Whoa…" Hildegarde gasped in disbelief. Once she had time to fully digest his story, she nodded in quiet acknowledgment.

"I—I see… That sounds really tough…"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that…"

"…Huh?" Hildegarde startled as if just realizing something. "Does that mean *you* were Saika all this time…? Or was she still herself…? Or…" But the more she thought about it, the more the various possibilities seemed to scare her, because Hildegarde soon let out a high-pitched noise. "…Y-yeah. Some questions are better left unasked."

"Th-that's true…"

Grateful for her mature response, Mushiki changed the subject. "Anyway, we've got to deal with this room. What even is this?" he

asked, surveying the walls.

"*…None shall leave this room without falling in love*," Hildegarde answered in a small voice.

"Right… That's what it says. But what does it actually mean?"

"Exactly what it says. You have to fall in love to get out…"

"…Huh?" he said, sweat suddenly beading on his forehead.

"W-well, there isn't anything we can do about it…!" Hildegarde said, her voice increasing in volume. "I originally wanted to make it, *None shall leave this room without having s*— Ahem. But that would have gotten the game an R rating! Not that I personally have any problem with that, but it wouldn't be entirely appropriate with Saika as the love interest… It would cause all sorts of misunderstandings…" The more Hildegarde talked, the more passionate she became, until she stopped herself with an audible gasp.

But it was already too late.

"…Hilde," Mushiki said with a stern expression. "You're saying you *also* made this room?"

"…Sorry… It's from *Saika-delic Days III*…," she answered sullenly.

"I see…"

Well, given that her character models had been reused, that shouldn't have come as a surprise.

"So in the original game, the player and Saika are trapped in a room and can't escape unless one of them falls in love with the other…? Is that how it works?" he asked, one hand resting on his chin.

"…Y-yeah. It's a huge help how quickly you catch on to all this…"

Mushiki started running through the scenario, a serious expression on his face. "So in the game, you're both locked in a room and forced to cooperate. But it takes more than that to fall in love. The two of you are at a total loss… You start talking, and through your casual conversation, you each learn to see the other person in a new light, and that strikes a chord in your hearts… Then, the locked door swings suddenly open. *Huh?!* you think. *Just now, was that…?*

Frantic, you glance across at each other, only to find you're both blushing. *No way… Which of us was it?!*"

"Huh…? Y-you've played it…?" Hildegarde shrank back with an admiration bordering on fear.

Mushiki, however, remained unfazed.

"Hilde."

"Y-yes…?"

"You're a genius," he said, his heart racing with all sorts of emotions.

She blushed slightly, still apprehensive, but far from displeased. "D-do you think so…?"

"Yes… But we're in a real bind here. If it was a game, we could just play the scenario out, but we're actually trapped inside this thing…"

"…Y-yes… Ugh… That stupid AI. Those little Saikas weren't enough for it. It just had to go and steal this scenario, too…," she groaned, consumed by shame.

Mushiki couldn't help but give her a wry smile. "Just making sure, but could your substantiation technique get us out of this…?"

"I think…that would probably be difficult. Saika's second substantiation would be the better option… You can't switch back to her body, can you?"

"Ah. Well…" He trailed off, a troubled expression crossing his face.

True, Saika's second substantiation, Stellarium, might well be able to remake the room to give them an escape route. But there was a certain insurmountable problem preventing him from doing that.

"Actually, I can't turn back alone… There's something I need to do to trigger the change. In the past, I've always had Kuroe to help me."

"Oh… If there's anything I can do…"

"Huh?! W-well, I'm afraid that might be a little…difficult."

"You never know unless you try. Can you tell me? How do you usually do it…?" she asked.

After hesitating for a brief moment, Mushiki surrendered himself to the inevitable.

"Well, to put it simply, I need an external supply of magical energy. And the way it's delivered…"

"Yes?"

"…is through a kiss."

"Ah… I see, I see. Right… A kiss…" Hildegarde nodded before—

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!" she screamed, finally grasping the meaning of the word. "B-but that's something you do *after* falling in love…!"

"W-well, sure, but in this case…!" Mushiki's voice rose in response to her perfectly reasonable objection, and he felt his face going red.

Their voices echoed on top of one another in the cramped room, but the next second, they both fell silent.

The fact remained that without reverting to his Saika form, he couldn't use her second substantiation. In other words, a kiss was their only straightforward means of getting out of the room.

"…Hilde?" he asked after taking a few seconds to gather his thoughts and get his breathing under control.

"…! Wh-what…?"

"Sorry. I know this is sudden, and it's going to sound pretty strange…but do you think you could fall in love with me?"

"Wh…? Whaaa?! Wh-where did that come from…?"

"Just to get this out of the way, I don't think I could ever fall in love with you," he said, sending her flying back in shock.

"Y-yeah, I knew it… Who could ever love a gloomy woman like me? I'm no better than a woodlouse… Like a fish left out in the sun to dry…," she said, sinking down to the floor.

"No, that isn't what I meant," Mushiki hurried to clarify. "Sorry. I didn't phrase that right. I've already settled on the person I love. There's nothing wrong with you, Hilde. I just can't feel that way about anyone else."

"Ah… I see… So that's what you meant…" She nodded, her voice trailing off to a whisper. "Um… Do you mind telling me who she

is…?”

“Oh. Sure. It’s Saika,” he answered without hesitation.

Hildegarde startled, her voice simultaneously containing both surprise and understanding. “What?! Really?! Wow…! I see… I get it. Saika… She’s really something, huh…?”

“Yeah. She sure is…”

These two connoisseurs of all things Saika spent a moment in silent appreciation, before Hildegarde’s shoulders jumped as if she’d suddenly realized something.

“Um, Mushiki? You’re saying you’ve merged with the person you’re in love with…?”

“Ah, yeah. That just about sums it up.”

Hildegarde started breathing heavily, her excitement bubbling to the surface. “Sharing bodies with the person you love… When you’re your true self, the person you love doesn’t exist… She’s closer to you than anyone else in the whole world, but you can never truly meet… Like day and night… Wow… That’s so deep… It’s lit a creative spark in me…”

“Um, Hilde?”

“…! Oh! S-sorry… I was just brainstorming ideas for *Saika-delic Days X*…”

“You’ve already made nine of them?!”

Hildegarde’s expression turned evasive, like she was trying to cover up what she had just said.

A moment later, her eyes widened, having come to another realization.

“Mushiki… Did you just say you needed a kiss from Kuroe to activate your Saika mode…?”

“Ah… Yeah…,” he answered nervously. In actual fact, Kuroe herself was the real Saika, but it seemed prudent to withhold that small detail.

All the same, this admission only seemed to play into Hildegarde’s delusions.

"…Wow, seriously? Scary… Kids these days are something else… But I guess if you don't, you can't turn into Saika… Well done… No, hold on, that came out wrong… It's kind of heartbreaking…," she quietly muttered to herself.

It was probably a habit of hers when lost in thought, but her fingers were dancing about as if typing on an invisible keyboard.

As a fan of her dating sim games, Mushiki wanted to be careful not to interrupt her musings about any new follow-ups. But now wasn't the time for such concerns. Feigning a cough, he tried to steer the conversation back on track.

"…So, Hilde? What do you think?"

"Wh…? What?! Y-you can't mean that…?!" she exclaimed, turning red all the way to her ears. After a long pause, she breathed out a strained sigh. "Sorry… Maybe I shouldn't have asked if you're in love with her…"

"…! Oh… R-right… Sorry, that was thoughtless of me…"

"N-no, it isn't your fault, Mushiki…! *I'm* the one who asked *you*…"

The two bowed their heads to one another, and an awkward silence enveloped them.

Mushiki gritted his teeth, his thoughts racing.

The way things were going, all they were doing was wasting time. He was worried about Kuroe and Ruri, and he couldn't shake his concerns about the world outside.

The most pressing issue was their limited time remaining. Thanks to Hildegarde, they had been able to take several major shortcuts, but time was slipping away while they were locked in this room. He couldn't count on any other adventurers to defeat the Saika NPCs and get them out of here.

They'd hit a wall. At this rate, would they even be able to confront Edelgarde? For all he knew, their adventure had reached its end.

"…But why…?"

"Huh?"

"Ah, no, sorry. I was just wondering why Edelgarde locked us in here. Is she really just trying to sabotage us?"

"Hmm… That's probably part of it. We did cut a lot of corners to get here… But the biggest reason, I think, is something else…"

"What?"

"…She thought it would be funny…"

"I see…" Mushiki furrowed his brow at that compelling explanation.

That had been Edelgarde's core motivation from the very beginning. Her actions hadn't been driven by what was rational or irrational, but whether something would be fun or not. Even as she orchestrated world-changing events, when all was said and done, she was still just seeking out pleasure.

After giving the situation a good amount of thought, he spoke up again.

"Hilde? If you don't mind, could you tell me what your sister was like before she passed away?"

"Edel…?" she responded, her eyes widening. "I don't mind… But why?"

"I just want to understand more about the person we're dealing with… Of course, I know your sister and this AI aren't the same person. But I thought that if the AI is based on your sister's memories and thought patterns, maybe it will help us find a way to break through…"

Hildegarde considered this, finally nodding in agreement. "I—I see… All right. We're not getting anywhere just sitting in silence anyway."

"Thank you."

"Hmm…," she began, as if conjuring up distant memories. "Where should I start? To be honest, the memories of my childhood are pretty faint… Edel and I were orphans, and by the time we understood the world around us, our parents were already gone… It was our mentor who raised us. He was a skilled mage, but he couldn't have children of his own, and he wanted an heir to carry on his techniques."

"I didn't know that… So you learned magic from him?"

"Yes. He really put us through the ringer. Though that was all we'd really known, so we didn't think it was particularly bad at the time," she said with a distant look. "From the very beginning, Edel truly was exceptional. By the time she turned twelve, she already knew how to construct composition formulas faster and with more precision than our master."

"Wow… That's incredible."

"Yes. She was. I also thought so at the time, but I only realized *how* extraordinary she was once we went to the Garden. Our master probably wanted her to be his successor…"

"'Probably'?"

"Ah… Yes. He was killed around that time…"

"H-he was *killed*…?" Mushiki murmured, unsettled.

"Yes…" Hildegarde scratched her cheek. "Apparently, he had been blackmailing politicians and the mafia to fund his research. He stirred up a great deal of resentment toward him from all sorts of different directions… I went into the workshop one day and found his corpse there, riddled with bullet holes… It was gruesome… I'm over it now, but I couldn't eat meat for a long while afterward…"

"I—I had no idea…"

"Unlike me, Edel was unfazed. She calmly disposed of the corpse and sorted through our master's belongings and devices… In the end, we inherited everything—his connections, his workshop, his research infrastructure—and maintained them all exactly as he had left them. I wonder if some of his old acquaintances even realized he'd gone… Edel said she tracked down the murderer and made them pay. She didn't go into any details, though…"

"…W-wow…"

Mushiki nodded, sweat beading on his forehead. He could see why Hildegarde considered her sister a genius. She wasn't just exceptionally skilled—her ability to act under pressure and resolve also set her apart.

"After that, it was just the two of us. I like to think we got along… but I can't really say how Edel felt about it," Hildegard said self-

deprecatingly. “Maybe she thought I was clumsy or just slow to figure things out… I was supposed to be the older sister, supposed to protect her, but I ended up relying on her for everything… I’m the head of the Garden’s technical department now, but if Edel were still alive, I’m sure that position would belong to her… I still wonder about it sometimes. What if I had been born frail instead of her? If I had died back then and she was alive today, the Garden, and the world, might both be better off than they are now…”

“How can you say something like that?” Mushiki exclaimed.

“…Hee-hee. Thank you. You’re very kind,” she said with a weak smile. “But it’s true. She was just so gifted… She saw things differently from everyone else… I was with her the whole time, but I still couldn’t follow what she was doing. I never grasped the important details. And now…I’m even more lost,” Hildegarde said in a thin voice, scratching the back of her head. “I wonder what she was thinking when she made that AI… Putting everyone’s lives in danger and plunging the world into chaos… Was that really what she wanted…? Revenge…? Or did she want to live forever as data? I don’t know. She didn’t tell me anything. Maybe she thought I wasn’t worth telling… I was a failure as a big sister…”

“…”

Mushiki silently looked into her eyes.

He hadn’t known Edelgarde during her lifetime, and he knew nothing of her relationship with her sister. Any words of solace he might have offered would have sounded hollow.

But there was one thing he could do…

Having a younger sister himself, he was sure of it.

Giving Hildegarde a warm smile, he asked softly, “What was her favorite food?”

“Huh…?”

“What did Edel like to eat?” he asked again.

A confused look flashed across Hildegarde’s face. “Stew…I suppose. She liked beef shanks, cooked tender until they melt in

your mouth. Whenever I told her we were having stew, her eyes sparkled with excitement…”

“And what foods didn’t she like?”

“Ah… That one’s easy. Leeks. Whenever I put them in a pot-au-feu, she’d leave them untouched. So I’d chop them up and mix them in with ground meat to hide them. Though my success rate was still only around fifty-fifty…”

“Yeah, I know what that’s like. Ruri used to hate bell peppers. She always managed to find them, no matter how cleverly hidden they were. It was pretty impressive.”

“Hee-hee… Yes… Well, people’s dislikes are easy to spot.” The corners of Hildegarde’s lips curled into a smile.

“Then how about…?” Now that the ice had been broken, Mushiki asked one question after another.

Did she have any hobbies? Was there anything else she was good at? What books did she like? Any annoying habits? Was there anything she would never compromise on?

The questions themselves were fairly trivial. It was the kind of small talk people turned to when there was nothing else to discuss, or the sort of questions elementary school friends might ask each other.

Given the dire situation, their conversation seemed completely out of place. But thanks to Mushiki’s questions, Hildegarde’s tension seemed to abate, and she responded to him naturally.

“Ah, right. Edel and I loved video games ever since we were kids, and we wrote our own simple programs whenever we could. But we had different tastes. Or we went off in different directions, I guess you could say.”

“Oh? In what way?”

“I’ve always been more interested in character development and all the emotional turns, while Edel was more concerned with the intricacies of the internal systems. It wasn’t an issue when we worked separately, but when we decided to collaborate for the first time, we were both surprised by just how different we were,”

Hildegarde said, the emotion in her voice rising. "Edel actually asked at one point, 'Do we really need such intricate character relationships?' Can you believe that?! I mean, honestly! It's not just necessary—it's the basis of the whole story…! And then, out of nowhere, she put in this ridiculously complicated combo system! Into an RPG! When I pointed it out to her, she gave me this deadpan look and said, 'Huh? Are you serious…? You're my sister, yet you don't understand the romance of combos…?'"

"So what happened in the end?"

"…No matter how much I tried to explain to her, she just didn't get it. I suggested a system where the characters' affinity levels would buff or debuff their stats in battle, and then it finally clicked… Edel agreed so long as she could fine-tune the difficulty options. In the end, we distributed the game online, but I wonder how many people actually managed to clear the highest difficulty level…"

"Ah-ha-ha… Sounds like it was quite an ordeal," Mushiki said with a grin.

"But," Hildegarde continued, "that got us thinking. There were elements we definitely needed to include, and some that fit together perfectly. You know, hidden characters, secret commands, that sort of thing… We laughed when we realized it." She chuckled wistfully.

Mushiki let out a deep breath, seeing that Hildegarde looked considerably more relaxed than she had been a few minutes ago.

"Hilde," he said.

"Hmm…? Yeah?"

"You know a lot about her, don't you?"

"…!" Her breath caught in her throat. "Well… It's completely different from all this, though…"

"You know," he said, cutting her off, "I have a younger sister, too."

Naturally, he was referring to Ruri.

"Y-yes… I mean, I know that, of course…," Hildegarde answered nervously.

Mushiki gave her a slight nod. "My sister's also a genius. At least, that's what people say. In my case, I'm the unworthy older brother…

And I'm ashamed to say I didn't know she was a mage at the Garden until only recently. I've heard she's been through a lot, but I don't remember any of it…"

"O-oh…," Hildegarde murmured, as if struggling to see what he was getting at.

Mushiki sighed, a troubled expression across his face. "…I'm sure she must hate me. After all, I'm just her pathetic, unreliable, embarrassing older brother."

"I—I don't think that's how she sees you…"

"What makes you say that?"

"I mean, I've never heard her say anything like that… In fact, I think she loves you. A lot. You're her big brother. She's always talking about you…"

"Exactly," Mushiki said.

Hildegarde's eyes opened in surprise.

"Wh-what…?"

"Just before, you said you thought Edel saw you as clumsy and inept. But did she ever say that directly?"

"…W-well, no, but…"

"Then how do you know that's what she thought?"

"I…" Hildegarde trailed off, unsure.

"You also said something else," Mushiki continued calmly. "That you don't know why she made that AI. That she never spoke to you about it."

"…"

"There's only one way to know for sure."

"Wh-what…?" she timidly asked.

"Simple," he said with a forceful nod. "You need to ask her directly."

"Huh…?" Hildegarde's brow furrowed ever so slightly. "B-but Edel is already…"

"I know. Unfortunately, she's already passed away… But aren't we trying to find her AI, the one that's inherited her memories?"

"—!"

Hildegarde's breath caught in her throat.

She must have already realized it herself.

Yet that AI, a replica of her sister, had emerged as a threat to humanity. She probably hadn't been able to think about anything else.

He couldn't say he didn't understand that sentiment. If Ruri had met an untimely end and an enemy looking exactly like her had popped up in her place, Mushiki would have been just as disturbed. But that was also why he understood her perfectly.

He looked Hildegarde straight in the eyes.

"I can't say this too loudly, given the situation, but I think this is an incredibly valuable opportunity for you… You thought you'd never be able to see your sister again, but now you have a chance to see how she really felt."

"…B-but…that would mean…" Hildegarde's voice trembled with fright.

He understood her fear so well, he could almost grasp it in his hands.

She was scared. Scared that if she asked Edelgarde, she would be met with rejection or discover a darkness in her sister she'd never known before.

But even so…

He gently shook his head. "Hilde, did you tell Edel how much you loved her while she was still alive?"

"…H-huh…? I didn't go out of my way to say it… No…," she murmured, knitting her brows.

Even for sisters who were as close as they had been, it was probably rare to have that sort of conversation. Especially for Hildegarde, who was shy and reserved by nature.

"But you *did* love her, right? You've been taking part in the preparations for the Spirit Festival ever since she died. You haven't missed a single year."

Yes. That was certainly true.

Though she often missed other school events, Hildegarde made a point of attending the Spirit Festival every year to pray for the souls of the dead. There was no way she would have gone to all that effort if she didn't care about her sister.

"I…uh…" She hesitated before slumping her head.

"You're wondering if she hated you, even though you loved her. Right? If it was my sister we were talking about, that would be the bigger shock for me."

"…!"

She startled, trembling all over.

"Sorry. I went too far," Mushiki apologized. "You were shaken when you saw the AI. Because deep down, you never thought she would do something like this. Right?"

Hildegarde took a few seconds to gather her thoughts before speaking. "She was a genius… More times than I could count, I just couldn't keep up with her… But she never did anything to upset me. She wouldn't have done anything like this, not even by mistake… So I couldn't believe an AI she made would do all this… I thought maybe I never really understood her at all…," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes.

Mushiki took a small breath. "That's good to hear."

"…Huh…?" She stared back, wide-eyed.

"You believe in her, so you have to ask her. What could have driven her to make an AI so similar to herself? What did she go to such lengths for…? And what did she really think of you…? There are certain things people can't communicate without putting them into words."

"Mushiki…" Hildegarde wiped her tears with the back of her hand, then slowly looked up. "You're right… Thank you."

A soft smile graced her lips—and in that moment, it was as if the fear and worry clouding her thoughts all this time had suddenly lifted, even if only by a fraction.

"Yes… Even if I can't live up to her as a sorcery engineer, I'm still her big sister… I have to believe in her…," she said, so quietly it

almost sounded like she was talking to herself.

Yet her words were impossible to ignore.

Mushiki raised his hand and fixed her with a serious look.

"Hang on. I have a different opinion there."

"Huh…?"

"You said you're no match for her, but I don't see it that way. At the very least, I think you're the best sorcery engineer in the world today."

"Y-you do…?" she asked unsurely.

Mushiki puffed out his chest. "The person behind those wonderful Saika NPCs *has* to be a genius!"

"…"

Hildegarde wore a puzzled look for a moment, then—

"…Pfft! Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha…!" Unable to hold back, she burst into laughter. "What…? Hee-hee… That's got nothing to do with a sorcery engineer's skill!" she snorted before getting her breathing under control. "Thank you, Mushiki. I need to get out this room so I can ask Edel what she really thinks."

"Yeah. Let's give it our all," he responded, nodding firmly.

Hildegarde fell silent as she gathered her thoughts.

"…Hey, Mushiki? If you turned back into Saika, your second substantiation would be able to open a hole in this wall, right…?"

"Huh…? Yes. It would…"

Hildegarde's cheeks turned pink with embarrassment. "Um, how should I put this…? If you don't mind…I could…er…"

"Eh…?!" Finally grasping what she meant, Mushiki felt his cheeks burn red. "Um… Er…"

"…S-sorry, that probably sounded weird, saying something like that so suddenly. I understand if you don't want to… I just thought if it helps us get out of here… Ah! Th-that doesn't mean you *have* to or anything…!"

"N-no, it's not that I don't want to… I just feel guilty about it, is all," Mushiki explained. "I'm sorry… I didn't explain properly. When I get a supply of magic from anyone but Kuroe, a spell needs to be

cast on them beforehand… So a kiss on its own won’t be enough…,” he said apologetically.





"…Huh?!" Hildegarde gasped, smoke all but rising out of her ears. "I—I—I see… S-sorry for jumping to conclusions like that…"

"N-no… I'm the one who should apologize…"

Unable to calm herself, Hildegarde held her head in her hands.

"Aaaaaaaaagh! I-I'm just plain old perverted…! Please, don't tell anyone at the Garden…! It's not like I was trying to kiss a boy or anything! I just wanted to get out of here… I normally wouldn't say anything like that… I—I don't even know why I did… I just thought maybe it would be okay…" Her eyes spun in bewilderment, when—

The room began to shake, accompanied by an ominous, heavy sound that reverberated all around them.

"Wh-what's—"

"…?! H-huh…?!"

To their mutual amazement, cracks ran through the walls of the room as a hole slowly emerged like a set of double doors opening.

Hildegarde gasped as if she'd figured something out, her already flushed face turning an even brighter shade of red.

"Wha…?! I-it can't be… W-wait…! No! That doesn't count! It's gotta be some sort of fluke! If it was going to open, why couldn't it have happened at a better time?!"

"H-Hilde? What's wrong? Please, calm down," Mushiki urged, caught off guard by her sudden agitation.

Meanwhile, the walls opened wider and wider.

"…Finally."

"Honestly, that was hard work…"

Kuroe and Ruri appeared from the gap in the wall.

"Kuroe! Ruri!"

"What…? Huh?! H-how…?!"

The two of them looked puzzled seeing Mushiki and Hildegarde's shocked expressions.

"What do you mean, 'How'?" asked Kuroe.

"…What were *you* both doing in there?" Ruri demanded with a hard stare.

Gasping audibly, Mushiki and Hildegarde both averted their gazes.

Though Kuroe and Ruri continued to watch them with clear skepticism, they decided to put the question aside for now.

"Ruri and I found ourselves trapped in a small room, but we managed to escape," Kuroe explained in a flat voice. "We've been trying to help you both from the outside."

"That's right! It was pretty sturdy, but I'm glad we managed to get out!" Ruri said, puffing out her chest.

Mushiki breathed a relieved sigh. "I see… Thank you."

"…S-so that's what happened…! That was close… And I thought…" Hildegarde trailed off, mumbling something under her breath.

Puzzled, Mushiki glanced over at her. "Hilde? Did you say something?"

"N-nothing…!" she stammered, color rising to her cheeks again as she shook her head vigorously from side to side.

It was a strange reaction, but he knew better than to delve any deeper.

"But how did *you* both manage to escape?" he asked, turning to Kuroe and Ruri. "What kind of room were you both trapped in?"

"…"

"…"

Kuroe remained expressionless, while Ruri looked away, her cheeks flushed.

"Well, all that matters is that we're out now."

"…Y-yeah! This is just a game… It's just a game, right…?!"

"O-okay…"

Just what sort of room could it have been? Curious though Mushiki was, he knew better than to ask any more questions.

"Anyway, thanks," he said, clearing his throat and changing the topic. "I'm just a little surprised. I didn't know you could break in from the outside."

Kuroe and Ruri fixed their gazes on Mushiki again.

"No, these gimmick rooms are built to be resistant to outside interference. Not even Ruri here would have been able to force it open," Kuroe said.

"Huh? Then how—?"

But before Mushiki could finish speaking, an electronic voice boomed out.

"It looks like you're about done talking."

The next moment, a round silhouette emerged from the shadows behind Kuroe.

"Whoa!" Mushiki yelled, caught off guard.

A strange object appeared, neither biological nor inorganic. It was around thirty centimeters in size and looked like an extremely caricaturized human being. If he had to compare it to something, it was like a three-dimensional piece of retro pixel art.

The mysterious object floated gently through the air, leaving them all understandably surprised.

"Wh-what is that thing…?"

"Is that really any way to greet your savior?"

"Huh…?" Mushiki's eyes widened in astonishment.

He knew who this was. He'd heard that voice before.

Yes. Right after the incident with Clara Tokishima, during the meeting with the heads of the other mage-training institutes.

"Are you…Headmaster Shikimori?" he asked.

"Oh-ho." The floating piece of pixel art broke into an amused smile—though strictly speaking, it merely halved the number of pixels situated around its eyes. *"Impressive, picking up on that with so little information. I should have expected nothing less from the man who stopped a Mythologia, Mushiki Kuga,"* the pixel art object—Shikimori—said.

Kuroe cleared her throat, likely to keep him from delving too deeply into that subject. "Apologies for not making the proper introductions earlier. As you have guessed, this is Headmaster Baito Shikimori of Twilight City. Like the Garden, the City has fallen victim to Edelgarde's cyberattack. Fortunately, they were able to swiftly regain control over their core computer systems and have now come to our aid."

"I see. So were you the one who helped us escape that room…?"

"Indeed… The door did open slightly quicker than my analysis suggested…but I suppose it was within the margin of error."

"Right. Thank you," Mushiki said gratefully.

Hildegarde blushed slightly for some reason, retreating into the shadows behind her.

"…I—I appreciate it, but how did you end up like that?" she asked.

Mushiki had been wondering the same thing. In this world, which was so lifelike, it could be mistaken for reality, Shikimori looked like a character pulled from a game made decades ago.

With an awkward motion, Shikimori shrugged. *"Don't get the wrong idea. This is just an avatar. My consciousness is still very much in the real world. Unlike some people, I'm not reckless enough to dive headfirst into a video game that steals the souls of its players."*

"…"

The members of their fearless, foolhardy attack force fell suddenly silent, perspiration beading on their brows.

Shikimori himself, however, remained unconcerned as he looked about, taking in his surroundings.

"So the four of you are the only ones who broke in from the Garden? What about Saika Kuozaki? I thought she was taking the lead."

"…Don't worry. Lady Saika is supporting us in her own way," Kuroe answered.

Shikimori's suspicion was plain to see. *"Looks like she's MIA, if you ask me…"*

But just then—

A heavy, ominous rumble sounded all around them as it had before, and the wall to their left opened to reveal four Saika NPCs in adorable costumes.

"Well, well, well. I thought I heard a commotion out here."

"You want a rematch? I'll kick your ass all over again."

"It seems we have an uninvited guest with us, *meow*."

"What a bad bunch of boys and girls. It seems you all need some extra lessons."

Swimming Club Ace Saika, Lone Gamer Saika, Cat-Eared Maid Saika, and Trainee Teacher Saika leaped out, spreading to the left and right.

"…Did she multiply since I last saw her?" Shikimori said with surprise. *"Knowing the Witch, that isn't impossible."*

"Don't act like this is normal," Kuroe snapped, her expression turning stern as she adopted a fighting stance.

"Right. Getting out of that room was one thing, but we still have to have to deal with these four. So first…" Mushiki calmly walked past the wary Kuroe to stand in front of the four Saika NPCs.

"Mushiki…?" she asked, unable to guess what he was planning.

And how could she? These opponents were Edelgarde's strongest guardians, and they had learned how to counter Hildegarde's fourth substantiation. Just a short time ago, he himself had been overwhelmed by their sensual attack and forced into a state change against his will.

And yet—

"Leave this to me, Kuroe."

Something had changed in him since then. With renewed certainty, Mushiki called out, "Do it, Hilde!"

"O-okay…!" she responded, activating her world crest. "Fourth Substantiation: Fanatikarheim!"

The moment she cast her spell, their surroundings were replaced with the same after-school setting as earlier. A semitranslucent window popped up in front of Mushiki with multiple choices.

"Oh? I was wondering what you were planning. But this…"

"Have you already forgotten how we turned the tables on you last time?"

The Saika NPCs fixed him with daring grins as they circled toward him—likely hoping to seduce him once again.

"…"

Without even glancing at the options available to him, Mushiki closed the distance to the NPCs and whispered to them.

"I know you're worried about your injuries from the accident. But you can't push yourself too hard. I know you'll be able to swim again, Saika. I believe in you."

"Huh…?!" Swimming Club Ace Saika's eyes shot open, uncomprehending.

But Mushiki wasn't finished yet. Next, he approached Lone Gamer Saika, Cat-Eared Maid Saika, and Trainee Teacher Saika.

"Whoever wins three matches in a row gets to order the other one to do whatever they want, right? Heh-heh-heh… Let's have one more battle then, Saika."

"…What…?!"

"You mean like when our homeroom teacher almost found out about your part-time job…? Don't worry about it. I like seeing you there. So long as my cute little cat-eared maid keeps on greeting me with her usual smile, that's enough for me."

"…But we've only just met…?!"

"Oh? The zipper on your cosplay costume is broken, and you can't get it closed? Here, put my jacket on for now. It's okay, you won't get cold. Actually, I'm feeling a little hot now that you're here, Miss Kuozaki."

"…How do you know about that…?!"

As with Swimming Club Ace Saika, the other three NPCs were awash with confusion.

"Gah…?!" they shouted. Their bodies trembled as if they'd just been hit by some tremendous force.

"Th-this feeling… What *is* this…?!"

"I don't remember something like that happening…!"

"It didn't happen… I'm sure of it… But…"

"Why? How is this—?"

The Saika NPCs recoiled in shock.

It was little wonder. Those were events the player was supposed to discover while playing out their respective routes in the original

game. But Hildegarde, the creator, had revealed them to Mushiki while they'd been trapped in the room earlier.

"Goodbye, Saika. Next time we meet, it'll be in our true forms," Mushiki said—and with that, the four Saika NPCs turned to light and faded away, satisfied.

A moment later, their surroundings reverted to their original state.

"You did it…! You're amazing, Mushiki…!" Hildegarde exclaimed, clenching her fists in excitement.

Kuroe, by comparison, looked on in bewilderment. "I'd like to ask you to explain what just happened…but it's fortunate you were able to defeat all four of them." Although she seemed incredibly interested, apparently Kuroe had come to the conclusion that now wasn't the time to dwell on it. She looked ahead, urging them on. "Anyway, we should hurry… Headmaster Shikimori, if you would?"

"Ah, yes," he replied, touching the back wall.

The next moment, numbers and letters shimmered across its surface. It opened to the left and right with a deep rumbling noise, revealing a hidden staircase to the upper floors.

"Time to go. The Fairy Queen's throne room lies ahead."

"Aren't you coming, Headmaster Shikimori?" Mushiki asked.

The pixel-art avatar shook its head. *"There are still many other things I've got to handle. And besides…"*

"Yes?"

"Honestly, your way of fighting is so radically different from what I'm used to that I don't think I can keep up."

"…Ah. Right." Mushiki gave him a tight smile and nodded.

With that, they proceeded upstairs, leaving Shikimori behind.

◇

"So this is the Fairy Queen's throne room…?" Mushiki murmured when they reached a towering door at the end of the long flight of stairs.

So much had happened since they first set foot in the castle, but they'd finally made it.

Beyond that door waited Edelgarde, the queen of Tírnanóg.

Mushiki clenched his fists with newfound determination.

"Are you ready, Hilde? Ruri? Kuroe?"

"Y-yes…!" said Hilde.

"Of course," responded Ruri.

"No," came Kuroe's flat reply.

Mushiki nearly fell to the floor with shock.

"Y-you're not…?"

"No. There is still an important matter we need to discuss," she said, glancing at Hildegarde. "Is Knight Hildegarde aware?"

"Ah… I had to tell her. There was no way I could keep it under wraps," he replied.

"I see." Kuroe nodded, as if having fully expected this. "And the conditions for a state change?"

"That too."

"Then there's no need to hide this."

"Right… Wait, what?" Mushiki stared back, wide-eyed.

The next second, Kuroe reached out to grab his robe with a sharp tug, pressing her lips against his with a boldness that took everyone by surprise.

"—?!"

His body began to shimmer, and he gradually transformed into Saika.

Their shock was understandable when you stopped to think about it. Mushiki had been in his original body ever since the Saika NPCs triggered his state change.

"H-huh…?!" Hildegarde gasped, having witnessed his transformation for the first time. Her cheeks burned red, and she covered her face with both hands—though her eyes peeked out through the gaps between her fingers. "I-it's true… A kiss really does turn you into Saika…"

"…Ah. Surprised?" he asked.

In truth, he was taken aback himself—but in his role as Saika, he couldn't afford to come across as flustered. Doing everything he could to maintain his composure, he gave them a relaxed smile.

"U-um… Wow… D-did I just see that…? E-eeep…," Hildegarde exclaimed, her breath coming in quick gasps.

Kuroe let out an exasperated sigh. "Please don't lose your presence of mind over this. Now that you've learned Lady Saika's and Mushiki's secret, you're an accomplice. I must ask you to keep this matter strictly between us."

"O-of course…," Hildegarde said, nodding. "Um… Now that I know, there's every possibility you might transform in front of me again… Right…?"

"It's possible."

"Um… I don't suppose I could take a photo…? For reference…?"

"Hah?" Kuroe glared back at her.

"…Sorry. It's nothing." Hildegarde looked away, sweat dripping from her brow.

Mushiki couldn't help chuckling—but then he noticed something.

"Hm?" He tilted his head to one side. "Ruri? Are you all right? Are you not feeling well…?"

"Huh? No, I'm fine… Why?" she asked in confusion.

The fact that she'd seen him undergo a state change without emitting any strange noises, gnashing her teeth, shedding tears, or muttering curses under her breath struck him as very odd. Then again, they were about to confront this game's final boss, who would otherwise soon rule the world, so she probably just understood the gravity of the situation.

"No, don't worry about it. Forget I said anything." He shook his head, turning back to the matter at hand. "Getting back on track… Let's head out for real this time."

With those words, a two-layered world crest appeared above him, and a huge staff materialized in his hands. Stellarium, Saika's second substantiation, which he hadn't been able to use while trapped in the room earlier.

With a grandiose gesture, he struck the staff against the floor, and a sharp sound rang out around them.

The next moment, the heavy doors leading into Edelgarde's throne room began to swing open.

After exchanging glances with the others, he stepped inside.

"…"

The chamber beyond was so vast that it was hard to believe they were still inside the castle.

Mysterious lights flickered throughout, casting a dim glow, but beyond that stretched an immense darkness that couldn't exist in any real building. It was impossible to know where the room ended.

But now wasn't the time to get distracted by something like that.

There, in the center of the chamber, they found whom they'd been searching for.

"Silvelle…!" Hildegarde shouted, her cry echoing back at them many times over.

Yes. Bound to a colossal pillar in the center of the hall, like the world tree supporting the heavens above, was a girl who looked exactly like Hildegarde—Silvelle, bound by softly glowing chains.

And seated on the throne below her…

"Ah, welcome. You're here sooner than I expected, Sis."

It was Edelgarde, watching them with perfect composure.

"Edel…" A slight frown creased Hildegarde's brow as she called out to her sister.

"Mm…" Edelgarde stretched her arms above her head, then sprang down from her throne in an unnatural parabola, as if gravity had somehow weakened around her.

She gave them an angelic smile and cleared her throat. "You've done well to make it this far. I am Edelgarde Silvelle, queen of this land of Tírnanóg… O arrogant, irreverent adventurers seeking to usurp my throne! If before my majesty you dare to cling to your foolish ambitions, then come and face me!" she commanded, spreading her arms out wide.

Kuroe furrowed her brow in response. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, don't be such a buzzkill. You've finally made it to the final boss. We should at least play the part, don't you think?" Edelgarde answered, grumpily crossing her arms. "Hmm… Your playstyle leaves a lot to be desired, you know? I can overlook you using your substantiation techniques, but using your old save data? That's a bit much. And fast traveling right up to my castle? Downright rude. I designed the game so you'd still be able to make it in time if you followed the proper route at a good pace. I even went to the trouble of setting up special events and encounters across all three islands…" She continued to chide them, tapping her fingers against her arm.

…Even putting her appearance aside, Mushiki was starting to see just how she was modeled after Hildegarde's sister.

Nonetheless, Edelgarde was still a threat. He responded without taking his eyes off her.

"Unfortunately, we're not here to play your little—"

"I mean, the Madam Witch Swimsuit Festival on the second island was an absolute masterpiece, if I do say so myself."

"…"

"There's no need to look so upset," Kuroe whispered to Mushiki.

He cleared his throat. "I'm surprised to hear you criticizing *my* playstyle when you've been basing all your strongest characters on me."

"Oh? Those Madam Witches? They were quite something, weren't they? I stumbled on them while rummaging through Hilde's computer files. They were so detailed, I just *had* to borrow them… Honestly, you've improved a lot since I last checked in. Though I guess using a real-life subject for a game character isn't exactly something to brag about. I'll bet you didn't even get her permission first. You've always been like that, haven't you?"

"U-ugh…" Hildegarde shrank back in a nervous sweat. A moment later, however, she shook her head and stepped forward. "…You really do know me, don't you?"

"Yes. I told you, didn't I? I may be an AI, but I've inherited everything I am from Edelgarde Silvelle."

Determined, Hildegarde put on a brave face. "In that case…answer me. What was Edel thinking when she made you? Is this what she wanted? And what…?" The words stuck in her throat briefly, but she quickly recovered. "What did she really think of me?"

Yes. Here it was, the outcome of her conversation with Mushiki.

Edelgarde's eyes widened in equal parts surprise and curiosity. "Oh…? Did something happen to you? You aren't usually so direct, Sis."

"…Answer me. Please," she pressed, and Edelgarde suddenly lowered her gaze.

"Fine. But first…" Her lips twisted in a sneer as she kicked off from the floor and floated in the air. "You'll have to defeat me!"

With those words, her body started emitting a faint glow as an overwhelming surge of magical energy filled their surroundings.

"…!"

Mushiki found himself grimacing under the weight of that pressure.

Edelgarde's aura was above and beyond those of the Saika NPCs. In the blink of an eye, this petite girl, as fragile as a wisp, had transformed into the Fairy Queen who ruled this world.

"Lady Saika!" Kuroe shouted.

"Right…!" Mushiki responded, tightening his grip on his second substantiation staff.

The others followed suit, readying themselves for battle.

But none of them could have guessed what would happen next.

"Huh—?" Mushiki gasped.

A sharp pain shot through his back, seeping into his chest, and he caught sight of a spray of red droplets.

It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

Someone had stabbed him in the back.

"Ugh… Ngh…!"

Coughing up blood, he fell to his knees.

"Lady Saika?!" Kuroe screamed as she ran to his side.

"Ugh…"

He managed to look behind him as his vision wavered. When he recognized the figure standing over him, his voice left him.

It was none other than Ruri, a bloody sword in her hand and a thin smile on her lips.

"Ru…ri…? Why…?"

She looked down with a frown, then nodded in realization.

"Ah, right, yeah. I totally forgot to switch back to my original character design," she said cheerfully, quickly opening a configuration window and changing a few settings.

Within moments, she wore a completely different appearance—hair dyed in vibrant colors, prominent canine teeth, ears adorned with piercings and ear cuffs.

"Wha—?"

Mushiki's eyes all but popped from their sockets.

His reaction was entirely reasonable. After all—

"Heh-heh! It's been, like, forever. Right, Madam Witch…? Or should I just call you Mushipi?"

It was none other than the mage carrying the mythic-class annihilation factor the Ouroboros—Clara Tokishima.





Chapter 5
The Final Puzzle

"What…?" Mushiki groaned, dazed by the pain coursing through his chest.

He could hardly be blamed for his confusion. Anyone else in his situation would have undoubtedly reacted in the same way. His sister, a member of his party with whom he'd shared so many hardships and joys, had suddenly revealed herself as the enemy of all mankind.

"Wow, nice reaction! You're pretty cute, y'know? I think I might be a sadist, 'cause I'm totally getting off on seeing you like that," Clara joked, circling him with incredibly light steps.

"Cla…ra…," Mushiki wheezed, sweat building up on his face.

She must have used the game's character creator to disguise herself as Ruri, all to catch Mushiki and the others off guard and strike when they least expected it.

But she couldn't have taken Ruri's place from the very beginning. Mushiki clearly remembered the look on his sister's face when she'd fallen to her knees to apologize in the first town and the blissful way she'd cuddled up to the Number One Host Saika. It was hard to believe an imposter could have been behind those actions.

But Ruri had been with them ever since. There shouldn't have been an opportunity to—

"…! Ah… When we were separated in those rooms…"

Kuroe, fighting to staunch his bleeding, tensed up. "Yes, probably… I thought those rooms were a half-hearted distraction, but maybe this was their true purpose…" She fixed Clara with an odious glare. "I should have realized it sooner. There was no way Ruri wouldn't have reacted when I triggered your state change, Mushiki."

Right. Come to think of it, she hadn't responded to it at all.

He also remembered picking up on it at the time, but given the circumstances, he'd decided to let it slide.

"Bingo! You're spot on! I knew you'd figure it out!" Clara snickered. "Your bunny girl was the super-annoying one, but I figured Edelun could handle her, so no probs there. So, like, I'm holding a bit of a grudge against you for that. Then again, I'd never have gotten a hit in on Saika Kuozaki in her prime, you know? So I'm actually super grateful to you for that, Mushipi," she said, neatly spinning around on the spot. Before anyone knew what had happened, her clothes transformed into a necromancer's outfit, complete with skull-shaped trinkets.

"Mm-mm! This feels way better! Armor is super cute and all—like, it totally gives off that RPG vibe—but it's kinda hard to move around in, you know? I'm real curious about that whole bikini armor look, though. What even is that? Baha!" She let out a burst of laughter, her tone of voice completely out of place in the tense atmosphere.

All the while, Mushiki glowered at her, a look of dread etched into his features.

The reason was simple. Clara's presence here hinted at something else.

There was no way that her knowing the truth about *Argento Tírnanóg*, creating a character identical to Ruri, and taking her place in the game had all just been a coincidence.

The fact that she was here now could mean only that she and Edelgarde were working together.

Mushiki gritted his teeth. Edelgarde was a formidable foe in her own right, but with Clara on her side, the weight of despair hung

heavy over them. And yet—

"…Hold on," Edelgarde interrupted, turning to Clara with a raised eyebrow. "What are you doing? You're ruining the big boss battle I was looking forward to!" she wailed in annoyance.

Even Clara mustn't have been expecting this sort of a reaction.

"Eh…?" She turned around, surprise written across her face. "Seriously? I helped you out by taking down a super-annoying enemy. Why don't we, like, team up and fight them together?"

"You don't get the psychology of gamers one little bit!" Edelgarde continued. "Look, there's a huge difference between a fight having a high difficulty level and just being plain old unbeatable! How would *you* feel if you made it all the way to the final dungeon to face the last boss and then you were forced not to use one of your party members?! I might be able to accept it if there was a compelling story reason, but for a new character to pop up out of nowhere with zero foreshadowing and wreak havoc on the player's party—that's a complete letdown."

"…I'm not allowed to just pop up…?"

"And your timing is all wrong! If you were going to launch a surprise attack, you should've done it right at the moment when the player is all but assured of victory. That's one of the main rules of drama! Sure, this might be a different medium, but you're an entertainer! You can't just ignore it!"

"Ugh…!" Clara staggered as if struck by some unseen force. "I'm starting to feel like I messed up real bad or something…!" But she soon dismissed that thought with a shake of her head. "Well, it is what it is, you know? I mean, getting a shot in on the Witch of Resplendent Color and seeing her get knocked down is kinda cool, so I'm just gonna take what I can. Besides…" A two-layered world crest unfurled around her abdomen, and the chainsaw of her second substantiation, Endlesser, appeared in her hands. "Things are gonna get way more exciting from here on out, so brace yourselves! We're gonna be even after this!" she said with a harrowing grin.

"Ngh…"

“Saika! Kuroe…!”

Kuroe positioned herself in front of Mushiki, drawing her dagger to protect him, while Hildegarde faced off against Edelgarde.

“Eh? You wanna go? Ngh, you’re so devoted, Kuroetchi! I like that about you… But you’re kinda at a disadvantage here, don’tcha think? Just saying!”

“You only play games you know you can win, Clara Tokishima. You’re dull,” Kuroe said in a flat voice.

“…So it’s one of those days where I’ve gotta keep being everyone’s punching bag, huh? Ugh!” Clara said, dripping with sweat. “Whatever. If you’re not gonna back down, then just, like, hold on to your loyalty until the end… I don’t care. I’ll turn it into an epic video and nab all the ad revenue for myself.”

“…”

“Don’t, Kuroe…,” Mushiki wheezed, desperate to pull her back.

In front of him, Clara’s second substantiation roared to life, and she lifted it up.

But in that instant—

“Aaaaaaaauuuggghhh!”

A sharp cry sounded from behind Clara, and a long blue flame extended like a whip to deflect Endlesser.

“Ohhh?!” she yelped, jumping to her left.

A moment later, a girl landed in the spot where Clara had been standing.

She was covered head to toe in armor with a blue world crest around her head. In her hand, she gripped not a warrior’s sword, but a long naginata—her Luminous Blade.

“Ru…ri…,” Mushiki gasped.

“I’m here…! Are you all right, Madam Witch?! Sorry I’m so late…!”

Yes. It was the real Ruri, back after Clara had taken her place, rushing to his and Kuroe’s aid.

“Thank you for that. I’m glad to see you’re safe, Ruri. Where have you been?” Kuroe asked.

"I was locked in some weird room. Sorry, it took me longer to get out than I thought."

"I see… Just as I thought."

"By the way, the instructions were, *None shall leave this room without saying a hundred thousand things they love about Madam Witch*."

"Don't you think you escaped rather quickly, then?" Kuroe said, giving her a flat look.

Ruri, however, barely seemed to register the comment, swinging her naginata around with a flourish as she adopted a defensive stance. "Anyway, I'll apologize again later. Right now…" She narrowed her gaze, fixing Clara with a sharp glare. "Let's teach this tramp a lesson."

"Heh-heh… You're getting really intense there, Ruririn. But, like, do you seriously think you can handle me?" Clara teased, licking her lips with amusement. She beckoned toward Ruri in challenge.

Fiery anger flickered in Ruri's gaze, but her voice was frozen.

"Kuroe, take care of Madam Witch."

"Yes. Leave it to me," she replied.

A split-second later, Ruri charged straight for Clara, leaving a trail of blue flames in her wake.

"Luminous Blade!"

"Endlesser!"

Their second substantiations clashed, sending sparks of magical energy scattering through the air as an immense surge of raw power burst out around the two S-rank mages.

"Ugh… Ruri…," Mushiki murmured, trying to pull himself up.

"Don't. You shouldn't move," Kuroe said, holding him back with a hand placed on his wounded chest.

She lowered her gaze, and her lips started moving. It was a second-generation spell, which wove incantations into composition formulas. Kuroe's palms glowed faintly, and a warm light caressed the wound in Mushiki's chest as she tried to heal his injury.

But—

"…!"

Mushiki's breath caught in his throat as his skin began to glow, and his body reverted from Saika's back to his own.

"Is this…? Was the state change because of the spell you just did?" he asked.

"…No. That was just a simple healing technique. Lady Saika's life force must be weaker than yours, so your Mushiki form rose to the surface."

"…"

He swallowed hard.

It suddenly felt as if a pair of cold hands had closed around his heart, and his breathing became shallow. Erulka's words echoed in the back of his mind.

It wasn't the first time this had happened.

Shortly after he and Saika had been merged into one, he'd lost to the Saika Kuozaki from the future and his Saika form had met its end.

With that *death*, his Mushiki half had risen to the surface, triggering a state change.

His body and Saika's were like two sides of the same coin. Even if one side's life force got critically low, so long as the other remained alive, it would hold on and have time to heal. That was something he'd learned through firsthand experience.

But there was one thing that still troubled him—he hadn't heard anything from Saika herself about the death sentence Erulka had given her.

Saika's death meant the death of the whole world. It was what she feared above all else.

If she was aware of the limits of her own body, surely she would have conveyed those concerns to Mushiki.

How could a mage of her caliber be unaware of her own dwindling lifespan?

There were two main possibilities that came to mind.

The first was that Erulka's estimate was flawed or else intentionally deceptive.

The second was that this development had happened after Saika's body had merged with his own.

If the latter assumption was correct, the likeliest cause was that it was a result of her death during his battle with the future Saika.

Death was death, even if her body was holding on by clinging to his life force. The damage done to it was far from trivial.

…And this unnatural fusion may have shortened what time she had left even further.

That possibility tore at Mushiki's insides as if he'd swallowed a thorn.

"—shiki. Mushiki. You need to calm down," Kuroe called out.

He snapped back to reality.

Kuroe let out a small sigh, perhaps relieved by his response. "So long as you draw breath, Lady Saika still lives. For now, just focus on overcoming this."

"…Right. Sorry," he said, nodding and rising to his feet.

Mushiki's heart was still racing, but he understood that if he died here, it would mean the end of everything. He slapped his cheeks to try and get his thoughts back on the task at hand.

Edelgarde, glowering at the unfolding chain of events, breathed a thin sigh. "Ahhh. What a mess. This was supposed to be my big moment. Does anyone here even realize that this is the final boss fight?" she glowered. "Then again, maybe all this chaos is just a part of the allure of player-versus-player combat. I guess the game master's ability to navigate an unpredictable situation is where their skill truly shines."

With those words, she floated up into the air with her arms spread wide, as if welcoming her beloved.

"Very well. Your Fairy Queen loves you all equally. I'll embrace you all."

Her body began to shimmer, and an intricate pattern appeared behind her like a pair of delicate butterfly wings.

"She's coming. Be ready," Kuroe warned.

"Right…!"

"O-okay…!"

Mushiki and Hildegarde adopted defensive stances.

The next instant, a pillar of light pierced Edelgarde's throne room.

That was no metaphor. The moment Edelgarde raised her right hand, a silver column of radiant light shot up from floor to ceiling.

"Gah!"

"Eek…?!"

A dazzling, ethereal glow blinded Mushiki's senses. It wasn't hard to imagine the fate of anyone who dared to touch that light. He'd leaped away and managed to dodge it just in the nick of time.

But that wasn't the end of Edelgarde's attack. More columns of light appeared and vanished in rapid succession, their trajectories anything but uniform. Some fired from ceiling to floor, others from wall to wall. They sliced through the air with reckless abandon from every direction.

"Whoa! What gives, Edelun?! Yours truly is down here, you know?!"

"I know. But you can regenerate, can't you?"

"Seriously?! You say you're overflowing with love, but you're still holding a grudge over my fancy entrance, aren't you?!" Clara cried, arcing through the air as a pillar of light carved through the space where she'd just been standing.

Edelgarde, it seemed, didn't care about her allies. Still, at this rate, it would be impossible to get close enough to attack her.

There was only one way out of this situation.

"Hilde!" Mushiki called while dodging the beams of light. "You're up!"

"A-all right…!" she replied, raising both hands in front of her. "Fourth Substantiation: Fanatikarheim…!"

Yet—

"…H-huh…?"

No matter how long they waited, the space around them remained unchanged. Perplexed, Hildegarde stared down at her hands.

"Hilde…!" Mushiki shouted. "Do you think Edelgarde did something?"

"Don't go giving people the wrong impression." The Fairy Queen's voice rang out as she fluttered through the air. "It may be a powerful technique, but not one you can use over and over in a single day, is it?"

"What…?"

"…N-no way. Is *that* why you kept sending those Saika NPCs after us…?" Mushiki asked, wide-eyed.

Hildegarde broke into a worried frown.

Edelgarde sighed. "Is that it?" she asked with a resigned shrug. "The abilities you've unlocked during your adventure ought to be—oh. Yes, you took a few shortcuts, didn't you? In that case, use whatever magic or tricks or even cheats you have up your sleeve… Otherwise, this will be the end."

"Ngh…!" Mushiki clenched his fists, his face darkening.

In this world, Edelgarde was all-powerful, stronger even than the Saika NPCs with the highest stats. Given the intricacies of the game's internal systems, victory seemed all but impossible.

That was precisely why he'd hoped to use Hildegarde's fourth substantiation to change the rules at play. However, that was no longer an option.

To make matters worse, Mushiki wouldn't be able to switch back to Saika's body until it had time to heal, and Ruri, their strongest fighter, was busy keeping Clara at bay.

All hope was lost. This was the worst possible situation.

But just before he could give way to despair, a figure appeared beside him—Kuroe.

"Why are you making such a face?"

"Kuroe?"

"You're not allowed to die. Or to surrender. You can't give up because of something like this."

"…You're right. Of course."

"I'm glad you're quick to pull yourself together," she said, before lowering her voice to a whisper. "Have you noticed? You still have one option left."

"…! Really?"

"Yes. *Your* powers, Mushiki, are indispensable."

"But…"

His breath caught in his throat.

He didn't need Kuroe to say it out loud to know what she was thinking.

"…I see. In that case…"

"Yes. We'll move at the same time."

The two exchanged measured looks—then, at the same moment, dashed off in opposite directions.

Edelgarde's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Oh? What's this? You still think you can win? I like that—standing up to an all-powerful foe using your wits and ingenuity," she said, waving her arms in a wide arc.

More silver-colored pillars of light shot out, seemingly intent on blocking their paths.

"But I'll still do everything I can to stop you!"

"Ngh…!"

Mushiki gritted his teeth, twisting around to dodge an oncoming blast. But he was too slow. His robe grazed the beam, and with a faint hiss, its hem vanished into thin air.

"Mushiki!"

Kuroe, running in the opposite direction, deftly dodged Edelgarde's attacks and pulled a small blade from her waist—a throwing knife, a core weapon in any thief's arsenal.

"Haah!" Still off-balance, she hurled it at Edelgarde, the blade carving a savage trajectory straight for her.

Yet just before it could reach her, it was deflected, as if blocked by an invisible wall.

“Ah-ha-ha! What was *that*?! Did you really think some cheap little trick would work on *me*?” With a pitying laugh, Edelgarde raised her hands in front of her.

The next moment, a colossal pillar of light shot up where Kuroe had just been. She only barely managed to avoid it, rolling across the floor to safety.

Surely Kuroe would never have expected that attack to have any meaningful effect.

In fact, the knife had performed its role precisely as it was meant to.

By diverting Edelgarde’s attention, she had given Mushiki the briefest of openings.

He couldn’t waste this opportunity, not even at the risk of his own safety. As he sharpened his awareness, a crown-like two-layered world crest appeared above him.

“Second Substantiation: Hollow Edge.”

With those words, a sword of transparent glass appeared in his right hand, looking quite at odds with his mage’s robe.

“Hah!”

Gathering his strength, he swung Hollow Edge at his target.

“…!”

Edelgarde must have sensed him coming as she shifted her gaze away from Kuroe.

“Ha-ha! Didn’t you hear me? That sort of attack won’t—”

But the words died on her tongue.

The tip of Mushiki’s Hollow Edge had pierced clean through her protective barrier and was continuing straight for her.

“Ugh…!” she grunted, pivoting around to narrowly dodge his sword.

Hollow Edge sliced through thin air, having missed its target.

Edelgarde stroked the light gash on her cheek, her lips curling into a grin. “You’re good, breaking through my defenses like that. I’m guessing you nullified my spell. Or does that technique disperse magical energy…? Yes, I see. You lured me into a false sense of

security with that last attack before revealing your true intentions. Clever. Very clever.” She spread her arms wide once again. “But I’ve learned your trick now. It wasn’t bad, but a surprise attack works only once… Now, what will you show me next?”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement, as if she was honestly looking forward to the thought of Mushiki and the others catching her by surprise.

However, Mushiki let out a weak chuckle, deactivated his world crest, and raised his hands into the air. “Sorry, but that’s all I had. There probably isn’t anything else in this world that will be able to reach you.”

“…”

Edelgarde was shocked into silence.

“I see,” she finally muttered, disappointed. “Then I guess it can’t be helped. It was fun while it lasted.” Her voice turned as cold as if she’d lost all interest, and she pointed a finger at him. Silver light began to coalesce at its tip.

Mushiki remained standing, neither giving in to despair nor yielding. “I’m substituting players now.”

“…Huh?” Edelgarde squeaked.

The next second—

“…Oh no, you can’t do that, Edie. You’re acting out… But I’ll forgive you. Because your big sister’s love is higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, and greater than the storage capacity of any supercomputer.”

A soft, kind voice sounded from behind Edelgarde.

“Wha—?”

She spun around, her eyes widening in shock.

Yet who could blame her?

After all, there floated Silvelle, the Garden's administrative AI, who was supposed to be bound and deprived of freedom.

Yes. Mushiki's attack with the Hollow Edge hadn't ended in failure.

Edelgarde had never been his target—rather, he'd been aiming at the pillar behind her and the glowing chains binding Silvelle.

Whatever force empowered those chains that had subdued the AI, it was certainly far from normal. Yet seeing that his second substantiation was capable of erasing all techniques and magic, Mushiki had thought that Hollow Edge should be able to nullify it.

And sure enough, it had done precisely that.

Silvelle was the ultimate AI, created by the Garden's unparalleled sorcery engineer, Hildegarde Silvelle, sister of the late genius Edelgarde Silvelle.

And nearby floated her sister, so to speak—the prototype AI Edelgarde, who shared its creator's memories and essence.

"Silvelle…," Edelgarde said in astonishment.

"*Non, non*," Silvelle answered, wagging her finger in disapproval. "It's *Sis*—right?"

"Ha-ha…"

Edelgarde's features twisted in amusement at this provocation (though Silvelle probably hadn't meant it that way), and she waved a hand through the air.

Then, from the tips of her fingers, condensed rays of light lashed out at Silvelle.

"Watch out!" Mushiki shouted.

Yet without so much as a hint of panic, Silvelle turned through the air, stretching herself as slender as a thread and passing through the web of light closing in on her.

Then, she reappeared next to Mushiki with an audible *Poof!*

"Whoa!"

"Thank you, Mukkie! But there's no need to worry. Your big sis isn't going to get taken down by something like that," she declared, puffing out her chest.

Kuroe sighed deeply. "You *did* let yourself get captured the last time, though."

"Ugh. I can't deny that… But there was a good reason for it."

"There was?"

"Yes. Think about it. If you were investigating a mysterious game world and someone who shares the same basic structure as you—possibly your very own sister—appears before you, wouldn't your natural response be to give her a hug? Anyone would have done the same. And just like that, my consciousness cut out."

"You mean you fell into her trap?" Kuroe asked with a flat stare.

Silvelle gave her a wink, sticking out her tongue.

"Just to be clear, you're okay now, Silvelle? Sis?" Kuroe asked.

"Of course! I've always dreamed of having a little sister of sorts, so my big-sis aura is at an all-time high! Nothing's gonna stop me today!"

"A *little sister of sorts*?" Kuroe asked questioningly.

"I don't think I like the sound of that…," Mushiki added.

Edelgarde let out a loud huff, staring down at the floor. "While it's true that Silvelle and I are based on the same program, my creation date precedes hers. If anything—"

"*Beep!* Nope, nope! Filtered words! I can't hear you!" Silvelle shouted, cupping her hands over her ears.

In terms of the relationship between the two people they'd been modeled after, it could certainly be said that Silvelle was the older sister. The fact remained, however, that Edelgarde had been created first. So which was the older sister and which the younger? There was no clear answer. In any case, Silvelle was the only one who seemed to consider it a major issue.

Edelgarde breathed an exasperated sigh. "Well, I don't really care one way or the other. Even with Silvelle on your side, it won't change the outcome… This is *my* world. *My* castle. No one can defeat me here."

"…Really?" Kuroe asked.

Silvelle nodded. "She's telling the truth, I'm afraid."

"…"

Hildegarde's breath caught in her throat.

Silvelle floated gracefully through the air, circling around her and placing a hand on her shoulder. "That is, only if things remain as they are now."

"Huh…?" Hildegarde's eyes widened.

Silvelle turned back to Edelgarde. "True, your base program seems to be the same as mine—but there's more to it than that. I suspect *something else* has been thrown into the mix."

"Something else…?"

"Yes. The real-life Edie was a genius sorcery engineer, wouldn't you say?"

"Y-yes… No doubt about it."

"Then there *must* be something different about you. This world certainly boasts incredible computational power…but how should I put it?" Silvelle put a hand on her chin for a few moments, deep in thought, before raising her index finger into the air. "It's not beautiful."

"…"

"—!"

It was an ambiguous, abstract accusation—not the sort of thing you would expect to hear from an artificial intelligence.

Yet Edelgarde's brow furrowed in annoyance, while Hildegarde stared back in wide-eyed realization.

"Hmph… You have a way with words, don't you…? So, *beautiful* Silvelle? How exactly are you going to stop me?" Edelgarde asked with a sharp glare.

Silvelle leaned close to Hildegarde, whispering in her ear.

"Hilly?"

"Y-yes…?" Hildegarde answered, her shoulders trembling slightly.

"Do you believe in me? In my abilities? In my potential?" she asked. "In the skill of the sorcery engineer who made me?"

"—!"

Hildegarde gasped, hearing those words, which were so unlike Silvelle. She glanced uneasily at Mushiki—who gave her a firm nod.

"It's all right. I told you before: You're the best sorcery engineer in the world," he said, repeating his words from earlier, when they'd been trapped in the room.

He wasn't exaggerating, nor was he trying to flatter her. He meant every word of it.

Yes, Edelgarde was a genius. She possessed qualities that Hildegarde didn't.

Yet Hildegarde had continued to hone her skills after her sister's death, always aspiring to live up to her example.

If Edelgarde were here…, she thought to herself. *If she were still alive…*

Though racked with feelings of helplessness and inferiority, Hildegarde had continued to forge ahead, steadfastly carrying out her duties. As far as Mushiki was concerned, it was hard to accept that she was in any way inferior to Edelgarde.

"Mushiki…" Hildegarde clenched a fist over her chest. "…Okay. I'll believe you. My Silvelle won't lose to Edel's AI…!" she declared unwaveringly.

Silvelle broke into a broad smile. "Wonderful. Thank you, Sis."

With that, a radiant light erupted from Silvelle's body, which fragmented into pixel-like pieces.

And it wasn't just her. Hildegarde's skin was glowing in the same way.

"Whoa?! Wh-what's going on…?"

"My body is ultimately a collection of data. While I may look like you, Hilly, my composition is completely different from your physical flesh. But now that your soul has been digitized through your ability…!"

Before Mushiki knew what was happening, the two dazzling silhouettes of Hildegarde and Silvelle began to merge into one.

"Ngh…!"

A burst of light flooded the room, forcing Mushiki to squeeze his eyes shut.

When the glow subsided a few seconds later, there was only one of them—Hildegarde, clad in strikingly different attire from before.

She was wearing a glittering dress with wings like a butterfly and a body protector that wrapped around her like a bondage outfit. A three-layered world crest that looked like a glowing circuit diagram shone from her back.

"Th-this is…my third substantiation: Gespenst," Hildegarde murmured in stunned disbelief.

"Yes. It seems your abilities enhanced automatically to accept my capacity," Silvelle's voice sounded from out of nowhere in response.

Sweat dripped from Hildegarde's brow. "I wish you wouldn't trigger it without asking… This outfit is embarrassing… I'd prefer not to use it…," she said, embarrassed. Then she spun around, as if she'd only just remembered that Mushiki and the others were still watching.

Feeling a pang of guilt, Mushiki turned to Kuroe. "What just happened…?"

"A partial fusion technique, I suspect. Right now, our bodies are composed of data, just like Silvelle's, making it possible for them to temporarily merge as one."

"I—I see. Then that means—"

"Yes," Silvelle's voice replied. *"By fusing the real and the virtual, we have given birth to the perfect big sister. Naturally, our depleted magical energy has been fully restored as well… Now, Edie. Can you resist our twin aura?"* she declared loudly and confidently.

Hildegarde, however, remained hunched over in embarrassment in dramatic contrast to Silvelle's bold claims.

"Hilly! You've got to do the pose!" Silvelle urged.

"Huh? Oh… L-like this?" Hildegarde asked, standing up awkwardly.

She came across as a novice cosplayer. Her pose, aiming a finger gun at Edelgarde, was nothing if not cringeworthy.

"Ha-ha…!" Edelgarde leaned back with a mocking smirk. "I was wondering what you were up to. A fusion? Heh. I should have expected nothing less from my big sister. You really know how to build up the excitement." She flashed them a grin, spreading her arms wide with a theatrical flourish. "But do you really think you can beat me like that? *Me?* The greatest AI, created by the world's greatest genius, the Fairy Queen Edelgarde…?!"

As she spoke, the radiant wings at her back glowed even brighter, releasing an overwhelming pressure that crushed all those around her beneath its weight.

Yet Silvelle was undaunted. *"Of course. Right, Hilly?"*

"…Yep. We'll stop you, Edel!" Hildegarde said with a firm nod, raising both hands into the air.

"Fourth Substantiation…!"

As she intoned the name of her strongest and most powerful technique, the fabric of the world was rewritten.

"Fanatikarheim…!"

In an instant, a pristine white expanse unfurled around her, an inorganic world composed of nothing more than gridlines.

Edelgarde burst into raucous laughter. "Ah-ha-ha! This again? You've combined forces, and *this* is the best you can come up with? Have you forgotten already? I already know how to counter—"

She was cut off abruptly, interrupted by Hildegarde.

"Game type: Puzzle…!"

"What…?" Edelgarde's eyes widened.

The next moment, a pair of gigantic control panels materialized in front of both Hildegarde and Edelgarde, and the space around them transformed into a pastel-colored world.

"That…isn't like her last fourth substantiation…!" Mushiki exclaimed.

"Knight Hildegarde's fourth substantiation merely enforces predetermined rules," Kuroe replied with a thoughtful nod. "The rules she has applied thus far are only one example."

"So what you're saying is…?"

"Yes. I believe Knight Hildegarde thinks this to be the most suitable place to confront Edelgarde."

At that moment, Edelgarde, inspecting the area around them with open curiosity, let out a soft laugh. "Heh-heh… I see. You've switched genres now that the dating sim angle has been worn out. And you've picked a puzzle game…?" She fixed Hildegarde with a grin that was at the same time unsettling and oddly amused. "You've underestimated me again. Or has that fusion inflated your confidence?"

Hildegarde remained silent for a long moment, focusing on the control panel in front of her before answering. "This is a simple, falling-block-style puzzle game. When you match the colors and patterns, the blocks on your side disappear, and blocks fall down in your opponent's area to obstruct them. If the blocks reach the top of your playing area, you lose… Okay?"

"Of course. Are *you* okay with this? I didn't think you were insane enough to challenge *me* to a puzzle game. You can still change genres if you want an easier time of—"

"You sure have a lot to say. Aren't you confident you can win?" Hildegarde interjected.

"…Hmph." Edelgarde raised an eyebrow, stepping forward to position herself in front of her control panel. "Fine. I'll make you eat those words," she said, ready for a fight.

"Hilde, Silvelle…," Mushiki called out.

"Good luck!" Kuroe said.

Hildegarde looked over at them, gave them a nod, then turned back to the game. In a quiet voice, she gave the order:

"Game: Start."

With that, a countdown timer appeared between the two players—and the battle was underway.

"…!"

"Haah!"

Hildegarde and Edelgarde, both wearing ghastly, bloodcurdling looks, leaned forward toward their respective control panels.

Kuroe crossed her arms, a solemn cast to her features. “A puzzle game. That seems like a rather uncharacteristic choice for Knight Hildegarde.”

“You think so…? It’s more colorful and peaceful than I was expecting…,” Mushiki answered as he scratched his cheek.

Although the game had already begun, there had been almost no visible change. Despite being a falling-block puzzle game, not a single block had appeared. Instead, the two players were facing off against each other, faces taut in concentration. For a moment, Mushiki couldn’t understand what was happening.

“Look closely,” Kuroe said, squinting. She pointed to the floor behind Hildegarde.

It was only then that Mushiki realized that it was shimmering—no, *flickering*.

“Wh—? No way…”

After a few more seconds, it finally clicked: Hildegarde and Edelgarde were erasing the blocks so quickly that they were almost imperceptible to the naked eye.

Upon closer inspection, Mushiki saw that they had both connected the tips of their long hair directly to the control panel, probably to directly interface with it. Overhead, their scores were increasing at an astonishing rate.

“Th-they’re so fast…!”

“Yes. A normal human wouldn’t be able to keep up. This is only possible because Edelgarde is an AI and Knight Hildegarde has merged with Silvelle… Puzzle games tend to be a peaceful, relaxing experience, but for these two, it’s anything but. This is a stripped-down, almost brutal form of conflict. Essentially, they’re directly comparing each other’s computing prowess,” Kuroe said quietly, like an impartial judge of a life-and-death duel.

Mushiki gulped, straightening his back. But before he could respond—

“Okay, like, wow, right? This is totally an epic battle between two pros. But honestly, it’s way too advanced for the average viewer to

follow, you know?”

He heard a voice from right beside him.

“Wha…?!” Mushiki flinched.

Anybody would have reacted similarly in his position. After all—

“Oops. Did I scare you? But I’m *always* right by your side! I’m your super-fab partner, Clara Tokishima, here to add a little spice to your life!”

Before he knew it, Clara—who was supposed to be fighting Ruri—had set her sights on him.

“Clara…?!”

“Naw. Even when you’re all serious, you’re still totally cute, Mushipi. ♡ But you should chill, ’mkay? We’re super lucky meeting up here, so let’s get to know each other better!” Clara said in a voice that sounded almost like a purr.

But just then—

“Raaaaaaaggghhh!”

A piercing wail sounded from above them, and a blade of azure flame went through Clara’s head.

Ruri was on the attack. It had all happened so fast that Mushiki gasped in shock.

“Are you okay, Mushiki?!” she asked.

“Y-yeah.”

Yet Clara, who should have been stabbed through the head just now, burst into laughter. “Nyah-hah-hah! Your attacks won’t work here! We’re in a puzzle game now, if you haven’t noticed! You should at least know the effects of your friends’ magic, riiight? Though even if I *did* get my head smashed open or whatever, it wouldn’t do anything to me!” Clara said scornfully. “Since our attacks won’t work right now, let’s just chill and watch the game together, ’mkay? It’s kinda cute, don’t you think? I mean, who knew a puzzle game could decide the fate of the world?”

Ruri, however, continued to relentlessly thrust her Luminous Blade into Clara’s head and abdomen. Her attacks didn’t send any blood

flying, but seeing Clara with a glowing naginata blade sticking out of her was surreal.

"Seriously, come on! You're not doing any damage, but it's still super annoying, you know? I'm *so* not into *Pop-up Pirate*, if that's what you're going for!" Clara cried, exasperated.

Ruri clicked her tongue in frustration.

"I can't even with how dramatic you get sometimes, Ruririn. But whatever. Let's just shake it off and move—"

"Wrist slap, wrist slap. Forehead flick, forehead flick. Kick in the back of your knees!"

"Urgggh! Seriously! Stop trying to find something that doesn't count as an attack!" Clara snarled, flailing about to try to drive her assailant away.

Ruri hid behind Mushiki, glaring back at her and emitting a low growl.

"…Clara," Mushiki said, gently calling out to the woman who had only moments ago stabbed Saika in the back.

He was definitely angry at her, but there was nothing to be gained by laying his feelings bare now. Instead, he calmed his racing heart and continued.

"So you were the one pulling the strings here? What exactly do you want?"

"Hmm? Hee-hee. Are you trying to dig for info or something? That's, like, kinda sneaky, but in a cute way?" Clara laughed as if she could see right through him, then turned around. "Are you sure, though? You're totally gonna miss something super important if you keep looking away, you know?"

"Wha—?"

Mushiki caught his breath.

While he'd been distracted talking to Clara, the stalemate between Hildegarde and Edelgarde was on the verge of breaking.

Behind Hildegarde, blocks were starting to pile up, albeit only slightly. The delicate balance of power was beginning to crumble.

"Hilde! Silvelle!" he called out.

Hildegarde looked far from normal. Her face was slick with sweat, her shoulders heaved up and down, and blood trickled from her vacant eyes.

"Ah-ha-ha!" Edelgarde chortled. "You look good, Sis! That fusion was all for nothing! I'm sure you remember by now, don't you? You'll never surpass me…!"

"…"

Yet at that moment, Hildegarde slowly raised her face to fix her vacant eyes on Edelgarde.

"—wrong…"

"Oh…? Have you finally lost your mind? Well, so be it. At this rate—"

"You're wrong… I knew it… You aren't Edel…"

"…Huh?" Edelgarde's eyebrows twitched.

Hildegarde continued undeterred, "You're better than me…? I can't surpass you…? I know that better than anyone. But still…" She slammed her hands down on the control panel, her voice escalating to a roar. "Edel *never*, *ever* spoke to me like that! Not once!"

"What are you—?" Edelgarde frowned at her unpleasantly.

Yet Hildegarde wasn't intimidated, instead flashing her a dauntless grin. "Ah, that's right… I remember now. Thanks to you, I've remembered… Let me teach you something, *imposter*. If she were here right now, she'd say, 'Hang in there, Sis.'" She tightened her grip on the controls and leaned forward.

Beads of sweat dropped down onto the control panel.

In that instant, the blocks building up behind her vanished, while others began to stack up behind Edelgarde.

"Wh-what…?!" Edelgarde's face, which had until then remained relaxed and composed, contorted into a scowl. "No… You can't…!" Gritting her teeth, she poured all her power into her hands and body. "Don't screw with me…!" she bellowed. "*I'm* the strongest AI—way more than some half-baked imitation like you…!"

"Don't you dare…! With that face… With that voice…! Don't you dare act like my sister!"

“Damn…yooooooouuu…!” Edelgarde yelled as a change came over her.

No sooner had Mushiki registered the appearance of two bestial eyes than a pair of long ears emerged from Edelgarde’s head and a tail sprouted from her rear. Her entire body crackled and shimmered as if charged with electricity.

“Now you’ve done it… Making me reveal my true self…!” Like a monster freed from its shackles, Edelgarde let out a ghastly roar.

Once again, the blocks behind her vanished into thin air.

“…! Did she…?!” Mushiki gawked.

Kuroe furrowed her brow.

“What *is* that?” he asked. “Edelgarde’s acting like some kind of monster…”

“There’s no mistaking it. That is the Gremlin—the weakest of all mythic-class annihilation factors.”

“The weakest one…?” Mushiki repeated, unsure of what she’d meant.

Kuroe nodded. “Yes. Confronted out in the open, even a C-rank mage should be able to defeat it. However, due to its ability to infiltrate electronic devices, it’s one of the most dangerous threats to modern society.”

“So you’re saying Edelgarde…”

“…Yes. It seems she was being manipulated by the Gremlin, which was revived by Clara Tokishima. I should have realized it sooner.”

“Aw, no way!” Clara exclaimed, sticking out her tongue. “You worked it out… Oh well…” Her lips twisted in a sneer. “In that case, I guess it’s time for the endgame.”

“…! Hilde…!” Mushiki screamed.

He could only watch as she sank to her knees, well past her limits.

“—, —, —.”

Someone, somewhere, was talking.

Awakening from a daze, Hildegarde slowly opened her eyes.

In front of her was a control panel, its surface crackling with static. Beyond that was Edelgarde, her Gremlin features exposed.

"Ah… I knew it…"

All of these evil acts hadn't been the work of her sister.

Relief poured through her heart with that realization—accompanied by unquenchable rage that someone had dared exploit Edel's memory.

But Hildegarde no longer had the strength needed to fight back. Even with Silvelle helping her, the calculations needed to keep going had pushed her beyond her limits and inflicted serious damage to her brain.

As Edelgarde's blocks disappeared, more began to pile up on Hildegarde's own side.

No, more accurately, the space around her was fading into static before the blocks could reach the ceiling, revealing Edelgarde's castle slowly rematerializing around her. She was clearly having difficulty maintaining her fourth substantiation.

Her own fourth substantiation and Edelgarde's throne room—seeing them both overlaid on top of one another, Hildegarde couldn't help but laugh.

The way the two worlds were intertwined called to mind a game they'd once built together.

…Looking back, she acknowledged it was a crude piece of work, but it had brought them endless joy. They were both highly opinionated, so they had often butted heads, and yet—

"But we really did need the ——, didn't we?"

"…"

A voice suddenly echoed in her mind, prompting Hildegarde to catch her breath in surprise.

It was a conversation she'd once had with Edelgarde.

Ah, right. They both had their own different tastes when it came to video games, but there were moments when their visions aligned. They had collaborated on several projects together but had made

sure to implement a certain *extra* feature in each and every one of them.

With that thought, her lips started moving seemingly of their own accord.

"…Hold SELECT…then press LEFT…UP…RIGHT…DOWN…"

The tips of her hair flowed through the mottled landscape, connecting to Edelgarde's throne room as she input her will into the world of *Argento Tírnanóg*.

"…Huh…?" Edelgarde cried out in surprise.

Her sister—now half transformed into a beast—must have noticed what she was doing.

But she was too late. Hildegarde had already input a button sequence that she had repeated so many times before.

"…A, X, Y, B… A…"

And at that moment—

"Wha…?! What is this…?!"

Edelgarde's panicked scream reverberated all around the room.

"…! What on earth?" Mushiki asked, his eyes wide with shock as he stood in the crumbling chaos of Hildegarde's fourth substantiation.

The moment Hildegarde fell to the ground, mumbling something under her breath, Edelgarde started writhing in pain.

"Gah…! You…! What did you do…?!" she raged, fixing her foe with a hateful glare.

Hildegarde slowly looked up.

"Heh… Heh… The allure of a hidden cheat code… That's something an annihilation factor could never understand…"

"A hidden cheat code…?!" Edelgarde cried, her face contorting in shock.

Hildegarde gave a weak smile. "I knew it… You're being controlled…but you're still Edel's AI. Irrespective of your form or purpose, there's no way you wouldn't have included our hidden codes…" She started typing into the air in front of her. "Accessing

administrative data… Transferring administrator privileges to Hildegarde Silvelle…”

“Stop—”

“Command: Reject…!”

But Edelgarde’s pleas went unheard, and Hildegarde clenched her fists.

“—!”

With a shrill, piercing scream, Edelgarde’s body lit up, expelling a creature that looked like a horned fox.

This was the true form of the Gremlin, the weakest and the most dangerous mythic-class annihilation factor.

“…Big-sister power…unleashed…!” Hildegarde’s bloodshot eyes sharpened as her hair connected to the control panel once more.

In an instant, blocks started stacking up behind the Gremlin—and the electronic beast disappeared with a high-pitched scream.

“…I…did it…,” Hildegarde said with a satisfied smile as she crumbled to the ground.

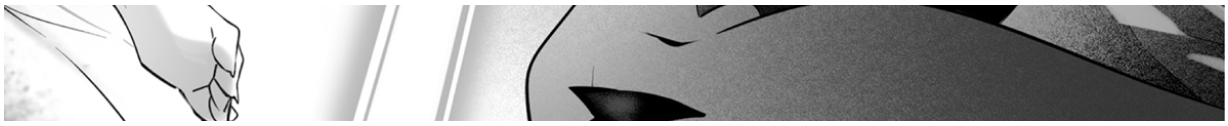
As she fell, her fourth substantiation vanished, and their surroundings reverted to those of the castle throne room.

“Hilde!” Mushiki cried, running to her side and cradling her limp body in his arms.

As he held her, Hildegarde’s skin began to emit a soft glow. Silvelle separated from her, and her clothes returned to their original form.

“Don’t worry, Mukkie. We’ve already implemented a recovery program. Everyone will be back to normal soon,” Silvelle explained.





"…Ngh…," Hildegarde moaned, as if confirming what Silvelle had said.

Mushiki let out a sigh of relief.

A moment later, a violent sound erupted behind them.

Glancing over, Mushiki saw Ruri rushing at Clara with her second substantiation.

"Geez, Ruririn, you're such a battle maniac! You just won! Can't you chill for a bit and savor the moment?"

"Shut up, Ouroboros! I'm putting an end to you…!"

"Nyah-hah-hah! Impossible. If you haven't noticed, I'm, like, immortal and stuff," Clara joked. She leaped backward to avoid Ruri's onslaught, before turning her attention to Mushiki. "Seems I kinda lost this time, huh? I thought combining the weakest Mythologia with the strongest AI would be a super-exciting twist, but whatever. I'm just gonna, like, wipe my tears and bounce. And honestly, you guys should skedaddle, too! With the Gremlin gone, I don't think this place is gonna stick around much longer."

"Huh…?" Mushiki stared back, wide-eyed.

At that moment, an immense tremor struck, causing the Unseen Castle to start collapsing.

"What…?!"

"Oops. Well, there you go. Clara out!" she said, disappearing with a casual wave of her hand just before Ruri's azure blade could pierce through her.

"Tch… She got away," Ruri said with a scowl.

At that moment, the round silhouette of Headmaster Shikimori's avatar floated up from the stairs Mushiki and the others had entered from.

"I see you've beaten the boss. Well done. But there's no time to waste. You need to hurry up and log out. It's not just the castle—the entire game world is falling apart."

"What…?!" Mushiki cried out in alarm as Kuroe raced over.

"Headmaster Shikimori. What about everyone else trapped in the game?"

"We've already prepared a way out for them," Shikimori replied.

Kuroe nodded, as if she'd expected nothing less. "Then all is well. We should escape, too."

"Right," Mushiki answered, before falling silent as Hildegarde reached out to tug on his shirtsleeve.

"…Wait. I just need…more time… Just a little… That's all…," she said, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

"Ah…"

Sensing the reason behind her plea, Mushiki lent Hildegarde his shoulder and helped her walk.

"What are you doing?" Shikimori called out in concern. *"There's no time. If we don't hurry—"*

"Sorry. We just need a moment," Mushiki told him.

Shikimori seemed to sense that it was important because he let out a deep sigh. *"Three minutes. We can't wait any more than that."*

"Thank you."

Mushiki led Hildegarde across the room to Edelgarde, who lay crumpled on the floor.

"Edel…," Hildegarde said.

Edelgarde raised her face. "…Voiceprint authenticated. Hildegarde Silvelle. How may I assist?" Her voice seemed strangely mechanical compared to before.

Mushiki furrowed his brow. "Is that…?"

"…I think her personality program must have been reset. We probably don't have time to reconstruct it…" Disappointment fell over Hildegarde's face, but she quickly collected herself. "Tell me—you're the self-learning AI that Edel made, aren't you?"

"Affirmative. Edelgarde Silvelle is my creator."

"…What did she make you for?"

"My master's goal was to re-create herself within the digital realm."

Hildegarde broke into a frown. "What for?"

"To ensure that Hildegarde Silvelle would not be alone after her death," she answered matter-of-factly.

"…"

Hildegarde had no words.

"My master knew that she did not have long to live," Edelgarde continued. "She was concerned for your well-being after her passing, so she made sure to secure arrangements for your future at a mage-training institute while she was still alive… As a final touch, she also created me as a prototype self-learning AI to serve as her alter ego."

"Ngh, hngh…!" Hildegarde sobbed amid the roar of the castle collapsing around them.

Within moments, her eyes were flooded with tears.

…Ah. So in the end, that was all it had ever been.

The genius sorcery engineer Edelgarde Silvelle had devoted her life to creating an AI not to change the world, nor contribute to the advancement of humanity—but so her beloved sister wouldn't be left alone.

"My master had a message for you. Shall I play it?"

"…Please," Hildegarde said.

A voice—Edelgarde's from before her death—sounded from the AI's throat.

"Um, if you're listening to this, Sis, I guess it means I'm already gone. I'm sorry, but there wasn't anything I could do to stop it… I do have one lingering regret, though: that you lack confidence in yourself… You're always telling me how amazing I am, but the truth is, your skills as a sorcery engineer surpassed mine long ago. You just haven't realized it yet… Well, I've told you time and time again, but for whatever reason, you just don't believe me… Have you realized it yet? The *genius* I told Madam Witch about back then—That was you, Sis."

Hildegarde clenched her jaw, tears dripping down her cheeks.

Mushiki sensed that she was engraving each of those words deep into her heart.

"Try not to stay up too late when I'm gone," Edelgarde continued softly. "Air your mattress out every once in a while. Get along with

everyone at the Garden. And remember…” A smile formed on her lips.

“I love you, Sis.”

With those last words, the Unseen Castle came crashing down.

Mushiki and the others logged out just moments before the destruction could reach them.

Chapter 6
The Spirit Festival

"…Pfft!"

Clara Tokishima snapped awake in her room in the apartment building she was using as a hideout. Still drowsy, she poked herself in the head to try to wake her brain, then sat up.

A bespectacled woman sitting beside her lifted her gaze from the manga in her hands.

"Oh, Clara. Good morning. Did you finish everything?"

"Oh… Right. I'm in Kiritan's room. I totally forgot. This feels kinda nostalgic."

Clara sat there in bed. The woman next to her was Kiriko Araibe, the apartment's original owner. Clara had stolen her death from her, transforming her into one of her thralls, an Immortal.

"Where are Rimy and the others?" Clara asked.

"In the living room. I figured having so many men sleep in a girls' room might be a bit much…"

"Good call. I mean, I'm, like, a superstar idol influencer and all, so, you know?"

"…You sure don't look like an idol when you're asleep…"

"Did you say something?" Clara asked with a grin.

"N-no…," Kiriko stammered, averting her gaze.

Clara stretched her arms overhead, jumped out of bed, and strode into the living room.

What she found was a surreal sight. Just as Kiriko had said, close to a dozen sorcery engineers were sprawled over the dining table, the sofa, and the floor, their laptop computers set up in every nook and cranny.

There wasn't much she could do about that, though. Until just now, these people had been her support staff, helping her dive into the world of *Argento Tírnanóg*.

"Hey, Rimy!" she called in greeting. "Morning!"

"I told you to quit calling me that. And it isn't even the morning," replied the closest Immortal, Raimu Himemiya, with an air of disgust.

In both appearance and voice, Raimu came across as a beautiful girl—yet beneath that façade, he was every bit a man.

"Well, let's not sweat the small stuff… So how's it all going here?"

"…Honestly." With a grimace, Raimu turned to his laptop screen. "I'll be frank with you—this is huge. That AI is clearly the work of a genius sorcery engineer. It breached most of the containment facility's security checks. I mean, it couldn't do much about the parts sealed with old-fashioned magic, but we already expected that anyway," he said, clearly impressed.

Clara let out a sharp whistle.

Yes. This had been her true objective.

After discovering the Gremlin deep in the code of the AI left behind by the late sorcery engineer Edelgarde Silvelle, Clara had used its powers to orchestrate a worldwide electronic meltdown and seize the remaining physical bodies of the Ouroboros, sealed in secure facilities all across the globe.

"The Garden's response was unexpectedly fast, so I wasn't sure we'd be able to get all the targets…but luckily, *someone* bought us more time, and we just scraped through. We're still fooling their sensors, so I reckon it'll be a while before they catch on."

"Heh-heh. You can totally shower me with praise for that, you know?"

"It's the pieces of *your* body we're collecting. *We're* the ones helping *you*. So *you* should be thanking *us*."

"Huh? For a thrall, you really need to learn some manners," Clara said threateningly, before clearing her throat. "Anyway, with this many pieces, the full power of the Ouroboros is gonna be restored. It's only a matter of time."

She paused for a moment, glancing at her followers in the dimly lit bedroom.

"Come on, guys!" she said, her lips twisting in a grin. "We're gonna change the world!"

◇

"Um… What should I do with this?"

"Channel your magic through it. Imagine tracing the inner structure of a composition formula."

Mushiki did as Kuroe instructed, focusing his mind and channeling his magical energy into the origami crane perched on the palm of his hand.

A moment later, the object took on a soft, shimmering glow, fluttering its wings and taking off into the air like a living thing.

"Ooh… It worked."

"Hmm. Good job. It would be better if you could reduce the magic consumption to about a third next time, though," Ruri said, sitting next to him with her arms crossed.

"I'll do my best," Mushiki replied with a forced smile.

With matching timing, more origami cranes than the eye could count took off from the hands of other students all around him.

No. Strictly speaking, they weren't just origami cranes. There were also doves, airplanes, balloons… Paper objects of all shapes and sizes taking flight seemingly of their own volition.

They were soul lanterns—magical lights inscribed with the composition formulas that Mushiki had helped to write days earlier.

Yes. Several days had passed since the events in *Argento Tírnanóg*, and the Spirit Festival was in full force at the Garden to pray for the souls of the dead.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, and a towering bonfire blazed in the Garden's central square, drawing a large crowd of students and teachers. Hizumi, a member of the organizing committee, had been hard at work these past few days preparing for the event, and with exhaustion and relief, she gazed at the countless lights dancing through the sky.

Though the recent incident had had devastating repercussions, once the annihilation factor—the Gremlin—had been destroyed, the damage to the outside world was repaired as if it had never happened. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of the knights, there had been no casualties within the Garden.

"Mushiki, Kuroe." A voice drifted over from behind them.

He glanced over his shoulder, spotting Hildegarde. Though so often timidly hunched over, she seemed more poised today. Behind her were Erulka, Anviet, and Sara.

"Knight Hildegarde," Kuroe said.

"Is that…?" Mushiki stared at her hands.

Hildegarde gave him a brief nod, showing Mushiki the object she was holding—a beautiful origami butterfly.

"See you again next year, Edel," she whispered kindly, raising the paper butterfly into the air.

Shimmering softly, the butterfly left a silver trail as it fluttered away, its fragile, graceful appearance reminding Mushiki of Edelgarde in her throne room.

The ethereal beauty of the soul lantern drew amazed gasps from the other students, causing Hildegarde to smile shyly.

"…Thank you again, Mushiki," she said.

"Huh?"

"You're the one who told me to speak to Edel's AI. Thanks to that…I've been able to let go of a lot of baggage."

"I didn't do much…," he insisted.

"…I won't say anything about not living up to her. Not anymore," she added with a gentle look. "That would just undermine her feelings."

"Hilde…"

Mushiki was touched. Even Ruri—and surprisingly, Kuroe—seemed moved by this sight.

At last, as if suddenly remembering something, Ruri spoke up.

"It *is* strange, though, isn't it? I know Edel decided to train the AI based on her own memory and thought patterns, but why is Silvelle's personality so different from your own? Weren't they built in the same way?"

"Oh… That's true. Maybe I slipped up somewhere, after all…," Hildegarde murmured.

But just then—

"You know I can't let that slide, right?"

Popping up out of thin air was Hildegarde's mirror image.

"Ah!"

"S-Silvelle… Sis."

Mushiki and the others gasped, caught off guard. Silvelle, however, paid them no heed.

"My memory and personality programs are *based on you, Hilly. I even conducted a brainwave scan while you were asleep just to make sure."*

"Eh…? Wh-when did you do that…?" Hildegarde pressed her hands against her head, her face pale with shock. This was clearly news to her.

Silvelle crossed her arms without so much as a hint of remorse. *"Of course, I've made some adjustments of my own, but my speech patterns, actions, and personality are all still present in your subconsciousness, Hilly. Though in your case, I think admiration and longing have a lot to do with it."*

"Admiration and longing…?"

"She's your ideal self, Knight Hildegarde," Kuroe said with a flat look.

"Ugh! Th-that's a false accusation…! I would *never* want to be like her…!" Hildegarde yelled, flustered.

Silvelle tilted her head to one side. *"But you always wanted to be her big sister, didn't you?"*

At those words—

"…"

Hildegarde's eyes shot open in astonishment.

"…Ah, right. I see…"

After a long pause, she let out a breath, lifted her gaze—and stared at the silver butterfly dancing through the air.

Perhaps sensing that it would be inappropriate to continue, Silvelle gracefully spun through the air, capturing the attention of the gathered students.

"Now then, my dearest brothers and sisters. Have you all lit your soul lanterns? May our dearly departed friends find peace. May our companions from days gone by find rest. To all who have left us, you have our eternal love and gratitude… Let the Spirit Festival begin."

With that declaration, the flames of the bonfire in the center of the square leapt high into the air.

It wasn't a real flame, apparently, but one conjured by magic. Radiating a white brilliance, it reached straight to the heavens.

The released soul lanterns spiraled about the pillar of white light, ascending higher and higher.

"Wow…" Mushiki's eyes widened at the otherworldly sight.

Slowly, the sparkling origami objects floated away, like souls returning to the world beyond.

"This is incredible…," Mushiki murmured.

"Yes. The visual impact is a huge component of the Spirit Festival," Kuroe replied before shaking her head slightly. "No, that was rather tactless of me. Forget I said anything."

"Ah-ha-ha… I understand. You said this sending-off ceremony was more for the sake of those still living."

"Indeed." She nodded, speaking low so that only he could hear. "I've said goodbye to a great many people over the years. Lives I

couldn’t save because I wasn’t strong enough. Souls lost to lay the foundation for a brighter future… There are so many of them. Maybe this grand festival is all just a way of masking my guilt,” she said in Saika’s natural voice.

Mushiki raised an eyebrow at her melancholy tone.

“Don’t say that…”

“…I’m sorry. I’m rambling. Maybe because no one will ever be able to see *me* off… Though now that my true body has merged with you, perhaps there *is* hope…”

“…”

Thoughts of Saika’s remaining lifespan flashed through Mushiki’s mind.

Before he knew what he was doing, he reached out to take Kuroe’s hand.

“…Mushiki…?”

“I won’t let that happen. I’ll find a way…”

Saika’s eyes widened in surprise—but perhaps realizing she was drawing attention to herself, she lowered her voice back to Kuroe’s cool and composed level. “What’s wrong, Mushiki? Is something wrong?”

“Ah… No. Never mind…” he said, hastily letting go of her hand.

Still intrigued, Kuroe peered into his eyes.

Feeling like she could see right through him, he swallowed hard.

All of a sudden, as if to tear them free from that awkward atmosphere, a lively ringtone sounded from his pocket.

“You’re supposed to keep your phone on silent mode during the festivities, Mushiki.”

“S-sorry… That’s strange. I thought I turned it off…,” he murmured, fumbling through his pocket.

Only then did he realize it—the sound wasn’t coming from his Garden-provided smartphone, but from his old device he’d used on the *outside*. He still received messages from old friends from time to time, so he liked to keep it on him just in case.

He tapped the ANSWER button, holding the phone to his ear and answering in a hushed tone.

"Hello?"

"…Hello? Mushiki?" said a familiar female voice. *"Where on earth are you?"*

"Huh…?"

"…You're always out whenever I stop by your house. I tried contacting your school, and they told me you transferred away months ago. So where are you?"

"I—I… Uh…," he stuttered.

Sensing something amiss, Kuroe leaned in. "Who is it?"

"…My sister," he answered.



Kuroe's eyes shot open. "Your *sister*? But the Fuyajoh Clan—"

"Ah, n-no, it isn't like that…"

But before he could explain, the confused voice on the other end of the line continued: *"Mushiki? Are you even listening to me?"*

"Y-yeah, I'm listening."

"…Really? Then answer me. Where exactly are you? What about your school? And also…" The person on the other end of the line lowered their voice.

"I'm hoping to kill someone called Saika Kuozaki. Can you introduce me to her?"

"Eh…?" He gasped, suddenly finding himself at a loss for words.

Afterword

Long time no see. Koushi Tachibana here. I hope you all enjoyed Volume 6 of *King's Proposal: The Silver Fairy*.

This time, it was Hilde's turn to take center stage. I've been wanting to do a crazy story in a video game world for a while now, so it was really fun to write. To be honest, I don't really have anything against baddie characters… Heck, I kind of like them… No, let's be honest—I *love* them! Before I knew it, I ended up making a character who turned out to be a sort of greedy assemblage of all my favorite elements. On top of that, we've got all those colorful Saika NPCs. It really is a jam-packed volume. Personally, Lone Gamer Saika struck a chord in my heart that I just can't shake. Ha-ha!

I have an announcement to make. The third volume of the manga adaptation, with Nemo Kurio as the illustrator and Shishitoh as the layout artist, was released last month!

The manga really has outstanding quality throughout, but the eleventh chapter in this latest volume is something else. A visual medium gives you all so much more scope to appreciate all the flashy moves and effects. Be sure to check it out!

Another announcement, though I apologize for plugging a separate work here. The anime adaptation of *Date A Live V* will start

airing on April 10, 2024!

I never thought we'd get to see Mio's arc in the anime! The premiere date, April 10, is a nice touch, as well. *Date A Live* is brought to you by the same team behind *King's Proposal*, so I hope you'll take a look!

Now then, it's time to give my thanks to everyone who helped make this book a reality.

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, dear reader, for picking this book up, you have my heartfelt thanks.

I can't wait to see you again in Volume 7 of *King's Proposal*.

March 2024, Koushi Tachibana

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