

Eternal Shrine Maidens

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I. Corporeal Maiden

Leaving the bustle of the city and winding up mountain paths, an old shrine appears, veiled in thick fog. It was a mysterious place, seemingly cut off from the world, untraceable on any map. Yet, it was located on a precarious boundary; not so remote as to be utterly isolated, occasionally found by the stray hiker. An invisible boundary extended around the shrine, and within this boundary, the maidens belonging to the shrine could freely transform their bodies into any form, including inanimate objects.

Even more astonishing, once transformed within the boundary, their altered form remained even if they stepped outside it. Of course, they could not revert to their original form until they returned inside the boundary, but thanks to this ability, the maidens no longer aged or died. Basic needs such as eating, drinking, or sleeping for the maintenance of life had long become unnecessary. They were beings who had chosen to live as immortal guardians of the shrine.

The deepest secret of this shrine lay in the shrine buildings themselves. The colossal wooden pillars, magnificent roofs, and every intricately carved pattern were, in fact, the body of a maiden who had transformed long, long ago. The other maidens called her the Great Maiden. To prevent the younger maidens from being confused by her being a building, the Great Maiden had created a separate avatar within her own body to function as her proxy. Her avatar walked the shrine like any other maiden, guiding them and overseeing all shrine affairs. This shocking secret was never to be revealed outside the shrine. For it was clear that if it were to be exposed

to the world, uncontrollable chaos would ensue, thus the shrine strictly forbade entry to outsiders. Only maidens could enter the shrine, and this secret was thoroughly, meticulously hidden.

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The girl lived in an ordinary city. It was an ordinary day, and she was on her way home from school. It was then. A beam of light poured down from the clear sky, and a distinct voice echoed in the girl's mind.

"Come to the shrine. Your destiny awaits there."

At first, she thought it was an auditory hallucination. However, the voice grew clearer with each passing day, carving a powerful pull into the girl's heart. Ultimately, without informing her family, the girl was drawn by an unknown force and set out, guided only by instinct. After wandering for days and nights, traversing winding mountain paths, the shrine, shrouded in fog, appeared before the girl's eyes. The moment she crossed the shrine's threshold, a strange energy enveloped her entire body, and she realized the voice of the vision had not been false.

Upon entering the shrine, women in white robes greeted the girl. They seemed to already know she would come, naturally guiding her to the maidens' living quarters. The girl knelt before the Great Maiden's avatar and formally pledged to become a maiden. Immediately upon completing the oath, changes began to occur in the girl's body. She felt an unknown energy overflowing from her fingertips to her toes, and experienced her entire body's senses becoming heightened. The girl was now no longer an ordinary human.

After the sacred ritual concluded, the girl was given a new name: Lua. Along with other novice maidens, Lua learned about the shrine's rules and the life of a maiden. She began training to freely transform her body within the boundary. At first, even changing a single finger into a branch was difficult, but with time, she gradually became accustomed to it.

Most surprising was the buddy system with fellow maidens. Lua was assigned a fellow maiden to accompany her on outdoor missions. During external activities, they were to transform into

each other's clothes, ensuring they were never apart for a moment. One would become the clothes of the other, forming a part of their body, so the two maidens had to move as a single entity. This was a crucial means for the maidens to carry out their duties without exposing the shrine's secrets to the outside world. Lua's partner was a calm and wise maiden, Shizuku. Shizuku would transform into Lua's black hair tie, and Lua would transform into Shizuku's collar. Thus, they learned to permeate each other's existence, like a single shadow, moving in and out of the shrine, ready to perform their duties. Lua had just begun a new life.^[1:1]

...

Lua was gradually getting used to the shrine's daily life. Even amidst the sacred and solemn atmosphere, the maidens' lives were far more practical and flexible than she had imagined. What particularly caught her eye was the way maidens transformed their bodies within the boundary. Beyond simply changing into animals or plants, maidens would transform into various household items as needed, alleviating inconveniences within the shrine.

One day, Lua was tidying up the document archives deep within the shrine with the Great Maiden's avatar. In a corner of the room, filled with ancient books and scrolls, several old bookshelves caught her eye. These bookshelves were none other than the transformation of the maiden Miho. Miho had transformed into a bookshelf, necessary for storing the shrine's history and knowledge. She would use her finger, transformed into a thin bookmark, to help Lua find specific books, and sometimes freely expand the shelves to accommodate more books. Lua vaguely sensed that Miho's transformation was not merely into a bookshelf, but based on a deep comprehension of the bookshelf's structure and storage efficiency. She was amazed that Miho's transformation possessed a functional completeness beyond mere changes in form.

...

The nights at the shrine were quiet, yet sometimes unexpected noises could be heard. They came from the space where the maidens rested. There was a maiden named Aki there, who often transformed into a television. Lua could barely suppress her astonishment at first. A television deep in a mountain shrine? It was unimaginable.

When Aki transformed into a television, news from the outside world flowed across the screen. From news to dramas, even animations. Through the videos Aki displayed, the maidens stayed connected to the world and obtained external information. Lua saw that Aki wasn't merely displaying images; she skillfully changed channels, adjusted volume, and even manipulated the screen's aspect ratio, just like a real television. Once, when the screen momentarily flickered, Aki mumbled, "The vertical blanking frequency was slightly off. I've adjusted it." On another day, when the screen suddenly froze, she skillfully resolved the error, saying, "Hmm, it seems the ATSC protocol was unstable. I'll fix it right away."

Lua couldn't precisely understand Aki's words, but she intuitively sensed that Aki had a complete grasp of even the television's mechanical operating principles. Aki's transformation was not merely mimicking a shape; it was at a level that perfectly replicated the television's essential functions and technical attributes. Aki possessed an unrivaled level of talent in inanimate object transformation.

This way, the maidens' ability to transform not just into clothes but into various items for their convenient living greatly fascinated Lua. She once again pondered her own body, which held infinite possibilities within the boundary. Would she someday be able to perform functional and practical transformations, beyond simple forms, like Aki and Miho? Lua felt excitement as she opened her eyes to a new world.^[1:2]

...

One clear afternoon, Lua was strolling in the shrine courtyard with the Great Maiden's avatar. While sitting on the sun-drenched veranda, drinking tea, Lua suddenly posed a question that had been on her mind.

"Great Maiden, why did the Divine create such a special boundary? I'm curious about the reason for us being able to freely change our forms and live eternally."

The Great Maiden took a sip of tea with a gentle smile. Her eyes seemed to hold a story as deep as the shrine's ancient history.

"Lua, this boundary is not merely to grant you special abilities. The world is constantly changing, and to protect the shrine's existence amidst the tides of change, special wisdom and power were required."

She paused for a moment and gazed at the distant mountain peaks.

"Humans are finite beings, and within those limitations, they tend to forget and lose much. But the shrine plays a role in preserving the world's fundamental wisdom and spiritual balance. For this, beings who can transcend time and adapt to any environment were necessary."

The Great Maiden looked at Lua again.

"You maidens, by being able to free yourselves from the constraints of matter and transform within this boundary, are not merely transcending the limitations of the flesh. This means acquiring the ability to flexibly respond to worldly changes, obtain necessary information, and sometimes perform the shrine's duties without being revealed to the world. For example, just as Miho becomes a bookshelf to preserve knowledge, and Aki becomes a television to read the world's currents. You are beings who will exist eternally and continue the shrine's wisdom."

Deep trust and responsibility were evident in her voice.

"This boundary is the infinite possibility granted to us by the Divine, and simultaneously, the most powerful tool to safeguard the shrine's reason for existence. Your obtaining eternal life is also to allow you to focus solely on the shrine's role, unbound by death and time."

Lua nodded as she listened to the Great Maiden's explanation. She realized that the boundary's meaning went beyond simply granting abilities, encompassing a deeper, more sacred purpose. She gained a new understanding of the shrine she belonged to and her life as a maiden.^[1:3]

...

Lua quietly watched Shizuku preparing to go out. The maiden uniform, while within the boundary, existed like a part of the body, like skin, but the moment they left the boundary, it

vanished without a trace. Therefore, for external activities, another maiden always had to transform into clothes for them. Today was Lua's turn to take on that role. Shizuku smiled faintly at Lua, as if in gratitude.

"Lua, please take care of me."

Lua took a breath and composed herself. She brought to mind the image of the casual clothes Shizuku would wear: a warm cream-colored knit sweater and soft jeans. She vividly imagined not just the simple form, but the texture, the creases of the clothes, and even each individual fiber.

Her body began to change. The transformation began first from her toes. Her toes disappeared, and her instep smoothly flattened, transforming into the soft hem of the knit sweater. Her calves and thighs slowly took on the shape of jeans. The uniquely rough yet soft texture characteristic of blue denim could be felt. The waist naturally settled into the form of belt loops and pockets.

Her torso became a knit sweater. Lua's skin transformed into a mass of warm cream-colored yarn, and the sensation of each individual cell being reconfigured into a dense knit fabric surged through her. Her arms elongated into sleeves, and her fingers became soft, enveloping cuffs. Her neck became the neckline of the knit sweater, and her hair naturally finished off like flowing threads of yarn.

Upon completion of the transformation, Lua realized she had become an entire outfit. Shizuku slowly picked up Lua, that is, the cream-colored knit sweater and jeans. Lua felt a momentary dizziness, but soon the familiar sensation of clothing enveloped her. As Shizuku's hands held her and she was worn as clothing, Lua felt a peculiar sense of stability, as if she had become another layer of skin.

Though Lua had become clothes, her five senses remained vivid. The sensation of touching Shizuku's skin, the rustling sound with her movements, and even the subtle vibrations felt when Shizuku walked, all were transmitted to Lua. She could see the world through Shizuku's eyes and hear sounds through Shizuku's ears.

Shizuku's voice echoed clearly in Lua's mind. It was telepathy. From the moment Lua transformed into clothes, a silent channel of communication had opened between them.

"Yes, Shizuku-san. I'm not uncomfortable at all. In fact, seeing the world this closely is quite a new experience."

Lua's thoughts were transmitted directly to Shizuku. Shizuku nodded and stepped out of the shrine. Lua, now a part of Shizuku, stepped out into the outside world. As clothes, she was ready to protect Shizuku and act as her eyes and ears, perceiving external information together.^[1:4]

...

Having left the shrine, Shizuku walked along the mountain path as usual. Lua, being Shizuku's clothes, vividly felt every one of her movements. The damp smell of the forest path and the rustling of leaves were fully transmitted to Lua through Shizuku's five senses. Everything was fresh and wondrous.

But the peace did not last long. As Shizuku descended the narrow mountain path, she suddenly lost her footing. "Ah!" With a short cry, Shizuku's body swayed, and the jeans Lua had transformed into were instantly dragged across the rough dirt ground. The moment a sharp branch brushed past the jeans, Lua recoiled, her entire body cringing at the raw sensation, as if her own skin were being scratched. Fortunately, Shizuku did not fall, but a short scream erupted in Lua's mind.

"Shizuku-san, just now... my body got scratched!"

Lua's flustered cry echoed in Shizuku's mind. Shizuku chuckled and stopped walking. "It's alright, Lua. Clothes are just like that. They get dirty, and they get scratched."

At Shizuku's words, Lua sighed in relief, but the tribulations had only just begun. As they left the mountain path and reached the edge of a small village, a dog suddenly darted out and sniffed at Shizuku's leg. Soon, the dog urinated on the jeans Lua had transformed into.

"Ugh! Shizuku-san! Just now... something warm and wet on my body...!"

Lua almost screamed, but fortunately, her silent cry was transmitted only to Shizuku. Shizuku, without a hint of embarrassment, gently pushed the dog away with her foot and bent down to inspect the jeans. "Oh, dear. It's alright, Lua, this can be wiped off quickly." Shizuku took a handkerchief from her pocket and casually wiped off the dog's urine from Lua's body—that is, the jeans. Lua shuddered at the sensation of being wiped. She had never imagined experiencing such things as clothes.

Upon entering the village market, even more embarrassing incidents followed. Shizuku stopped in front of a street food stall. The savory smell of oil and spicy seasoning stung her nose. Shizuku picked up a skewer and took a bite. Just then, a drop of red sauce splattered and fell onto the cream-colored knit sweater Lua had transformed into.

"Aaaah! Shizuku-san! On my body! A stain...!"

Lua almost shrieked. Seeing the clearly embedded red spot with her own eyes was utterly dreadful. Shizuku sensed Lua's distress and chuckled softly. "Oh dear, I'm sorry, Lua. It's alright, we can just wash it when we get home." Shizuku nonchalantly resumed eating her skewer.

Lua was thrown into confusion. Inside the shrine, she was an immortal being, maintaining a perfect form without fear of scratches or dirt. But the moment she became clothes, experiencing scratches, being urinated on, and getting stained—all of these experiences were a great shock to her. Experiencing the 'tribulations' of being clothes firsthand, Lua gained a new understanding of her transformation ability, while also unable to hide her unexpected and visceral dismay.^[1:5]

Even on the way back to the shrine from the village, Lua still couldn't shake off her embarrassment. The stain on the knit sweater, the dog urine on the jeans, and the scratches kept bothering her. The series of incidents she experienced in the form of clothes felt to her as if her soul had been wounded.

"Shizuku-san... is this really okay? My body... getting so dirty and damaged..."

Lua's anxious voice echoed in Shizuku's mind. Shizuku walked silently along the quiet mountain path, then gently stroked Lua's collar—that is, the knit part Lua had become.

"Lua, I completely understand how you feel. Everyone feels that way at first."

Shizuku's voice was calm, but imbued with a warmth that seemed to soothe Lua's distress.

"I was very surprised too, just like you, at first. Was it a few years ago...? Back then, I transformed into a teacup to serve the Great Maiden."

Lua listened attentively to Shizuku's story. A teacup, she thought. What else could have happened?

"The Great Maiden was drinking tea in the courtyard, when suddenly a gust of wind blew. Because of that wind, I—that is, the teacup—fell to the ground. The moment it shattered, I felt a pain as if my entire body was shattering into pieces. It truly hurt. The sensation of my body scattering into hundreds, thousands of fragments... is still vivid."

Lua shuddered just at the thought. Transforming into a glass shard and then shattering—that would be an extreme experience even for an immortal being.

"At that moment, the Great Maiden carefully picked up each of my fragments. She brought the largest glass pieces back to the shrine. And the moment she stepped inside the shrine, as if by magic, my body came back together. Into the perfect form of a teacup, without a single trace of being broken. And soon, I was able to return to my original form."

Shizuku finished speaking and gently tugged at the sleeve of the knit sweater Lua had become.

"No matter what form we take outside the boundary, no matter what we experience, the Divine's blessing is always with us. The moment we return inside the boundary, we revert to our original, perfect form. So don't worry. Your body will be perfectly fine."

No sooner had Shizuku finished speaking than the shrine's boundary was felt. Lua felt her vision momentarily waver, and soon after, the sensation of the knit sweater and jeans that had enveloped her entire body disappeared. When she opened her eyes, she was wearing her original maiden uniform again.

Lua quickly examined her body. Her scratched leg, her urinated-on thigh, the part of her chest where sauce had splattered—all were clean and perfect, without any trace. As if nothing had happened at all. Lua sighed in relief and looked at Shizuku in wonder. Shizuku, as if reading Lua's mind, smiled.

"See? I told you."

Lua once again felt reverence for the boundary's mystery and the Divine's blessing. Realizing that the minor tribulations she had experienced were in fact nothing, she was able to alleviate some of her anxiety about experiencing the outside world as clothes.^[1:6]

II. Automotive Maiden

Lua gained a deeper understanding of her transformation ability through the experiences she had as Shizuku's clothing and the Great Maiden's explanations. She realized how crucial it was to perfectly understand and embody the functions and properties of the object transformed into, beyond simply changing its shape. She was greatly inspired by Aki becoming a television to gain external information and Miho transforming into a bookshelf to preserve knowledge.

One day, Lua felt a sudden sense of discomfort when she saw the maidens preparing to visit another shrine. They always had to walk, or sometimes go down to the village to use public transportation. The distance between shrines was considerable, sometimes taking more than a day for a round trip.

'How convenient would it be if we could move ourselves?'

A sudden thought flashed through Lua's mind. And she decided. To help the maidens with their travel, she would become an electric car. Not just a moving mass, but a perfectly functional, real car.

Lua immediately sought out the Great Maiden's avatar and expressed her resolve. The Great Maiden nodded and smiled at Lua's bold decision.

"That's an excellent idea, Lua. Your ability will be a great help to the maidens."

The very next day, Lua's special training began. The first thing she was given was a thick electric car repair manual. It wasn't just a simple user manual, but a professional mechanic's manual. The hundreds of pages were filled with complex circuit diagrams, parts descriptions, and troubleshooting procedures.

Lua opened the manual within the boundary. At first, the words in front of her eyes seemed like complex symbols. However, she knew that to achieve a perfect transformation like Aki or Miho, she had to understand the internal principles, not just mimic the external appearance.

She meticulously read every page of the manual. The composition of the battery module, the role of the power control unit (PCU), the operating principles of the motor, the regenerative braking system, and even the sensor array and data processing methods for autonomous driving—she ingrained every detail in her mind. Beyond merely reading with her eyes, she felt a sense of immersion as if the information was being etched into her body. Sometimes, she would look at the illustrations in the manual and transform her own body into the corresponding parts. She would become a small gear, or a complex bundle of wires.

Lua delved into the manual day and night. She read it over and over until the pages were worn out. She completely understood all the technical requirements and operating principles of an electric car, and she was preparing to embody them in her own flesh. Imagining the maidens comfortably traveling to other shrines within the electric car that was her, Lua willingly memorized everything.^[2:1]

...

After studying the repair manual day and night, Lua perfectly understood every detailed structure and operating principle of the electric car. Now, all that remained was the real test. The Great Maiden and the other maidens gathered in the shrine courtyard, eagerly anticipating Lua's first transformation. Lua took a deep breath and envisioned the form of an electric car. The sleek body, the gleaming headlights, and the detail of each individual wheel. Her body began to glow and change.

In an instant, a brand-new electric car appeared where Lua had been standing. It was not a mere model. It was a real car, perfectly realized, from the deep grooves of the tires to the charging port, and even the complex dashboard inside. Lua felt her body become a massive machine composed of steel, wires, and batteries. She could feel the subtle vibrations of the battery, beating like a heart instead of an engine.

The most surprising thing was the driver's seat. A small avatar of Lua sat in it like a driver. This avatar followed Lua's will exactly, serving to prepare for any potential external checks or unexpected situations.

To become a perfect car, Lua had to overcome another hurdle: a driver's license and vehicle registration. It was somewhat ironic that a maiden had to follow the laws of the human world, but the Great Maiden explained it was an essential part of external activities.

At this point, Shizuku stepped forward. Shizuku skillfully transformed into Lua's appearance. To drive the car that Lua herself had transformed into, another Lua was needed. Shizuku perfectly reproduced Lua's actual appearance, voice, and even her small habits.

A few days later, the Lua that Shizuku had become sat in the driver's seat of the electric car that Lua had transformed into. On the way to the city's driver's license test center, Shizuku skillfully operated Lua, the car. She used the sensors embedded throughout Lua's body to perfectly park in the parking course, and displayed agile yet stable driving skills during the road test. The examiner stamped Lua's license with admiration.

Next was vehicle registration. The Lua that Shizuku had become drove the electric car that Lua had transformed into to the vehicle registration office and completed all the paperwork. Lua felt the cold sensation of the license plate being attached to her body, realizing that she had officially become a registered car in the world.

...

On the day of her first long-distance debut, Lua set off with the maidens visiting another shrine. Before starting, Lua indulged in all sorts of delicious foods in the shrine's kitchen to 'refuel'. Greasy meat, sweet fruits, and warm soup—she stuffed her mouth with food like a mukbang YouTuber. Her 'fuel' was food, and although she was a maiden who didn't need any food to survive, if the transformed car's energy ran out, her body was at risk of returning to its original form.

While driving on the highway, Lua felt a strange thrill speeding at over 100 kilometers per hour. The scenery rushing by outside the window, the sound of the wind, and the subtle vibrations of the road surface—everything was new. The maidens sat comfortably, chatting.

After a few hours, Lua felt the 'fuel level' displayed on the dashboard decreasing. At the same time, she felt a subtle trembling in her body and a sense of performance degradation.

"Shizuku-san, I'm low on fuel... I need to eat something."

Lua's urgent telepathy reached Shizuku. Shizuku nodded and drove the car to the next rest stop. As soon as they arrived at the rest stop, the maidens quickly bought snacks and brought them to Lua.

"Here, Lua. How about some corn dogs and onion rings? We have more!"

The maidens pushed the food through the window into the mouth of Lua's avatar, who was sitting in the driver's seat. Lua absorbed the savory flavor of the corn dogs and the crispy onion rings in an instant. As the food entered her body, the trembling miraculously stopped, and she felt her energy recharge.

"Mmm, it's delicious! I feel energized again!"

Lua sent a satisfied telepathic message, and the maidens laughed and got back into the car. In this way, Lua successfully completed her first long-distance drive and performed the important role of being the maidens' transportation. She had now proven herself to be not just a simple

maiden, but a being with infinite possibilities, capable of transforming into any form as needed.^[2:2]

...

It had been a year. Lua stood in front of the gate of her old house, wearing a neat dress and cardigan that Shizuku had transformed into. Life at the shrine was peaceful for an immortal being, but the longing for her family was inevitable. Lua's heart ached more and more as she thought about how much her parents must have searched for her after her sudden disappearance. Suddenly, Shizuku's warm telepathy soothed Lua's heart.

"Don't worry, I'm by your side."

Ding-dong. The doorbell rang, and her mother's surprised face appeared.

"Yui! Is that really our Yui? It's been so long!"

Her mother called Lua by her real name, Yui, and hugged Lua tightly. A mix of joy and relief washed over her face at the sight of her daughter, who seemed a little more mature after a year. Her father silently stroked Lua's head, his eyes welling up.

They sat facing each other with warm tea. Her parents' worries proved to be greater than expected.

"Where have you been all this time, and how have you been? Without any contact... Do you know how worried we were?"

Lua was speechless at her mother's question. She couldn't reveal the shrine's secret. She could only offer a vague excuse, saying she had been "recuperating in a deep mountain for a while due to illness." Her parents' faces were still filled with questions and worry.

It was then. Shizuku's voice resonated in Lua's mind. "Lua, ask your mother about the neighborhood where I lived as a child. The one with a small stream and many cherry blossom trees. And ask her about my friend Hozue Mika."

Lua was puzzled by Shizuku's request but immediately sensed that Shizuku was trying something important. Lua cautiously asked her mother,

"Mom, did you happen to have a best friend named Hozue Mika when you were little? In a neighborhood near a stream with lots of cherry blossoms..."

Her mother's eyes widened. Surprise mixed with faint memories flickered across her face.

"Mika! How do you know that name? I haven't heard that name in ages. Yes, that's right. Hozue Mika was my very close friend when I was little. We were always together... but then she suddenly moved, and we lost touch. I always wondered how she was doing."

Her mother smiled, nostalgic at the name of her old friend. Then Shizuku's telepathy reached Lua again. "Ask your mother about Mika's most cherished old doll. And that one of the doll's eyes was a button."

Lua carefully continued,

"Mom, did Mika-san really cherish an old doll that had one button eye?"

Her mother looked at Lua, startled.

"My goodness! How do you know that? That was our secret, no one else knew! Mika-chan really loved that doll.... Where did you hear that?"

Her mother's eyes contained certainty mixed with an unknown light. Lua was using Shizuku's knowledge to erase her parents' doubts. Shizuku continued to send Lua telepathic messages of childhood memories that only her mother would know, and Lua recounted them in detail as if she had experienced them herself. Through the stories Lua told, her mother seemed to glimpse

Shizuku's presence—a mysterious power—and began to vaguely accept that her daughter had become a special being, different from ordinary people. Lua's face now held an unknown power and wisdom.

When it was time to say goodbye, her mother hugged Lua tightly and said,

"Yui, anyway, I'm really glad you're healthy and doing well. And... if you happen to meet Mika-chan later, please be sure to tell her I said hello. Thanks to you, I thought of my old friend after a long time, and I was so happy to hear about her."

Lua felt awkward through Shizuku's telepathy at her mother's request. Shizuku's perplexed reaction, "What should I do about this?" was directly conveyed to Lua's mind. She was facing Lua's mother as Lua's clothing, and yet her mother was asking her to convey regards to herself. Shizuku inwardly sighed deeply in embarrassment. Lua forced a smile and nodded as if nothing was wrong.

"Yes, Mom. I'll be sure to tell her."

Lua's appearance as she left the house was different from before. Although she hadn't completely dispelled her parents' worries, she seemed to have gained at least a minimum understanding thanks to Shizuku's wisdom. Lua once again felt the weight of the secret that she, Shizuku, and the other maidens protected, and she headed back towards the shrine.^[2:3]

...

On the way back to the shrine after the short family reunion, Lua, dressed in the clothes Shizuku had transformed into, suddenly fell into thought while walking. When she had transformed into an electric car, her avatar in the driver's seat was fully clothed. But when she became Shizuku's clothes, Lua herself directly became the clothing, enveloping Shizuku's body. Why could she exist as a complete avatar in some transformations, but only choose to be a part of the body as clothing in others?

"Shizuku-san," Lua asked telepathically. "I was suddenly curious, when I turned into a car, my avatar was fully clothed and sitting in the driver's seat, right? But when I become Shizuku-san's clothes like now, why do I have to become the clothes directly? Why can't I choose to be clothing as part of my body?"

Shizuku also pondered for a moment. "Hmm, now that you mention it, that's true. I hadn't thought of that part. I just took it for granted because it's always been that way." A hint of curiosity was in her voice. "Inside the boundary, the maiden's robes exist as part of our bodies, but they disappear when we go outside, so maybe that's why we have to become the clothes directly... The avatar in the driver's seat had seemed so lifelike."

As soon as they returned to the shrine, Lua and Shizuku went to find the Great Maiden's avatar. The Great Maiden, who was drinking tea, smiled gently at the two maidens' curious faces.

"Your questions haven't been resolved, have they? You're asking why Lua's avatar, when she transformed into a car, could be fully clothed, and why you both have to exist as part of the body when you become each other's clothes, right?"

Lua and Shizuku nodded.

"To answer that question, I need to tell you a very old story."

The Great Maiden began to speak in a calm voice.

"In the beginning, the Divine blessed the maidens with the ability to 'freely transform into any form whatsoever.' At first, all maidens could create perfect avatars as they wished, and even dress those avatars. Just like Lua's avatar when you transformed into a car now."

Lua and Shizuku held their breath, waiting for the next part of the story.

"But problems soon arose. The maidens did not use their transformations responsibly like you do. Some maidens would create dozens of avatars and go down to the village, confusing people, while others would make their avatars play all sorts of pranks, or even do bad things. Since their

true bodies were hidden in the shrine, they faced no repercussions. The world fell into chaos, and distrust towards the shrine grew."

A faint sadness crossed the Great Maiden's expression.

"The Divine let out a deep sigh. The blessing she had given the maidens had instead become a tool to disturb the world. So, the Divine decided to place 'restrictions' on the maidens' transformation ability. The restriction was this: 'Only when transforming into an inanimate object can a complete avatar be created, and that avatar can be clothed.' This was because when transforming into an inanimate object, the true body completely assimilates with that object, so just as a car's driver is part of the car, the avatar also comes under the complete control of the true body. This prevented the avatar during an inanimate transformation from acting on its own. However, she placed the restriction that 'when becoming the clothing of another living creature, the maiden herself must become the clothing and exist as part of the body.' This was to ensure that the maidens would bear responsibility for each other, move as one body, and not abuse their abilities carelessly."

The Great Maiden took another sip of tea.

"Therefore, the reason Lua's avatar was fully clothed when you transformed into a car is because a car is an inanimate object, and the reason Lua herself became the clothing when she became Shizuku's clothes is because becoming clothing is a union with another living creature. All of this was a wise choice made by the Divine to prevent the maidens' abilities from harming the harmony of the world."

Lua and Shizuku nodded as they listened to the Great Maiden's story. Their curiosity was resolved, and they once again realized the deeper meaning hidden within the transformation ability. The Divine's blessing always came with deep meaning and responsibility.^[2:4]

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In celebration of memorizing the repair manual, Lua went to thank the Great Maiden. The Great Maiden's abode was as quiet and orderly as ever, but today, a subtle, familiar scent of

paper was subtly mixed with the usual faint aroma. The Great Maiden was not sitting in her usual spot, but instead was engrossed in something on a soft cushion by the window.

As Lua cautiously approached, she noticed what the Great Maiden held in her hands. It was none other than a thick comic book. The cover depicted a boy swordsman in a dynamic pose, and the title was boldly written: *Flame Swordsman Kaen*. Lua rubbed her eyes. The Great Maiden, who always appeared dignified and wise, was reading a shonen manga. Unbelievable!

The Great Maiden, sensing Lua's gaze, was startled and hid the comic book behind her lap. Lua didn't miss the faint blush that crept onto her cheeks.

"Ah, Lua, you've come? That... well... this is what I was looking at."

The Great Maiden spoke in a slightly embarrassed, and hushed voice. It was a touch of human embarrassment rarely seen in an immortal being. Lua tried to suppress her laughter.

"Yes, Great Maiden. But... you were reading a comic book."

At Lua's words, the Great Maiden cleared her throat and carefully brought the comic book back out.

"Hmm... actually, I sometimes read shonen manga like this. You might find it a bit surprising."

The Great Maiden gently stroked the comic book cover with her finger.

"Look at the protagonist in this manga. He doesn't give in to adversity, but constantly strives and grows. He works with his friends to achieve what seems impossible. That kind of pure and fervent passion... is sometimes necessary."

She gazed at the mountains far outside the window.

"When you live for a long time, everything becomes familiar, and sometimes even the will to live fades. Understanding the ways of the world and truth is important, but sometimes, such primordial and pure passion can breathe life into a withered heart."

The Great Maiden smiled, looking at the comic book again.

"As a maiden, I teach you wisdom and tranquility, but I too need a small driving force to keep moving forward and not get exhausted. Like the boys in this manga, it's to not forget the simple, passionate mindset of striving towards a goal. Although this shrine will exist forever, we who live within it must also continue to grow."

Lua nodded as she listened to the Great Maiden's explanation. In her words, Lua felt the deep contemplation of a being who had lived for ages, and yet still strived not to lose the vitality of life. Lua understood that the shonen manga was not merely entertainment, but a small yet precious source of vitality for the Great Maiden herself. In Lua's eyes, the Great Maiden seemed even more human and venerable.^[2:5]

...

In a spacious courtyard at a corner of the shrine, Aki—always neatly dressed in maiden robes with her hair braided—was holding a small sketchbook and meticulously drawing bundles of wires or unknown machine parts. Her gaze was as clear and rational as ever, as if logically analyzing every phenomenon. Lua cautiously approached Aki as she worked and spoke.

"Aki-san, could you perhaps transform into a piano for me? I learned to play the piano when I was little, and I'd like to play it again."

Aki looked up from her sketchbook and gazed at Lua. A hint of bewilderment flickered across her expression.

"A piano? Hmm... I'm confident in electronics and communication protocols, but a piano... I understand its mechanical structure, but the acoustic principles or the subtle mechanisms of each key are not areas I'm familiar with."

Lua was inwardly surprised to discover an unexpected weakness in Aki, who always perfectly understood and transformed into everything. But at the same time, an inexplicable sense of pride swelled within her at the thought of being able to teach Aki.

"It's okay, Aki-san! I'll explain it to you!"

Lua cheerfully exclaimed and led Aki to the old library that the Great Maiden had shown them. Among the dusty bookshelves, she found an old book explaining piano structures and opened it.

"Alright, Aki-san. A piano is basically composed of keys, hammers, strings, and a soundboard."

Lua pointed to the illustrations in the book with her finger as she explained. Aki, with an unusually serious face, listened to Lua's explanation and began sketching the internal structure of the piano in her sketchbook. Her eyes were still sharp, but this time, they seemed to be delving into the complex arrangement of wood and strings, not electronic circuits.

"When you press a key, the hammer moves and strikes the string. When the string vibrates, it makes a sound. And this sound is amplified through the soundboard. The important thing is that the depth and speed of each key press change the force with which the hammer strikes the string, subtly altering the volume and resonance of the sound."

Lua tapped the air with her fingers, mimicking pressing keys.

"Especially this damper part is important; when you press a key, the damper lifts off the string to make a sound, and when you release it, it reattaches to the string to stop the sound. Also, when you press the pedal, the damper lifts off the strings, causing the sound to resonate longer, or even producing a different sound."

Aki nodded as she listened to Lua's explanation. Her sketchbook already contained intricate hammer mechanisms and string tension adjustment devices, precisely drawn. "Ultimately, all these mechanical parts work in harmony to create acoustic beauty. It's an analog precision, different from the electronic signals I'm used to." Aki rarely expressed such admiration.

At the library entrance, several maidens were observing the interesting sight. It was quite a novel sight for them: Aki, who always created things with such sharp precision, was now the student, while Lua, who was usually the one learning, had become the teacher. They quietly smiled and watched the two maidens' passionate lesson.

...

A few days later, Lua and Aki finally stood in the shrine courtyard. Aki took a deep breath and recalled all the structures and principles of the piano that Lua had explained. And her body began to glow and transform.

A harmonious form of steel and wood appeared, and black and white keys were meticulously arranged. Finally, Aki transformed into a massive yet beautiful upright piano. Its glossy black exterior and neatly aligned keys stood majestically.

Lua, with a heart full of emotion, sat in front of Aki, who had transformed into a piano. She carefully reached out and placed her hands on the keys. The piano was Aki herself, but at the same time, it was the instrument Lua had longed for for a long time.

As Lua pressed the first key, a clear and resonant sound echoed through the courtyard. As her fingers moved, Aki's internal mechanisms responded precisely, expressing various timbres and dynamics. Lua soon recalled the melodies she used to play as a child and began to perform. A beautiful melody filled the shrine courtyard, and the other maidens held their breath, appreciating the music. Aki also seemed to feel deep satisfaction from the beautiful sounds flowing from her body.^[2:6]

...

When winter arrived at the shrine, the mountains were covered in pristine white snow. Snowflakes bloomed on every branch, and thick blankets of snow piled up on the roofs. Although they were immortal beings within the boundary, the maidens also felt the cold when

they were in human form. With the chilling cold seemingly seeping into their bones, the maidens naturally gathered together.

However, winter at the shrine was not painful. The maidens' special abilities transformed even the harsh cold into joy.

The first thing that stood out was the warm air emanating from various parts of the shrine. In the central hall of the shrine, Hinata, transformed into a stove, was lighting red charcoal. The heat radiating from her body instantly dispelled the cold air, providing warmth. The maidens gathered around the stove, warming their cold hands and chatting. In one room, Kana, transformed into a boiler, was warming the heated floor. The maidens would lie down and rest their tired bodies in the cozy warmth rising from the floor. Lua sat by the stove, enjoying the winter atmosphere while listening to the crackling of the flames.

Winter delicacies were also not to be missed. A savory aroma wafted from the kitchen. There, an unexpected transformed being awaited: Aoi, transformed into an air fryer. With her sleek silver body and perfectly realized digital panel, Aoi was diligently making winter snacks.

"Alright, the roasted chestnuts are coming out now!"

Perfectly roasted chestnuts poured out from inside Aoi. Soon after, steaming roasted sweet potatoes and whole roasted chickens, crispy on the outside and moist on the inside, came out one after another. The maidens laughed as they tasted the warm and delicious food that Aoi had roasted. Lua blew on a freshly roasted chestnut and tasted it. While a normal air fryer would have limitations in temperature control or cooking time, Aoi perfectly controlled all the functions of the air fryer she had transformed into, achieving the best taste.

Some maidens drank warm tea and talked about Aoi's air fryer transformation. "At first, everyone was puzzled why Aoi wanted to be an air fryer. But since she can warm so much food at once, there's no better transformation for winter, is there?" One maiden said with a laugh.

Winter at the shrine was not a harsh cold, but a warm and vibrant season with the maidens' warm transformation abilities. Thanks to the warmth provided by the stove and boiler, and the

delicious food offered by the air fryer, the maidens were able to share their warmth with each other and spend a cozy winter even in the cold.^[2:7]

...

The shrine seemed isolated from the world, but sometimes it interacted with the outside, revealing its presence. One such occasion was the village festival. Since outsiders could not enter the shrine grounds, the festival site was set in a wide flat area near the shrine entrance. The villagers eagerly awaited the annual festival held in front of the mysterious shrine.

The highlight of the festival was undoubtedly the kagura performances by the maidens. Kagura, a sacred dance ritual offered to the gods, was majestic and beautiful in itself. In this festival, three maidens danced the kagura.

Akane transformed into a splendid costume of red and white, forming the centerpiece of the dance. Her body fluttered like soft silk, shimmering with light with every movement. Akane's movements were elegant and disciplined, and her costume transformation further enhanced the beauty of the dance.

And the clear sound of bells accompanying the dance was handled by Aki. Aki transformed into small bells that were attached to Akane's wrists and ankles. She perfectly controlled the volume and rhythm of the sound, leading the flow of the dance. The bell sounds, sometimes cheerful, sometimes mysterious, seemed to show that Aki understood not only physical forms but also sound waves.

Shizuku transformed into a thin veil that moved as smoothly as the wind, matching the dance movements of the maidens performing the kagura. She cut through the air, following the maidens' movements, adding a mysterious atmosphere. Sometimes she would lightly cover a maiden's face and then reveal it, intensifying the mystique. Shizuku's veil became part of the dance, revealing an invisible presence.

Lua played an important role from the festival preparation stage. She transformed into a transport cart to carry the necessary items for the festival. With sturdy wheels and a spacious

loading area, Lua was a great help in carrying handmade crafts, food ingredients, and decorations from the shrine to the festival grounds.

When the festival began, Lua transformed into another form. She became a large digital display for festival guidance. She displayed festival programs and locations in colorful letters, and sometimes showed beautiful pictures to heighten the festive mood. Of course, Lua's display did not reveal any secrets of the shrine. It simply focused on helping the villagers conveniently enjoy the festival.

As the sun set and darkness fell, Lua transformed into a bright streetlamp, illuminating the festival grounds. Her light shone on people's faces until the end of the festival, making them smile warmly. The maidens helped the festival in their own ways, and their transformation abilities, while meticulously concealing the shrine's secrets, enriched the festival even further. The villagers once again confirmed the existence of the mysterious maidens and looked forward to the festival next year.^[2:8]

III. New Maidenhood

Winter was approaching the shrine once again. Lua sat by Hinata, who had transformed into a stove, listening to the crackling of the firewood. It was a peaceful time, but suddenly, an inexplicable vibration enveloped the entire shrine. It wasn't a physical tremor like an earthquake, but rather closer to a spiritual wave. Not only Lua, but the other maidens also seemed to sense the subtle presence simultaneously, looking at each other.

"Great Maiden..."

Lua's telepathy reached the Great Maiden. The Great Maiden's avatar quietly closed her eyes, perceiving the flow of energy. A moment later, a gentle smile spread across her lips.

"A new child is coming to us."

The Great Maiden's voice was soft, but it seemed to echo throughout the entire shrine. Expectation and excitement appeared on the maidens' faces. The arrival of a new maiden at the shrine was always a great joy, and it signified the continued blessing of the Divine.

With the news of a new maiden's arrival, the shrine began to bustle with activity. The maidens prepared to welcome their guest in their own ways.

Aki, as always, meticulously checked the boundary detection system around the shrine. She made sure not to miss even the slightest fluctuation, fully prepared to send an immediate alert if any impure energy from outside was detected. From the shadows, her delicate touch ensured the shrine's safety.

Miho rearranged the books in the library and dusted them down. Since the new maiden would need to learn the shrine's history and knowledge, she focused on classifying and arranging the necessary books for her easy access. As both a bookshelf and a guardian of knowledge, she faithfully performed her role.

Shizuku neatly tidied the new maiden's intended quarters. She laid out fresh, cozy blankets and pre-heated warm water in advance. With her delicate touch, she arranged cushions and placed a small flower, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Lua assisted Shizuku, holding the fabric as she spread it out.

Lua also prepared to welcome the new maiden, recalling her own first visit. In case of any unforeseen circumstances, she transformed her body into a first-aid kit, equipping herself with necessary medical tools and medicines. She also prepared to transform into a kettle that could boil warm tea for the new maiden, who would be tired from a long journey. She awaited the new encounter with a mix of excitement and apprehension.

A few days later, the snow piled even deeper on the mountain path leading to the shrine. But the maidens' hearts were filled with a warm light. They were confident that a new soul, called by the Divine, was making its way through the darkness towards the light. And they quietly awaited the moment that light would finally open the shrine's gate and enter.^[3:1]

...

One afternoon, as the snow around the shrine grew deeper, Aki's urgent telepathy reached the maidens. She had been detecting the boundary.

"Great Maiden! A new energy has been detected. But... there are two of them!"

The maidens stirred in unison. Those called by the Divine had always come to the shrine alone. Two of them—it was unprecedented. The Great Maiden frowned slightly, but soon regained her gentle expression.

"Unexpected guests have arrived. Everyone, prepare."

The maidens headed towards the shrine entrance. The first thing that came into their sight were two small figures, leaving heavy footprints in the white snow as they struggled to walk. One was a young girl, and following behind her was a much younger boy.

The boy kept almost tripping as his feet sank into the snow, and the girl would often look back, waiting for her younger sibling. Although they showed clear signs of exhaustion, the girl's eyes glowed with an intense longing for the shrine. She was the new maiden called by the Divine. But how did her brother come to follow his sister all the way here?

As the girl and boy reached the shrine boundary, Lua instinctively drew a sharp breath. The girl crossed the boundary without any problem, but the moment the boy trespassed, something unexpected happened.

"Guh!"

The boy screamed and collapsed on the spot. A blue light, as if electricity were flowing through him, flashed from his body, and soon his entire body stiffened. His eyes, filled with terror, stared into the void, but he was unable to make a sound. As if time had stopped, the boy remained motionless, like a living doll.

The girl ran to her brother in surprise. "Ren-kun! What's wrong, Ren-kun!" She shook the boy's body, but he showed no reaction. The girl's eyes were also filled with despair and confusion.

The Great Maiden calmly approached and patted the girl's shoulder.

"Do not be alarmed, child. This child is not hurt. However, the Divine boundary is not permitted to those who are not chosen. It has merely paused his time to protect his soul."

The Great Maiden looked at the boy once, then instructed the maidens.

"Quietly move the boy outside the shrine and cast a protective barrier around him so that he can awaken safely. And lead this girl inside."

The maidens moved in perfect coordination. Hinata transformed into a blanket that warmly enveloped the boy's body, and Shizuku transformed into a transparent protective barrier around him, to shield him from external dangers. Lua, having transformed into a first-aid kit in case of any emergency, followed them.

The girl watched her brother being moved with an anxious gaze, but guided by the Great Maiden's gentle touch and the maidens' calm movements, she stepped inside the shrine. Her eyes still held concern for her brother, mixed with fear and anticipation for the new destiny she was about to face. The unexpected event that unfolded in the sacred space was creating a huge ripple in the new maiden's narrative.^[3:2]

...

In the main hall of the shrine, in a room filled with warm air, the Great Maiden and the other maidens sat surrounding the girl. The girl's name was Sana. Sana, with tears still wet on her cheeks, began her story in a trembling voice.

"My name is Sana. Suddenly, a voice in my head said, 'Come to the shrine.' At first, I thought I was going crazy... but the voice kept calling me."

Sana clenched her fists. Her eyes, filled with fear of the Divine call, also held the weight of a life too heavy for her young age.

"My parents... they passed away. In an accident a few years ago. My younger brother, Ren-kun, is my only blood relative. If I'm not there, Ren-kun will truly be alone. There's no one to look after him..."

Sana's voice dissolved into sobs.

"So... if I came to the shrine, I worried that Ren-kun would be left alone, that he would be too lonely if I left... When I left home as if running away, Ren-kun followed me. No matter how much I told him to go back, he wouldn't listen... and so we ended up coming all the way here together."

Sana bowed her head.

"I... since the Divine called me, I can become a maiden. But what about Ren-kun? If I become a maiden, what happens to Ren-kun? I... I can't leave Ren-kun alone."

Her tears would not stop.

Sana's story plunged the shrine maidens into deep silence. Even the Great Maiden's avatar, whose face had been serene, was now shadowed by deep anguish. The shrine's ironclad rule was clear. Ordinary people could not enter the shrine grounds. The boundary did not accept any beings other than maidens, and if an ordinary person entered, a harsh sanction like Ren's inability to move would follow. It was an absolute rule to maintain the shrine's secrecy.

However, Sana's story was desperate enough to shake that rule. The maidens could not easily answer the pure heart of a girl who had lost her parents and was willing to reject the Divine call for the sake of her only blood relative.

The Great Maiden closed her eyes and fell into deep thought. 'Why does the Divine intend to make a maiden out of a child in such a harsh situation?' Within her, a conflict arose between the principles that had protected the shrine for ages and the poignant sorrow of a young girl. The will of the Divine was always profound, but this time, its meaning was not easy to discern. The other maidens felt the same. Aki tried to find a rational solution but could not find a suitable answer, and Shizuku and Lua deeply empathized with Sana's sorrow, feeling for her plight. Everyone was in a dilemma, caught between their mission as maidens guarding a sacred space and their own human compassion.

Inside the shrine, the Great Maiden's anguish deepened. Then, her eyes snapped open. She sent a telepathic message to Lua and Shizuku, who were waiting outside. Lua was still transformed into a first-aid kit, and Shizuku was the protective barrier around her.

"Lua, Shizuku. Convey my words to Ren. Ask him if he is willing to become a maiden."

Lua and Shizuku were surprised, but followed the Great Maiden's will. Lua spoke to Shizuku telepathically. "Shizuku-san, I'll talk to Ren. Please become my clothes."

Shizuku nodded and transformed into neat maiden robes, enveloping Lua's body. Lua, in human form, stood by Ren. Lua cautiously sent a telepathic message to Ren, who was still frozen but blinking his eyes.

"Ren-kun, can you hear my voice? I am Lua, a maiden of this shrine. The Great Maiden asks you: Are you willing to become a maiden?"

Ren's eyes wavered. A faint voice echoed in his mind.

"A maiden...? Me...? But I'm a boy... Can boys become maidens?"

Lua conveyed the Great Maiden's meaning.

"To become a maiden as a boy... means to forsake your manhood. It means your entire being is offered to the Divine, and you are reborn in a new form. It means you can no longer exist as a boy."

A moment of hesitation flickered in Ren's eyes. But soon his gaze turned towards the inside of the shrine, in the direction his sister had disappeared. Ren knew his sister's sorrow and loneliness better than anyone. When he imagined being left alone, a resolve to pay any price swelled in his small heart.

"If I can be with my sister... I'll do it... whatever it takes."

It was the moment Ren's resolve solidified.

...

As Ren's answer was conveyed to the Great Maiden through Lua, a mysterious light enveloped the entire shrine. A dazzling light began to emanate from Ren's body. His physique subtly diminished, and his shoulders softened. The young boy's face gradually took on delicate curves, and his short hair transformed into a softly flowing form.

Lua and Shizuku were speechless at the miracle unfolding before their eyes. Ren's body was now clearly that of a young girl. Although traces of a boy still seemed to remain, she had clearly been reborn as a new maiden. The boundary's restriction that had enveloped her body also seemed to have disappeared, and she could now move freely.

Lua sent a telepathic message filled with emotion to the Great Maiden. "Great Maiden! This... this miracle...!" Shizuku also looked at the Great Maiden with awe-filled eyes.

The Great Maiden smiled gently and replied,

"I merely discerned the Divine's will. The Divine saw this child's pure heart and deep love for his sister, and thus opened a new path."

The Great Maiden now sent a warm gaze towards Ren, who had become a girl, and Sana.

"Sana, you shall now be a being that shines like the stars in the sky. Your new name is Akari."

And she looked at Ren.

"You shall now be a being as clear and pure as the spring water of the earth. Your new name is Izumi."

Akari and Izumi, the two maiden sisters, held each other's hands tightly. Their eyes, instead of confusion and fear, were filled with hope for a new life and steadfast love for each other. Having

crossed the threshold of the shrine, they would now walk a new path as immortal beings, upholding the will of the Divine and relying on each other.^[3:4]

...

It was undeniably Izumi who brought new vitality to the shrine. Originally a boy, even after transforming into a young girl's body, Izumi still completely retained her playful and curious personality. In the shrine's quiet and serene atmosphere, Izumi's mischievous antics sometimes caused small commotions.

Izumi's first prank was on none other than Aki. Aki was practicing the piano with Lua when Izumi, full of curiosity, hovered around the instrument. Then, while Lua was briefly away, Izumi sent a telepathic message to Aki.

"Aki-san, can you make it so that no sound comes out even if I bang on the keys?"

Aki was troubled but ultimately granted permission because of Izumi's pure curiosity. "Hmm... just for a moment."

At that moment, Izumi jumped onto the piano keys and began to hit them wildly with her feet. Thump! Thud! Clatter! No sound came from the piano, but Izumi joyfully bounced and jumped on the silent instrument. When Lua returned to the bewildering sight, Aki replied with a small sigh, "I briefly activated mute mode." Some of the maidens, including Shizuku, quietly let out small bursts of laughter.

...

One day, Izumi approached Miho, who was transformed into a bookshelf in the library, and playfully spoke to her.

"Miho-san, want to play hide-and-seek with me? Try to hide so I can't find you!"

Miho was calm as usual, but she let out a chuckle at Izumi's suggestion. "Alright, go on and try to find me."

Izumi excitedly ran around the library, searching for Miho. Miho skillfully hid by perfectly blending her body with the surrounding bookshelves. Izumi grew more and more frantic in her search as she couldn't find Miho no matter how hard she looked. Then, she accidentally found a faint gap in an old bookshelf she leaned her hand on. When she put her hand into the gap, she felt the cold metallic touch of something.

"Found you!"

As Izumi exclaimed, Miho returned to her original bookshelf form. Looking at the gap where Izumi had put her hand, they saw a very small, old compass hidden there. The compass was an artifact that the shrine maidens had used long ago to avoid getting lost during their external activities, but it had long been forgotten.

Miho narrowed her eyes as she looked at the compass Izumi had found. "Oh, I still had this. Thanks to you, I found an important item I had forgotten about." Thanks to Izumi's innocent prank, a hidden artifact of the shrine saw the light again.

...

When winter returned, Izumi stayed close to Aoi, who had transformed into an air fryer. As delicious roasted sweet potatoes and whole roasted chickens came out non-stop, Izumi sat camped in front of Aoi's 'output slot'. One time, Aoi was taking out a freshly roasted hot chicken when Izumi, unable to wait, poked the chicken with her finger.

"Ow! Hot!"

Izumi pulled her hand away in surprise, but the chicken unfortunately fell to the floor. Aoi sighed telepathically, "Izumi, you have to be careful!" and the other maidens burst into hearty laughter at Izumi's cute mishap. Of course, Aoi re-absorbed the fallen chicken and quickly made a new one, but Izumi's innocent gluttony often led to small commotions in the kitchen.

Izumi's life at the shrine was a continuous series of such small incidents. But her pure and lively presence added new laughter and vitality to the maidens' lives.^[3:5]

...

During a maiden lesson, Akari was learning about the shrine's history and the life of a maiden from the Great Maiden. It was when the Great Maiden explained, "The moment you become a maiden, your time stops." A thought flashed through Akari's mind like lightning.

"Great Maiden... then... will Izumi live forever in this same form?"

Akari's voice held both dismay and tender affection for her younger sister. Izumi was still a young, small girl. The fact that she would have to live for eternity in this form was a shock to Akari.

The Great Maiden quietly nodded at Akari's question.

"That is correct, Akari. The moment you become a maiden, physical growth stops. Izumi will also live forever in her current form."

A shadow fell across Akari's face. She seemed to find it difficult to accept that her sister would remain a child forever.

The Great Maiden, perhaps reading Akari's mind, continued with a gentle smile.

"But Akari, do not worry too much. There are certainly advantages to having a small body."

She calmly explained the potential of Izumi's small physique.

"There are many objects in the world that are more useful to transform into precisely because they are small. Exquisite and delicate forms that are impossible for a large body to take. For

example, she could become a small component of an electric car that Lua transforms into, or a tiny circuit of an electronic device that Aki transforms into."

The Great Maiden's gaze drifted far away, towards Izumi playing in the shrine courtyard. Izumi was still running around playfully.

"Perhaps this... is the true intention of the Divine in making Izumi a maiden in this very form."

Her voice held deep insight.

"It is not always beings with great power who can change the world. Sometimes, small and delicate beings can bring about even deeper changes."

Akari listened to the Great Maiden's explanation and began to think about the new possibilities that Izumi's small body held. Even if she would never grow, the shadow that had fallen over Akari's heart gradually began to clear at the Great Maiden's words that Izumi's potential was by no means small.^[3:6]

...

Ten years passed. If she hadn't become a maiden, Izumi would have been a young man in his early twenties, but she remained a lively little girl. Her height had not increased, and her face was as innocent as when she first arrived at the shrine. However, Izumi's eyes were no longer those of a child. They held all the wisdom and experience accumulated over ten years, and deepened emotions.

Izumi sometimes stood in front of the mirror, gazing at her small reflection. At her age, her peers would have been growing rapidly and taking on adult appearances. She would sometimes imagine herself growing taller and her body maturing like them. It wasn't that she had absolutely no lingering regret about living forever as a little girl.

But that regret didn't last long. Izumi's gaze soon turned to Hoshi, who was running around the shrine. Her older sister, Hoshi, was now a dignified maiden. Izumi felt greater joy in the fact

that she could live with her sister at the shrine precisely because she remained in this small form. If she had grown up and gone out into the outside world, she wouldn't have been able to be with her sister every day like this. For Izumi, this eternal time spent with her sister was the most precious thing.

One sunny afternoon, Lua approached Izumi, who was deep in thought in the courtyard. Lua vaguely sensed what was on Izumi's mind.

"Izumi, what are you thinking about? If you're feeling cooped up, I can transform into a car. Want to go for a drive?"

Izumi's face brightened.

"Really, Lua-san? Yes! Let's go for a drive!"

Izumi jumped up and down excitedly. Lua smiled at Izumi's lively demeanor and prepared to transform into an electric car. The sleek body and gleaming headlights—everything would be perfectly realized.

Just as Lua was about to begin her transformation, a crucial detail suddenly crossed her mind. Lua's body would completely transform into an electric car, and Lua's avatar would sit in the driver's seat. But... Izumi was still a little girl.

Lua stopped her transformation and looked at Izumi. Izumi also paused momentarily, sensing Lua's gaze. The same thought seemed to have flashed across her eyes.

"Lua-san... I... if I sit in the passenger seat... I'll need a child seat, won't I?"

Izumi's voice held a hint of exasperated chiding. Lua realized there was an unexpected flaw in her perfect plan and let out a chuckle.

"Ah... right! I didn't think that far ahead!"

Izumi folded her arms and shook her head.

"Tsk, tsk, Lua-san. How could you focus on the transformation and forget the most important part!"

Lua smiled awkwardly at Izumi's chiding. Izumi's existence, remaining eternally small, sometimes created such unexpected situations. But for Lua, all those moments were accumulating into precious memories.^[3:7]

IV. Temporal Maiden

The time had come for Lua, the shrine's electric car, to undergo its regular inspection. Even if her exterior was perfect, it was a legally mandated procedure, and preventing any unforeseen malfunctions was also part of a maiden's responsibility. Lua, with her avatar seated within her, headed to the repair shop, driven by Akari, who was wearing clothes that were a transformed Shizuku. The repair shop was an ordinary place. It was a world entirely different from the shrine's tranquility, filled with the smell of oil, the noise of machinery, and unfamiliar parts scattered everywhere.

"Welcome! Here for your regular inspection, right?"

The mechanic greeted them kindly and meticulously examined Lua's body. Akari got out of the car, and Lua had to fully entrust her body to the mechanic's hands.

First, the engine compartment was opened. As the hood lifted, Lua was overcome with a strange sensation, as if her very heart was being exposed. The mechanic's flashlight beam illuminated every corner of her internal circuits and battery modules. Lua felt the light probing her insides throughout her entire body. It was the sensation of her wire bundles, coolant pipes, and complexly intertwined sensors—all once hidden under covers—being laid bare. Every small vibration from the mechanic touching wires and tightening bolts felt as vivid to Lua as a touch on her skin.

"Battery cell voltage is good, and the coolant is fine."

The mechanic's murmurs were transmitted directly through every part of Lua's body—the car itself. It felt as if someone was reporting on the state of her own blood circulation.

Next was the undercarriage inspection. Lua was lifted onto a hoist, her body floating in the air. The mechanic crawled underneath and began to inspect her underside. The dull thud of tapping the suspension, the feeling of fingers rubbing to check brake pad wear, and the subtle tremor of shaking the driveshaft to check for play—everything was felt directly through Lua's senses. It was the first time her underside had been examined in such detail.

The most sensitive moment was when the diagnostic device was connected. The mechanic plugged a cable into Lua's charging port and checked numerous data points on a laptop. Lua felt the sensation of being directly connected to the mechanic's device through her communication circuits—her nervous system, so to speak. It was a subtly ticklish and vulnerable sensation, as if all her electronic signals and sensor information were flowing outward, completely unfiltered.

"No issues! It's very clean. Looks like you've been taking good care of it!"

As the mechanic finished speaking, Lua descended from the hoist and touched the ground again. A sense of relief finally washed over her as the external touch that had meticulously examined her body disappeared. Though brief, the experience of having her deepest self revealed to another was a fresh shock for Lua. At the same time, it was a chance to realize once again just how intricate and perfect the body created by her transformation ability truly was.

Akari climbed into Lua's inspected body, and Lua left the repair shop to return to the quiet embrace of the shrine. The experience of being scrutinized to her very core was unfamiliar, but Lua prepared for her next transformation, considering this, too, a part of understanding the ways of the world.^[4:1]

...

Izumi now perfectly understood the special quality of her small body. While the fact that she would live forever as a little girl sometimes brought a faint sense of regret, she realized it also allowed her to perform more delicate and precise transformations. After ten years of shrine life, Izumi began to contribute in ways no one else could, all thanks to her small body.

The wooden floor of the shrine's main hall was wide, and fine dust often accumulated in the cracks of the old timber. It was a time-consuming task for the maidens to clean themselves. One day, seeing this, Izumi had an idea.

"I'll clean it for you!"

With those words, Izumi glowed and transformed. Her small body became a round, flat robotic vacuum cleaner. Small brushes were attached to its main body, and a faint whirring sound emanated from its suction port. Izumi expertly zipped across the shrine floor, sucking up dust. Using the sensors in her body, she accurately navigated into corners and under furniture, not missing even the finest dust in the floor's cracks.

"Wow, the floor is sparkling thanks to Izumi!"

Lua exclaimed, admiring the spot where the robotic-vacuum-Izumi had passed. After finishing, Izumi returned to her original form and smiled brightly. "How was that? Because I'm small, I can get into every nook and cranny!" Thanks to her efforts, the shrine floor was always kept spotlessly clean.

Meanwhile, because the shrine was old, the small, cherished items used by the maidens would often go missing. Small accessories and needles, in particular, were easily lost and often couldn't be found no matter how hard they searched.

One day, a small gem from Akari's cherished hair ornament fell off and disappeared. Everyone searched for it desperately, but it was nowhere to be found. That's when Izumi stepped forward.

"I'll look for it!"

Izumi transformed her body into a high-powered magnifying glass. Her body became a transparent glass lens with a handle, her vision magnified dozens of times. In her magnifying glass form, Izumi meticulously scoured the floor's tiny cracks and the dust within them, aiming to find fragments too small for the naked eye.

While magnifying a minuscule crack in the floorboards, Izumi soon spotted something faintly glittering.

"It's here! Akari's hair ornament gem!"

At Izumi's cry, the other maidens gathered around in surprise. There, in the spot Izumi indicated, was the tiny gem, buried in the dust. Thanks to Izumi's help, the precious lost item was found again.

Most of the shrine's belongings were old and frequently needed small repairs. Tasks requiring the tightening of tiny screws, like those in delicate clocks or complex locks, were difficult even for the maidens.

Aki was trying to repair a broken grandfather clock. A small screw was set too deep to be reached with a regular screwdriver. That's when Izumi approached.

"Aki-san, may I help?"

Without hesitation, Izumi transformed her body into a precision screwdriver. Her small body became a thin, sharp screwdriver bit, while the handle part reshaped to allow for precise rotation. Held in Aki's hand, Izumi moved like a perfect tool. Her body found the tiny screw head, fit into it perfectly, and rotated with delicate precision, tightening the wobbly screw completely.

"Amazing, Izumi! The repair was so much easier thanks to you."

Aki marveled at Izumi's precise transformation ability. Even with her small body, Izumi was growing into an indispensable presence at the shrine. As an eternal little girl, she had become a precious maiden, vital to every corner of the shrine wherever a delicate task was needed.^[4:2]

...

In the deepest part of the shrine, the Great Maiden's abode was always filled with a mysterious aura. Lua, Shizuku, Akari, and Izumi sat before the Great Maiden, listening to her story. Today, she was telling them of the time she first became a maiden. Her avatar closed her eyes, seemingly reminiscing about the distant past.

"My story is quite different from the world you know. It is a tale from a distant time, an era that was called the Age of Myths."

The Great Maiden's voice was soft, yet it held a grandeur that seemed to contain millennia.

"Back then, the world was not as orderly as it is now. The boundary between the heavens and the earth was blurred; it was an age of chaos where humans, gods, and all other beings lived intermingled. I was an ordinary human child then. But I was a little different from the others. I could feel the sounds of the world, the whispers of the wind, and the vibrations of the earth far more clearly than anyone else."

She paused, her gaze lost in the distance.

"One day, a great catastrophe struck the world. Ceaseless rains poured from the sky, threatening to swallow the land, and tremors that seemed to tear everything apart shook the earth without end. People trembled in fear, and the gods, vying for power against one another, only fueled the chaos. Amidst all that pandemonium, watching the world spiral toward ruin, I fell into a deep sorrow."

"I prayed desperately. For an end to the chaos, for the salvation of all life. My prayers continued day and night, and my earnest pleas must have reached the heavens, for at one moment, a great pillar of light descended upon me."

A flicker of the awe she felt then crossed the Great Maiden's face.

"Within that light, I came to understand all the knowledge of the world and the principles of creation. My physical body was reborn by the light, and I felt myself connect to the fundamental power of the world. I became a being who no longer felt cold, hunger, or the fear of death. And then, a powerful voice echoed within me."

The Great Maiden cleared her throat.

"'You are the one who shall keep the balance of the world. Your body will be the bridge that connects this world and the gods, and your existence shall forever protect this land.' That voice gave me the power to create a boundary, and within it, the ability to transcend the limits of matter. I accepted the will of the Divine and built the first shrine here in these mountains."

She quietly opened her eyes.

"And so, I became the first maiden of the shrine, and a part of my body became this very building. I hide the fact that I am the building and use an avatar to meet you all because, in the Age of Myths, a being like me becoming the shrine itself was a way to connect with the world and prevent chaos. In a way, my very existence became a testament to the harmony between the Divine, humans, and the world."

The maidens held their breath at the Great Maiden's story. They realized that the shrine where they lived had its origins in such a grand and mysterious beginning, born from the Age of Myths. The Great Maiden was not merely a maiden; she was living history, an eternal being carrying out the will of the Divine.^[4:3]

...

Clutching the Great Maiden's letter, Lua quickened her pace. Unlike their own shrine, which transcended the limits of matter, this destination was mysterious in a different way: it was a place that transcended the limits of time, where beings who perceived the past and future

simultaneously resided. The Great Maiden had once explained that the maidens there saw "all of time spread out like a single landscape painting."

Akari sat in the driver's seat of the electric car that was Lua, wearing clothes that were a transformed Shizuku. Izumi sat in the passenger seat, watching the passing scenery with eyes full of curiosity. This visit was more than a simple exchange; it was an important ritual between the shrines.

The Shrine of Time was nestled deep in the mountains beside a mist-shrouded lake. As they neared the entrance, Lua's body—the car—felt a subtle tremor. A strange sensation, as if time itself were expanding and contracting, enveloped her. Lua's avatar took a deep breath and stepped out of the car.

The shrine gates opened, and a group of maidens welcomed them. Their eyes were deep and distant, their gaze profound, as if memories of the past and visions of the future were mingled within. Like the maidens of their own shrine, they never aged, but their very existence seemed to stand outside the flow of time.

Lua handed over the Great Maiden's letter. The maiden who received it nodded as if she already knew its contents without opening the envelope.

"Welcome, guardians of the material boundary. We have already received the Great Maiden's message."

Lua could not hide her surprise at the maiden's words. They truly seemed to perceive all of time at once.

Lua, Akari, and Izumi were guided inside the shrine. While their own shrine's building was the Great Maiden's body, the buildings here possessed a stillness, as if the flow of time itself had stopped within them. In the corridors, one could almost imagine seeing faint shadows of the past overlapping with afterimages of the future.

They came face to face with the head of this shrine, the 'Temporal Guardian.' The Temporal Guardian, with an androgynous face that was neither old nor young, welcomed them.

"What you seek to know is the future, I presume. However, the flow of time cannot be altered carelessly, and to reveal everything would only invite chaos."

The Temporal Guardian spoke softly.

"We can see all that the future holds, but we can only convey what is necessary, when it is necessary. For just as your shrine's secrets must be protected, our foresight is also the will of the Divine and must be guarded."

After a moment's hesitation, Lua asked carefully.

"Is there... any great danger approaching our shrine in the future?"

The Temporal Guardian fell silent. Her gaze seemed to fix upon the far reaches of time. Then she answered briefly.

"A period of great turmoil is approaching. A time will come when your shrine's abilities will be tested. But... I cannot tell you when. I can only say that you have sufficient time to prepare."

The answer was clear, yet limited. Lua was disappointed but understood. Just as her own shrine forbade entry to outsiders to protect its secrets, this place, too, must have its own strict rules to protect the flow of time.

Nevertheless, Lua found hope. Even if she could not prevent the coming danger, the fact that they had time to prepare for it was a great comfort. After receiving a reply to the Great Maiden's letter, Lua left the Shrine of Time and returned home. Their bodies transcended the limits of matter, but now they carried a new burden: to perceive and prepare for the approaching future within the flow of time.^[4:4]

...

The Shrine of Time, as its name suggested, was a place that transcended the constraints of time. Its maidens lived perceiving the past, present, and future simultaneously. Their daily lives appeared serene on the surface, but they followed a unique rhythm where all moments of space and time were interwoven.

Mirai, one of the young-looking maidens, but her gaze seemed to see into the distant future. One day, as Mirai was tending to herbs in the shrine garden, a hazy vision of the future flashed before her eyes: she saw herself over-drying the herbs, diminishing their potency.

"Ah, I must remember to keep the herbs in a cool place tomorrow," Mirai murmured.

Kako, a veteran maiden watching nearby, smiled. "Avoiding tomorrow's mistakes already, are we? As someone who has repeated that same mistake in the past, I must say I'm envious."

Kako could not see Mirai's future, but from her reaction, she knew Mirai had perceived it. In this way, the temporal maidens didn't share their visions directly but would read and react to the flow of the future through small, everyday actions. Learning from yesterday's mistakes and applying tomorrow's wisdom was simply a part of their daily life.

In the shrine's kitchen, peculiar conversations were common. Shiori, the maiden in charge of the kitchen, always cooked with fresh ingredients, but her meal plans were driven by more than just present needs.

"Hmm... the guests arriving in three days prefer meat. I should start marinating it now," Shiori would say to herself, trimming a cut of meat with a translucent blade. She planned meals for guests who had not yet been invited, or whose invitations were not even confirmed. Days before Lua's party visited, Shiori had already foreseen their arrival and their preferred type of tea, and had made preparations.

"Shiori-san, will we be having fish for dinner tonight? I can see my future self enjoying delicious steamed fish!" a curious young maiden named Chie asked as she ran into the kitchen.

Shiori smiled faintly. "Well, if your future memory says so, then of course I must prepare for it."

Occasionally, there was communication with the outside world—delivering a letter from the distant future to the present, or sending one into the past. These were extremely rare events, however, and were only undertaken when absolutely necessary.

One day, in the deepest part of the Shrine of Time, Ritsu, a maiden who recorded knowledge of time, was unrolling an ancient scroll. Faint letters appeared before her eyes: an urgent message recorded by a scholar hundreds of years in the future, when a great catastrophe had struck the world.

"This letter must have been delivered to humanity 300 years in the past. It speaks of the need for specific plant seeds. And the senders... were the shrine maidens of the future."

Ritsu rose quietly. She grasped the letter's contents and identified the most appropriate moment to send it. This wasn't changing the past. It was simply perceiving and acting on a duty in the past, based on a need from a future that had already happened.

Thus, the maidens of the Shrine of Time lived their intertwined days of past, present, and future, serving to maintain the harmonious flow of time. They were the unseen guardians, preserving the temporal balance of the world.^[4:5]

...

Returning from the Shrine of Time, Lua, Akari, and Izumi headed for the Great Maiden's abode. Shizuku had transformed back into Lua's clothes, and Izumi followed quietly, holding Akari's hand. The Great Maiden, as if she had been expecting them, was waiting with warm tea prepared.

"Welcome back. How was the Shrine of Time?"

To the Great Maiden's question, Lua replied calmly,

"It was astonishing, Great Maiden. The maidens there truly seem to perceive all of time at once. They knew everything before we even arrived. But they would only speak of the future in a limited way."

The Great Maiden nodded at Lua's words.

"That is the most important secret and principle the Shrine of Time must uphold. Just as your shrine possesses the ability to cross material boundaries, they have the duty of guarding the flow of time. Revealing too much of the future can damage the order of time and bring about chaos."

The Great Maiden took a sip of tea and continued her explanation.

"The temporal maidens do not transform into specific forms as you do. They are beings who are themselves assimilated with the very pulse of time. They exist in every 'moment.' Past memories, present sensations, and future premonitions continuously intersect and flow within their consciousness."

Akari asked cautiously, "Then... they can't create physical objects like we can?"

"That is correct. They do not possess the ability to manipulate matter. Instead, their bodies carry the very traces of time. For instance, they might speak ancient knowledge while in the body of a newborn, or accurately foresee the events of the next moment while in the body of an elder. Their physical forms are like vessels that reflect the flow of time."

Izumi's eyes sparkled with wonder. "Then do they know what we're thinking right now?"

The Great Maiden smiled gently at Izumi. "It's easier to think of it this way: they don't read your 'thoughts,' but rather see the 'future results' your thoughts will create. For them, every chain of cause and effect is already laid out like a single, predetermined painting."

"You, the corporeal maidens, and the temporal maidens uphold the will of the Divine in different ways. You are beings who maintain the material balance of the world and fulfill the needs of the physical realm, while they are beings who protect the order of time and the flow of

history. Though you have different abilities, your ultimate goal is the same: to maintain the harmony of this world and to uphold the will of the Divine."

The Great Maiden looked at Lua, Akari, and Izumi with a warm gaze.

"Just as you have deepened your understanding of the Shrine of Time through this visit, they too will one day come to understand your shrine's abilities more deeply. In the coming period of great turmoil, the powers of your two shrines may need to join together. That is why it is so important to understand and respect one another."

Lua nodded. The visit to the Shrine of Time had given her a new perspective. It was a chance to be reminded that her ability was not merely for convenience but played a vital role in maintaining the world's balance. And with a vague premonition of the 'period of great turmoil' on the horizon, she came to cherish her own shrine, and the other maidens, more deeply than ever.^[4:6]

V. Lovers' Reunion

In the heart of the city, the rush-hour roads were choked with traffic. Hasegawa Sayuri, gripping the steering wheel with a tired expression, turned up the radio volume in frustration. She had once been a promising reporter at a prominent newspaper, but now she was exhausted by the mundane routine of a news drought. Amid the bustling city lights, Sayuri suddenly recalled her old girlfriend, Suzuki Yui, who had vanished 10 years ago. Yui had disappeared without a trace, leaving a deep wound in Sayuri's heart.

It was then that Sayuri's gaze fell upon a black electric car stopped in the adjacent lane. It had a sleek, well-designed body, and there was a woman sitting in the driver's seat...

"Y-Yui?"

The name instinctively escaped Sayuri's lips. The woman in the driver's seat had an all-too-familiar face. It was the exact same face from when she had left Sayuri 10 years ago. Her eyes were youthful yet clear, as if she hadn't aged a day. There was no way she could look exactly as she used to. Could it be someone who just looked uncannily like her?

Sayuri quickly rubbed her eyes and stared again at the car in the next lane. Yui's form was still sitting there. She moved her head slightly, as if checking the rearview mirror. That familiar motion made Sayuri's heart pound even harder.

'It's impossible... I'm just hallucinating because I'm so tired.'

Sayuri tried to calm herself, rationalizing that it must be an illusion created by her stressful life and unfulfilled heart. But the image before her was too vivid. The neat white blouse Yui wore, the thin scarf around her neck—everything was as clear as if she had seen it only yesterday.

Just then, the car ahead began to inch forward, and the electric car carrying Yui also started to move. Sayuri unconsciously pressed the accelerator, following it. Her mind was a mess of confusion. If this was real, it was inexplicable; if it was a hallucination, it couldn't be this lucid.

Sayuri blankly followed the car until it rounded a corner and vanished from sight. Her heart still hadn't calmed. 'If I wasn't seeing things... then what in the world was that...?' Gripping the steering wheel tightly, Sayuri fell into deep thought over the unbelievable scene. It was a moment when the line between reality and the surreal began to blur.^[5:1]

...

A few days later, determined to make the unbelievable reunion a reality and not just a dream, Sayuri went searching for the electric car again. Recalling the license plate number she had memorized just in case, she wandered through city parking lots until a familiar black car caught her eye. It was parked neatly in a small shopping district's lot at the mouth of a quiet alley.

Sayuri's heart pounded again. And in the driver's seat sat the very same Yui, not aged at all, staring blankly ahead. Lua—that is, Yui—had been inwardly nervous, wondering if Sayuri had recognized her during their last encounter. She was currently waiting for the other maidens who were grocery shopping. As an avatar who couldn't stray far from her main body—the car—she had no choice but to sit perfectly still.

Sayuri cautiously approached and tapped on the window.

"Yui-chan...?"

Lua felt her heart sink. This was unavoidable. She, the avatar, could not leave the car, and Sayuri had clearly recognized her. Lua slowly rolled down the window. With the cool air, Sayuri's shocked face came into view.

"You... are you really Yui-chan? What happened? You just disappeared 10 years ago... Why do you look the same? How...."

Sayuri's voice trembled, her eyes a mix of confusion, longing, and disbelief. Lua fought to keep her expression calm, but the sight of her old girlfriend after ten years shook her to the core. There was no denying it anymore.

Lua let out a soft sigh and nodded.

"Yes, Hasegawa-san. It's me, Suzuki Yui."

At those words, Sayuri's eyes reddened. She reached out and gently stroked Lua's cheek, a gesture to confirm her existence, as if still in disbelief. The warmth of her skin felt all too real.

"It's really... really you... I looked for you everywhere... What happened to you? What was it?"

Sayuri sobbed out her questions, but Lua could offer no answer. The secrets of the shrine could not be spoken. It was a terrible dilemma: she couldn't tell the truth, nor could she simply disappear again. A bitter expression crossed Lua's face.

From Lua's silence, Sayuri seemed to sense that something extraordinary had occurred. For now, however, rather than demanding reasons, she was overcome with emotion at the simple fact that the person before her was Yui. Spanning the 10-year gap, their reunion began.^[5:2]

...

The hot summer sun beat down on the asphalt. Faced with Yui after 10 years, Sayuri stood there blankly, a mixture of bewilderment and joy on her face. Reading Sayuri's complex expression, Lua felt a pang of pity. The fact that she couldn't reveal the shrine's secrets was stifling.

"Hasegawa-san, please get in the car. It's too hot out here."

Through her avatar, Lua opened the passenger-side door. Sayuri hesitated for a moment before climbing inside. The cool air from the air conditioner brushed against her flushed cheeks. Lua's avatar sat quietly in the driver's seat, watching Sayuri.

"I can't tell you everything that happened. But... I'm a shrine maiden now."

Lua began cautiously. Sayuri's eyes widened. The word 'maiden' was something far beyond her imagination.

"A maiden? What does that mean? And... Why haven't you aged a day? You look exactly the same as you did 10 years ago!"

Lua answered Sayuri's questions with forced calm.

"I don't know the details myself... but I think my growth stopped when I became a maiden. That's why I still look like this."

Lua turned her gaze out the passenger window.

"I'm waiting for the other maidens to come back from shopping at that store. That's why I was sitting here."

Sayuri couldn't fully comprehend Lua's explanation, but she sensed it wasn't a lie. The somehow transcendent look in Lua's eyes was proof. A more pressing thought occurred to Sayuri.

"Your parents... have you seen them? They were so worried when you disappeared...."

Lua nodded.

"Yes, I see them about once every few years. Thankfully, they're a little more at ease now."

At Lua's words, Sayuri finally let out a sigh. She felt a sense of relief; at least Lua wasn't living all alone, having cut off contact with her family. Sayuri took Lua's hand, trying to piece together a faint picture of the last 10 years.

"What about you, Hasegawa-san?" Lua asked. "What are you doing now? Are you a student? Or... something else?"

At Lua's question, Sayuri gave a short laugh, trying to hide her complicated feelings.

"I'm working as a reporter. Chasing deadlines, running around for scoops... you know, the life of a typical office worker."

A hint of weariness tinged Sayuri's voice. It was a moment when they both recognized how starkly different their lives had become. Ten years ago, they were both students; now, they were worlds apart. A short silence fell over the car.^[5:3]

...

In the cool air of the electric car that was Lua, Sayuri looked around the interior as the awkward silence lingered. It had a clean, futuristic design, a digital dashboard, and an infotainment system packed with the latest technology. It was, without a doubt, a top-of-the-line sedan.

"This car... is nice. Looks like the latest model. I have to say, a maiden driving a car like this is a little unexpected."

Sayuri spoke cautiously. Her mind was still reeling from the word 'maiden', but the fact that this car belonged to Yui seemed concrete.

Lua couldn't hide her delight at the compliment. Being praised for her body was always pleasant. Through her main body—the car—she began explaining, her voice full of pride.

"Yes, it's a model with a lot of new tech. The battery efficiency is incredible, so long distances are no problem on a single charge. It also supports fast charging, so you can get a lot of power in a short time."

"Most importantly," she continued, "the autonomous driving function is nearly perfect. It has sensors all around for a 360-degree view, and it can react to unexpected situations on its own. It really reduces driver fatigue. The air purification system is also excellent, and the audio system is..."

Lua enthusiastically launched into a detailed explanation of her 'body'. She naturally concealed the fact that she was the car, rattling off features and benefits like an automotive expert. From charging methods to motor output, suspension types, and even the characteristics of the interior materials, it was almost too much for Sayuri to follow.

At first, Sayuri was a little taken aback by Yui's unexpected expertise. Amid the shock of the reunion and the mysterious 'maiden' backstory, a small fear had taken root that Yui had become a completely different person. But as she listened to the nonstop explanation, a faint smile touched Sayuri's lips.

'This is Yui-chan after all. She hasn't changed.'

Back in school, Yui had always been a chatterbox. Whenever she found a new interest, she would study it for nights on end and then endlessly explain it to her friends. This was that exact same person. She hadn't aged, but her essence was the same. Sayuri finally felt a true sense of relief. Her tangled thoughts began to clear. Though she was still shrouded in mystery, the person before her was, without a doubt, the 'Yui' she knew.^[5:4]

...

A short while later, the maidens emerged from the store with their groceries. Akari, her hands full of bags, approached the car with Izumi. Opening the door and seeing Sayuri, Akari looked slightly surprised, but then, as if she'd received a telepathic message from Lua, she smiled naturally.

"Welcome."

Following Akari's light greeting, Izumi also peered at Sayuri with curious eyes. Sayuri gave an awkward nod in reply. The maidens skillfully loaded their things and got in the car. Izumi sat in the passenger seat, staring intently at Sayuri. Lua gave Akari a knowing look, and Akari nodded gently.

"We'll be on our way now," Akari said.

At that, Lua gave Sayuri a brief smile. "Goodbye, Hasegawa-san. I'll see you... again."

It was a short meeting and an awkward farewell. The electric car that was Lua's body pulled smoothly out of the parking lot and disappeared down the alley. Sayuri stood there blankly, watching until the car was completely out of sight.

After the car was gone, a storm of emotions churned within Sayuri. Yui, found again after 10 years, looking as if time had stopped. The fact that she was now some unknown being called a 'maiden', driving a strange car, and living with other young girls. It was all a mystery.

'What kind of shrine is that? And what on earth is this "maiden" thing Yui mentioned?'

Sayuri's mind was flooded with questions. Her reporter's instincts kicked in, and she felt an overwhelming urge to uncover everything. The 10-year gap in Yui's life and the secrets she now held endlessly fueled Sayuri's curiosity.

And yet, at the same time, a wave of relief washed over her. For ten years, Sayuri had been consumed with worry, always wondering if something terrible had happened to Yui. But the Yui she met today, despite her bizarre circumstances, looked healthy and happy. Hearing that she still saw her parents was a huge weight off her chest.

'Still... I'm glad she seems to be doing well.'

Caught between relief and deepening mystery, Sayuri walked to her own car. It felt as though the biggest and most difficult 'scoop' of her career had just landed in her lap. Hoping for the day she could unravel it all, Sayuri returned to the reality of her life. But her heart was already captivated by the mysterious world of the maidens.^[5:5]

...

After returning to the shrine, Lua exited her car-body and reverted to her human form. She went straight to the Great Maiden's chambers. The Great Maiden was sitting in her usual quiet state, but Lua sensed in her gaze a depth that saw through everything.

"Welcome back, Lua. Your handling of the situation today was very wise."

Lua was slightly startled by the praise. She had intended to report the reunion, of course, but the Great Maiden seemed to know everything already. Lua's cheeks flushed slightly at the thought that the Great Maiden might have even sensed the complex mix of emotions that had crossed her face.

"About the child, Sayuri," the Great Maiden continued in a gentle voice. "Though she cannot become a maiden, she will one day be of great help to our shrine. So do not worry, and continue to foster your connection with her."

Lua's eyes widened. The idea that Sayuri would help the shrine was completely unexpected. Sayuri was an ordinary human, a reporter who might even try to expose their secrets. Yet the Great Maiden was bestowing upon her the title of a future 'ally'.

Lua asked cautiously, "Great Maiden... was this information also... from the Shrine of Time?"

The Great Maiden gave no reply. Instead, a faint smile spread across her lips—a smile that held the mystery of a being who knows all but cannot say all.

"Perhaps," was all she said.

The Great Maiden offered no further explanation. Lua tried to find an answer in her smile but could not fathom its deep meaning. One thing, however, was certain: the Great Maiden's words always came to pass.

Leaving the chambers, Lua thought of Sayuri again. She had no idea how a reporter could possibly help the shrine. But she held on to the Great Maiden's words, and a vague premonition formed within her: that in the coming 'period of great turmoil', Sayuri would play an important role. The future was a mystery, but Lua readied herself for whatever was to come.^[5:6]

...

The reunion with Yui ignited Sayuri's reporter instincts. She could no longer write this off as coincidence or hallucination. First, she had to identify the electric car Yui was driving.

Using the license plate number and model name she had memorized, Sayuri began her investigation. She mobilized her network and information-gathering skills to look up the vehicle's registration. It was an unofficial channel, and she trod carefully, but her professional ethics demanded she get to the bottom of this mystery.

A few days later, she held the documents. Taking a breath, she reviewed the information. The make, model, and even the vehicle identification number were a perfect match. But her eyes froze on the 'Initial Registration Date' field.

Initial Registration Date: 13 years and 8 months ago.

Sayuri's brow furrowed. She was certain the car Yui was driving was a late-model electric vehicle. She knew for a fact that the model had been released three years ago at the earliest—a detail she had double-checked with a friend who was an auto journalist.

'Impossible... This model is only three years old, but it was registered over thirteen years ago?'

She scanned the document again. Model name, manufacturer, production year, initial registration date... everything was printed perfectly. But logically, the information was full of contradictions. The car's model didn't even exist 13 years ago.

She checked the owner's information. It simply read, 'Access restricted under the Personal Information Protection Act.' However, the owner at the time of the initial registration was clearly listed as 'Suzuki Yui'. That part, at least, matched.

Sayuri's mind was racing.

'Is the registration data wrong? Or... was this car registered in some special way? Or was Yui, even back then...?'

She shook her head. The idea of a car existing in a 'different' form for over a decade and then suddenly 'transforming' into a new model was unthinkable. Nowhere in the records was there any note of a 'change in vehicle type' or 'model update'. It was as if this car had existed, exactly as it was now, for more than 13 years.

For Sayuri, a reporter who had spent her life pursuing facts based on reason and logic, it was a moment where her entire worldview was shaken to its core. Her gut told her this wasn't a simple clerical error but was tied to a colossal secret, something beyond imagination. Yui, the shrine, and this car that seemed to defy time... all the jumbled pieces were leading her deeper into a labyrinth.^[5:7]

...

With the documents in hand, Sayuri felt a splitting headache. The car registration information, which defied all common sense, seemed to paralyze her reason. The contradiction of a 'latest model electric car registered 13 years ago' revolved in her mind, tormenting her. It felt as if the boundary between reality and the surreal was collapsing.

Out of frustration, Sayuri drove to the riverside late at night. City lights stretched long across the dark river. A cool river breeze came through the car window, but her mind was still in utter chaos. She gripped the steering wheel tightly, retracing their last encounter.

Yui looked exactly the same as she had 10 years ago. And the electric car she was driving (or riding in) was definitely the latest model. But the registration record was over 10 years old. How could all these contradictions be explained?

Numerous hypotheses flashed through her mind. A misconception, manipulated information, a disguised identity... but none of them fit perfectly. It was then. Like a streetlight illuminating the river, an idea flashed into Sayuri's mind.

'What if... that car was created anew each time it's needed?'

At that moment, all the puzzle pieces seemed to fall into place.

If one assumed that Yui brought the 'same' car with her each time, but that car wasn't a fixed entity but was newly created whenever needed, it would explain why a model released only three years ago could appear to have been registered thirteen years ago. What if someone had secured the registration information for a specific vehicle 13 years prior, and then 'created' the latest model of the same car to match that information whenever it was required?

This hypothesis also seemed to offer a clue as to why Yui hadn't aged in ten years. If she wasn't an ordinary human but a being who could 'create' things, couldn't she herself be free from the constraints of time?

Sayuri's heart began to pound violently again. This was not merely a logical deduction. It was speculation about almost supernatural abilities, far beyond the bounds of her common sense. Combined with the word 'maiden' Yui had mentioned, Sayuri had a gut feeling that they were not simply maidens in a religious sense. They were possibly beings who could create or transform things, possessing powers far beyond those of ordinary humans.

By the dark riverside, Sayuri confronted the most surreal possibility she could imagine. The headache vanished, and in its place, a thrill shot down her spine. It felt as if she had just found the key to unlock all these mysteries. It was a moment of stepping one step closer to Yui and the secret of that shrine.^[5:8]

...

A few days later, the Great Maiden summoned Lua.

"Lua, you look so worried these days. Why don't you go for a drive to clear your head?"

At the Great Maiden's words, Lua thought of Sayuri. A flicker of anxiety—"What if I run into her again?"—crossed her mind, but she couldn't defy the Great Maiden's will. Lua transformed her body into the latest model electric car and placed her avatar in the driver's seat.

Sure enough, not long after she entered the city, a familiar face came into view. It was Sayuri. Holding a small camera, she was inspecting something among the parked cars. The moment she spotted Lua's car, Sayuri's eyes lit up. She quickly approached and tapped on the car window.

Lua rolled down the window, forcing a neutral expression onto her face.

"Hasegawa-san, why are you doing this again? I'm not some celebrity you can just stalk."

Lua waved her hands dismissively, but Sayuri was unfazed.

"I have my reasons. Anyway, it looks like you were heading out for a drive. Mind if I come along?"

Lua was troubled by Sayuri's suggestion, but she had no good reason to refuse. In the end, she let Sayuri into the passenger seat.

The car left the city and began cruising down a quiet suburban road. Sayuri stared intently at Lua's avatar. Her face wore a look of sheer determination.

"Yui-chan, I looked up your car's registration information the other day. It makes no sense. This car is clearly the latest model, but it was registered over ten years ago. So I started thinking... is what you do at your shrine... creating things at will?"

At Sayuri's direct question, Lua flinched. She realized she had been far too careless, always transforming into the latest model. Deciding it was impossible to avoid the subject any longer, Lua took a deep breath.

"Hasegawa-san... what I'm about to tell you... you'll find it hard to believe. But... it's the truth."

Lua continued, her voice soft but resolute.

"We are... maidens. And we can do more than just create objects... we can become the objects themselves."

Sayuri's eyes widened. She struggled to comprehend Lua's words, her mind a total jumble of confusion.

"Become the objects yourselves? What do you mean, Yui-chan? This car you're in right now... you created it?"

Lua shook her head. Disbelief was written all over Sayuri's face. Lua decided it would be faster to show her rather than try to explain. Just then, the battery gauge on the dashboard began to blink red.

"No, Hasegawa-san. I didn't create this car. This very car you are sitting in... it's me. And the 'me' sitting here in the driver's seat... is my avatar."

Astonishment washed over Sayuri's face. She pressed her lips together, speechless. Her former girlfriend was telling her an unbelievable story right before her eyes.

"You don't believe me, do you? I'll show you. Besides, the battery is running low."

Lua pulled into a drive-thru burger joint they happened upon. She ordered a burger and cola set and, a moment later, was handed the warm food. Lua's avatar casually took a delicious bite of the burger.

That was the moment.

Sayuri's gaze flicked between Lua eating the burger and the battery gauge on the dashboard. The charge level, which should only increase when plugged into a charger, began to climb—slowly but distinctly—with every bite Lua's avatar took. The battery percentage climbed miraculously: 70%, 75%, 80%... and kept rising. There was no charging cable connected. As Lua's avatar took another large bite, the charge level surpassed 90%.

Her eyes wavered. She gasped, her eyes darting between the dashboard and Lua's avatar eating the burger. It was impossible. The miracle unfolding before her was beyond anything she could have imagined.

Once the burger was gone, Lua's avatar contentedly wiped her mouth. The battery gauge now reads 100%. A perfect charge.

"So? Do you believe me now?" Lua's avatar asked with a smile.

Sayuri couldn't speak. A shiver ran through her. A truth more incredible than she could have ever conceived had just played out right in front of her. The world of Sayuri, a reporter who had lived her entire life by reason and logic, shattered. She felt with every fiber of her being that the reality she inhabited was filled with unbelievable mystery, and she was overwhelmed with a mix of shock and awe too profound for words.^[5:9]

...

Witnessing the car's battery fully charge as Lua's avatar ate a burger left Sayuri literally trembling. Even in a state of shock so intense it made the hair on her arms stand up, her mind was working with surprising speed. The astonishing truth: Yui was a 'maiden,' and 'she herself

was the car.' Sayuri knew instinctively that this ability was an immense secret that must never be revealed.

What would happen if this fact became public? Scientists would rush to dissect them; military experts would try to weaponize them. Religious communities would undoubtedly be thrown into chaos, trying to reconcile it with their doctrines. Yui and her fellow maidens would no longer be able to live as ordinary people. Their very lives and existence would be threatened.

Her voice trembling, Sayuri managed to speak.

"Yui-chan... this... this is...."

She couldn't finish her sentence. But Lua read everything in Sayuri's eyes: the shock, the astonishment, and beneath it all, a deep understanding and resolve.

Sayuri soon clenched her fists and said in a firm voice,

"I swear... I'll keep this secret. I'll never... tell anyone."

Her gaze was unwavering. It was more than a simple oath; it was a promise born of her genuine feelings for Yui and her own ethics as a reporter.

Lua was relieved by Sayuri's heartfelt vow. As if the tension had finally broken, her avatar in the driver's seat scratched the back of her head in an embarrassed gesture.

"Thank you, Hasegawa-san. To be honest, I was a bit... flustered that you kept seeking me out."

Lua added with a slight smile,

"I guess from now on... I'll have to be more careful when I transform. I suppose I was a bit too fixated on the latest models."

Her words held a playful jab at Sayuri's relentless pursuit, but also a firm trust that Sayuri now understood the shrine's secret and would protect her. Sayuri chuckled at Lua's comment. Despite having just confronted a truth that could shake the world, Yui's unchanging, down-to-earth reaction helped to lighten her heart.

For Sayuri, Yui was no longer an unsolved puzzle but a steady presence, someone who held her ground no matter the situation. Their relationship had shifted to a completely new dimension, but within it, a deep and unshakable trust was beginning to blossom.^[5:10]

...

At that same moment, at the mailbox installed by the shrine boundary, Hinata, who always patrolled the shrine grounds in her neat maiden robes, opened the postbox. It usually contained nothing more than ordinary village news or seasonal greetings, so she checked the contents out of habit. But just then, her eyes widened at the sight of an envelope in her hand.

It was no worn, rustic piece of mail. The paper was smooth and high-quality. On one side of the envelope, the logo of a massive, city-style building was stamped alongside the sender's name: 'XX Construction Company'. The very fact that a large construction company had sent a letter to this mysterious mountain shrine was a shock to Hinata. Moreover, her intuition told her this letter contained something far more serious than a simple business inquiry.

Clutching the letter, Hinata ran toward the shrine's main hall with all her might, not hesitating for a second. Her face was a mask of surprise mixed with an unidentifiable tension.

The Great Maiden's quarters. Having sensed Hinata's urgent approach, the Great Maiden had already closed her eyes, as if she had anticipated everything. In her consciousness, the contents of the letter from the outside world—and its implications—were already taking vague shape. She was even aware that Lua was creating a point of contact with the world through Sayuri.

'It has begun... The coming period of great turmoil....'

The Great Maiden murmured softly to herself. But then, a faint smile graced her lips.

'But Lua is handling it wisely, so I can rest easy.'

As soon as she reached the Great Maiden, Hinata panted for breath and held out the letter.

"Great Maiden! This... this letter...! From the outside...!"

The Great Maiden opened her eyes and took the letter from Hinata's hand. Her movements were perfectly calm and elegant. As she opened the envelope and began to read, her face was filled with a deep insight and serene tranquility, as if she already knew everything.^[5:11]

VI. Edge of Development

When Lua returned from her drive and greeted the Great Maiden, the Great Maiden motioned for her to sit. The letter Hinata had brought lay on the table before her. As Lua sat, the Great Maiden spoke in a low but firm voice.

"Lua, the great tides of the world have begun to reach our shrine."

Lua saw the Great Maiden's gaze linger on the letter. She instinctively felt this was connected to her meeting with Sayuri and the period of great turmoil she had heard about at the Shrine of Time.

"This is a proposal for a large-scale apartment development in the area."

At the Great Maiden's words, Lua's eyes widened in surprise. Apartment development—the words felt utterly alien to this sacred and tranquil mountain.

"According to the plan, this entire mountain will be transformed into a massive apartment complex. And our shrine... is located right in the center of the development site."

The Great Maiden pointed to a blueprint in the letter. Lua could see for herself that the shrine's location was squarely in the middle of the development plan.

"That's why the construction company contacted us about land compensation."

Lua was confused. "Great Maiden... the shrine is registered as land? But we are spiritual beings, and the shrine is just... like a part of our bodies, isn't it?"

The Great Maiden nodded. "It is. But one must abide by the rules of the world. For the shrine to maintain its existence, it must have a tangible presence within the world's legal framework."

She calmly continued her explanation. "For a very long time, this shrine has been legally registered to a succession of maidens—those who were wise by the world's standards but not yet physically old. Since my own existence as the shrine's true form cannot be revealed, we needed a public face."

Finally, it all made sense to Lua. It was a wise method devised by her predecessors, allowing them to exist within the world's legal system while protecting the shrine's secrets.

"Until now, Shizuku-san has filled that role. However, this matter is likely to escalate beyond simple compensation negotiations. And... you, Lua, are next in line."

At the Great Maiden's words, Lua's heart pounded. After Shizuku, it was her turn to become the shrine's legal owner and face the outside world. The immense responsibility of protecting the shrine from the colossal wave of development weighed heavily on her shoulders.

But at the same time, Lua instinctively knew what she had to do. To protect the shrine from this massive wave, she desperately needed the help of an expert from the outside world—someone who could read and navigate the currents of modern society.

Lua sprang to her feet. The face of one person rose clearly in her mind.

'Hasegawa-san...'

She immediately began rummaging through her pockets, searching for the contact information they had exchanged when she last parted ways with Sayuri.^[6:1]

...

Lua found Sayuri's contact information, but the question now was how to reach her. Just then, Aki, who was standing nearby, seemed to read Lua's mind and sent a telepathic message.

"Lua, I'll help. How about I transform?"

Aki's body glowed, and she morphed into a sleek, state-of-the-art smartphone. Marveling at the perfect transformation, Lua held the phone—Aki's body—in her hand. Sayuri's name appeared clearly on the touch screen. Lua pressed the call button without hesitation.

After a few rings, Sayuri's voice came through.

"Hello?"

Lua calmly began to explain the situation: the apartment development plan, the shrine's land compensation issue, and the fact that she was now responsible for handling it. A desperation to save the shrine was evident in her voice.

Sayuri held her breath as she listened. The events of the past flashed through her mind like a panorama: the sudden goodbye ten years ago, Lua transforming into a car, the incredible powers she had witnessed. And now, she felt in her gut that all of it had been leading to this very moment.

'So... the Great Maiden brought Yui-chan and me together again for a reason. Perhaps... for this very moment.'

A strange thrill and an ineffable sense of mystery washed over her. She realized her presence here wasn't mere coincidence; she was placed within a great current of destiny. Yui's disappearance and their reunion—everything was connected, leading to now.

"Yui-chan... I get it. Why you disappeared, and why you still look the same... it all makes sense now."

Sayuri's voice trembled, but it held a firm resolve.

"I swear, I will keep your secret. And as for this... I will do everything in my power to help. Just tell me what you need."

Lua felt a wave of relief at Sayuri's sincere words. She sent a telepathic thank you to Aki. The Great Maiden's prediction that Sayuri would become a crucial ally to the shrine was coming true.

...

This wasn't a problem that could be solved by simply refusing compensation. The large construction company would surely mobilize its vast capital and legal teams to pressure the shrine. To win this fight, they had to find their opponent's weakness—their 'Achilles' heel'.

Under the Great Maiden's direction, the maidens began using their unique abilities to uncover the construction company's corruption.

Miho scoured every ancient text and document in the shrine's library, searching for historical precedents and legal loopholes. She became the bookshelf itself, rapidly extracting knowledge from the flow of countless pieces of information.

Aki reverted from her smartphone form to her native electronic form and connected to the world's complex networks. She began investigating the company's financials, past projects, and illegal activities. From financial statements and contracts to unofficial information on key personnel, her abilities combed through every byte of data in the digital world.

Izumi, being the smallest, prepared to infiltrate secure locations by transforming into a data storage device or memory card, completely unseen. She could slip through the tiniest cracks to acquire the data they needed.

Lua, in turn, gathered external information through her contact with Sayuri and began to coordinate the findings of the maidens, assembling the complete picture. The corporeal maidens had mobilized their full power, beginning an invisible war. The prelude to a colossal battle for the shrine's very existence had begun.^[6:2]

As the maidens' investigation progressed, the ugly truths hidden behind the glamorous facade of 'XX Construction Company' came to light. Thanks to Aki's all-encompassing digital search and Izumi's stealthy information retrieval, the company's internal affairs were laid bare.

The financial statements Aki uncovered were shocking. XX Construction appeared to have grown remarkably over the past few years, but it was a dangerous gamble built on reckless project bids and excessive borrowing. They had expanded by winning large-scale national and international projects, but their profitability was in a nosedive due to unexpected rises in raw material costs and construction delays.

It was a cycle of debt. The company's cash flow had long since dried up, and it was barely staying afloat on bank loans and private bonds. Its financial health was beyond critical; it was teetering on the verge of bankruptcy.

"Their books are cooked to look good, but in reality, their equity has been almost entirely wiped out. One bad quarter and they could go under," Aki's telepathic report was clinical.

This forest apartment development was their desperate, last-ditch effort to hit the jackpot. It was an attempt to erase their massive debts and revive the company. The shrine was their last lifeline.

Financial desperation had led them to resort to dirty tactics. The information the maidens uncovered went beyond financial mismanagement; the company was mired in various illegal activities.

First were the unfair practices against their subcontractors. They would win bids with absurdly low prices, then pass the costs onto subcontractors and delay payments to secure a profit. Countless smaller firms had been pushed to the brink of bankruptcy as a result.

Furthermore, their violation of environmental laws was severe. The maidens found evidence of illegal waste dumping, pollutant discharge, and even attempts to manipulate environmental impact assessments—all desperate measures to cut costs.

The internal documents Izumi secretly acquired revealed something even more shocking: records of large bribes paid to public officials for permits and illegal donations to politicians. There were also traces of collusion to monopolize certain projects. They cast a dark shadow, shamelessly trampling law and ethics for their own gain.

A grim determination settled on the faces of the maidens as they reviewed the information. Their opponent was a reputable corporation on the surface, but it was rotten to the core. As long as they held this colossal secret, there was definitely a way to protect the shrine.^[6:3]

...

Holding the information from the shrine, Sayuri's heart pounded in her chest. This was more than a scoop. This was a righteous battle that fueled her mission as a journalist—to expose the corruption of a corporate giant and help the oppressed. She cut back on sleep, analyzing the data and writing her story. She dug into the hidden meaning of the financial statements from Aki, traced the money in the bribery ledger from Izumi, and used the legal precedents from Miho as the core of her article.

Finally, Sayuri's story was published.

[Exclusive] XX Construction's 'Golden Goose' Forest Development Hides Mountains of Debt, Allegations of Corruption

- Exposé on Reckless 'All-or-Nothing' Gamble Amidst Bankruptcy Crisis

- Squeezing Subcontractors, Environmental Violations, Evidence of High-Level Bribery... 'Dark Connection' Allegations Explode

The article had an explosive impact. Sayuri hadn't just reported on a single plot of land; she had exposed a massive knot of corruption involving XX Construction's reckless projects, financial decline, unfair labor practices, environmental crimes, and political lobbying. Her story shook the media, sparked public outrage, and led to a chorus of demands for a thorough investigation.

The article's real-world repercussions were swift. Facing public fury, government authorities turned their blades on XX Construction. The apartment project was halted indefinitely, accompanied by a public apology. The massive, now-frozen investment choked the company's last breath. Under the subsequent prosecutorial investigation and pressure from financial regulators, the company's hidden debts and crimes were revealed one by one. Officials and politicians implicated in the lobbying scandal were arrested, and the company's credibility hit rock bottom.

In just one month, XX Construction, once a titan of the industry, collapsed completely. Unable to manage its debts, the company declared bankruptcy. Countless employees lost their jobs, and its stock became worthless paper. Their gamble for a massive payout had consumed them.

With XX Construction bankrupt, all of its assets went to auction, including the vast forest surrounding the shrine. Under the Great Maiden's instruction, Lua participated. Just as Shizuku had before her, Lua now acted as the shrine's legal owner and its liaison with the outside world.

With Aki's precise intelligence and Sayuri's advice, Lua acquired the forest land at the perfect moment for the lowest possible price. As it was a fire sale from bankruptcy, she was able to purchase the vast lands surrounding the shrine for an astonishingly low sum. Not only was the shrine now completely free from material threats, but it had also expanded its domain.

And so, the incident came to a close. As the Great Maiden had foreseen, Sayuri had been a great help, and through the combined efforts of the maidens' powers and Sayuri's courage, the shrine had turned a crisis into an opportunity. Lua felt a deep pride in having protected the shrine's

future with her own hands, along with an even heavier sense of responsibility. The shrine's secret remained safe, its quiet existence continuing deep within the mountains.[6:4]

With the fall of XX Construction and the successful acquisition of the forest, Lua was now the official legal representative of the shrine. A few days later, a simple land transfer ceremony was held deep within the shrine's main hall. As the Great Maiden and the other maidens watched, Shizuku formally transferred the land ownership from her name to Lua's.

Taking Lua's hands, Shizuku said, "Your time has come, Lua. As the new guardian of this land and this shrine, may you use your wisdom to its fullest."

Lua nodded. The legal documents in her hand felt heavier than paper. They were the weight of the shrine's long history, its future, and the lives of all its maidens. She realized her role now extended beyond transforming and following the Divine's will; she had to communicate directly with the outside world to protect her home.

...

That afternoon, a familiar car pulled up to the shrine's boundary. It was Sayuri. She stepped out, dressed in a sharp, formal suit. Since her article's publication, Sayuri had become a sensation in the press, and her work had sent shockwaves through society. But more than any joy of victory, she felt a profound need to thank the people of the shrine who had trusted her with their incredible secret.

The shrine gate, a transformation of Akari, opened silently. Sayuri's gaze immediately found the Great Maiden and Lua standing just inside. The Great Maiden greeted her with a serene smile, while Lua looked upon her 'former girlfriend' and 'invaluable ally' with warmth in her eyes.

Sayuri walked right up to the boundary line. She bowed respectfully to the Great Maiden.

"Great Maiden, it is I, Sayuri Hasegawa. Thank you... thank you so much for everything. Because of you, I was able to bring the truth to light and help a great many people."

The Great Maiden smiled calmly in return. "It was thanks to your courage and wisdom, Reporter Sayuri. Without you, the shrine would have been in grave danger."

Sayuri then turned her gaze to Lua. The sight of Lua, eternally unchanging, still filled her with a mix of wonder and a quiet sorrow. After a moment's hesitation, she looked back to the Great Maiden and spoke cautiously.

"Great Maiden... Yui-chan... unlike me, she will live forever, just as she is now. Please... please take good care of her."

Her voice was filled with a deep understanding of Yui's unique destiny, and the desperate plea of someone entrusting a precious friend to another's care. The Great Maiden, seemingly touched by Sayuri's sincerity, smiled warmly.

"Do not worry. Yui will receive all the protection and love she deserves here. In fact, it is we who owe you a great debt. Please... continue to visit us from time to time. We will need someone to bring us news of the world, and at times, to lend us aid. We look forward to working with you."

The Great Maiden's words were an acknowledgment of Sayuri not as a mere helper, but as a vital link to the shrine. Lua looked back and forth between the Great Maiden and Sayuri, her heart swelling with an inexplicable pride and a sense of anticipation for the future. A new bridge between the shrine and the outside world had just been formed.^[6:5]

...

Before she became a maiden, Yui's relationship with Sayuri was a sweet yet poignant first love. They were classmates in the same high school. Yui was a curious, quirky chatterbox, and Sayuri was the calm one who would listen quietly to her endless stories, a fond smile on her face. Different yet similar, they had quickly become the most important person in the world to each other.

In the summer of their first year, Sayuri worked up the courage to confess. Despite the scorching heat, her palms were slick with sweat. "Yui-chan, I... I like you. More than a friend... I like you

more." At her trembling voice, Yui's eyes widened in surprise. She felt something special for Sayuri, too, but the idea of liking another girl was confusing, and she had no idea where such a relationship could possibly lead.

But looking into Sayuri's sincere eyes, Yui's heart was moved. From that day on, they were secretly a couple. Their precious, daily routine consisted of walking hand-in-hand across the empty school grounds after class, or sitting in a quiet corner of the library, leaning on each other's shoulders as they read. The mere presence of the other seemed to make the whole world shine. They had a vague anxiety about the future, but they believed their feelings for each other were stronger than anything.

Their secret romance lasted until the very end of that summer vacation. A few days before the second semester was to begin, Yui and Sayuri were sitting on a bench in a small neighborhood park, just as they always did. Yui was chattering away, and Sayuri was gently toying with a strand of her hair, listening. It was an ordinary, happy moment.

Then, an unreadable shadow fell across Yui's face. She stopped talking and stared at a distant mountain. "Sayuri... I... I think I have to go. Suddenly." Her voice was a mixture of confusion and a strange, hidden fear. Sayuri, completely bewildered, took her hand. "Go where? What is it? What's wrong, Yui-chan?"

But Yui couldn't say another word. Her gaze grew distant, as if she were possessed, and her body trembled slightly. "I'm sorry... I'm so, so sorry, Sayuri." With those final words, she let go of Sayuri's hand, shot up from the bench, and started to run. A stunned Sayuri chased after her, but Yui vanished from sight in an instant, like smoke.

That was their last meeting. It was a sudden, inexplicable farewell. Yui disappeared from the world without a trace, leaving Sayuri to begin a long wait, lost in the confusion and heartbreak of her first love. She could never forget Yui's final expression or the sight of the empty sky. Until she met Yui again ten years later as Lua, Sayuri could neither understand nor accept what had happened that day.^[6:6]

...

Some time after the shrine's troubles were resolved, Lua suggested a drive to Sayuri. This was not a mission, but time meant entirely for the two of them. Lua transformed her body back into the familiar black electric car, and Sayuri settled into the passenger seat. The car glided smoothly along a quiet road on the city's outskirts.

Like the scenery drifting past the windows, their conversation flowed naturally. They spoke of memories from their school days, of their dreams, and of everything they had experienced during the ten-year gap. Sayuri cautiously asked about the changes in Yui's life since becoming a maiden, and Yui calmly described her daily life, careful not to betray the shrine's secrets. She was still the same chatterbox from all those years ago, and Sayuri was still her devoted listener.

"You must have been shocked when I suddenly vanished back then, right?" Yui's avatar asked with an embarrassed smile.

Sayuri nodded. "Don't even get me started. You just disappeared without a trace. Do you have any idea how much I looked for you? I was sick with worry, thinking you might have left because of me."

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Sayuri. I couldn't help it back then. It was all so sudden... being called to the shrine...." The pain of that time was still evident in Yui's voice. "Honestly, when we met again, I was surprised you recognized me... but I was also so happy. I never thought I'd see you again."

Sayuri took Yui's hand. "Me too. You have no idea how bewildered I was when you showed up looking exactly the same... but I'm so incredibly glad we can be here and talk like this again."

As their conversation deepened, Yui felt Sayuri's presence inside her 'body' more vividly than ever. Through the car that was her body, she sensed Sayuri's every subtle movement.

"Sayuri, when you're riding inside me like this..."

Yui's avatar looked at Sayuri and continued,

"It feels like every single nerve cell in my body is aware of your presence. The pressure of your back against the passenger seat, the subtle vibration of the seatbelt on your shoulder, the way your breath fills the air inside me, the warmth of your hand as it brushes against my dashboard... I feel all of it."

She described her sensations in poetic terms.

"When you sit comfortably, my suspension feels like it's gently absorbing the road's impact just to cradle you. When you smile at the view outside, my whole body feels like it's sharing that pleasant rush of air with you. It's like your very being is a current of energy flowing through me. So when you're relaxed and happy, my whole body feels relaxed and happy, too."

Yui gave a soft smile.

"Sometimes, it feels like I'm not just a car, but a living space connected to your senses. When you're in a good mood, I find myself wanting to press the accelerator. If you seem bored, I want to guide you down more interesting roads. Feeling you inside me with my entire body like this... it's a truly special experience."

Sayuri was deeply moved by Yui's words. The fact that this car was not just a machine but Yui's living, feeling body was still a source of wonder. A strange warmth spread through her, along with a sense of responsibility, at the thought that her every movement and emotion was being transmitted to Yui. Feeling each other's presence in the most intimate way possible, they continued their drive, healing the wounds of the past and heading toward a new future.^[6:7]

VII. Luminous Maiden

As summer reached its peak, the shrine was afflicted by a heatwave born of abnormal weather. Day after day of unusually high temperatures brought a feverish energy to the normally tranquil shrine. The maidens pooled their abilities and wisdom, struggling to overcome the oppressive heat.

Aki was a whirlwind of activity. She primarily transformed into air conditioners and fans, supplying cool air to the main hall, the dining room, and the individual living quarters. At times, she became an ice water dispenser, providing an endless supply of chilled water to quench the maidens' thirst. "Aki-san is the best!" Izumi's exclamations of admiration were endless.

Aoi stepped up for the maidens who had lost their appetites to the heat. She transformed into a refrigerator to store all manner of chilled fruits and drinks, then into an ice cream maker, producing a variety of flavors. Thanks to her, the maidens could enjoy a sweet, cool respite.

Miho sought wisdom in the shrine library. She transformed into ancient texts to share with the other maidens how their ancestors had survived such heat. Thanks to her, they used traditional methods like brewing herbal teas and cooling down with damp cloths. Sometimes, she would even transform into a hand fan to offer a personal, cooling breeze.

Shizuku and Akari made use of the stream near the shrine. Shizuku transformed into a large hose, drawing up cool mountain water to spray across the shrine's courtyard and lower the temperature. Akari became a wading pool, allowing the younger maidens, Izumi included, to splash around and forget the heat.

As evening fell and the temperature dropped slightly, the maidens gathered before the Great Maiden. Lua sipped her cool tea and asked,

"Great Maiden, has it ever been this hot before? It's truly suffocating."

The Great Maiden smiled serenely.

"We have had days this hot before. Even in the age of myths, when the world's energies peaked, such heat would visit. However... for it to be this frequent, and to last this long, is a recent phenomenon. I sense the world's energy is shifting in an unknown direction."

Her words were about more than just the weather. They held a deep insight into the changing world and a hint of even greater changes to come. The maidens grew solemn. They reflected on their role, realizing it was not just about enduring the heat, but about protecting the shrine amidst the shifting energies of the world.^[7:1]

...

Besides Izumi, there was another maiden at the shrine who had become one as a child. Her name was Mai. Though she had become a maiden hundreds of years before Izumi, Mai had the appearance of a small child, no older than five or six. Spotting Mai chasing butterflies in the small garden beside the Great Maiden's residence, Izumi bounced over to her.

"Mai-senpai! Hello!"

At Izumi's cheerful voice, Mai turned with a bright smile. Her eyes were as clear as a child's, but their depths held the traces of immeasurable time.

"Hello, Izumi-chan! What should we play today?"

Izumi squatted beside Mai and began to chatter.

"Senpai, you became a maiden long before I did, but you're still a little kid just like me! Isn't that strange?"

Mai nodded. She propped her chin on one hand, as if recalling a distant past.

"That's right. I've been this way since long before you were born. Perhaps it's because I became a maiden when I was very young."

Mai's gaze grew distant for a moment.

"Sometimes, because I've been a child for so long... events from the distant past feel like a dream. I've seen the world change countless times, after all, and watched people live and die over and over."

Listening to Mai, Izumi felt a strange sense of solemnity. The reality of living forever in her current form was sometimes stifling, but she couldn't even imagine enduring it alone for hundreds of years like Mai-senpai.

Izumi asked cautiously, "Senpai... isn't it hard? Living as a child forever..."

Mai met the question with a quiet smile. With her small hand, she picked up a leaf from the ground.

"It would be a lie to say it isn't. But you get used to things as time goes on. And more than anything... the joy of encountering new things helps me endure the time."

Mai looked at Izumi.

"Meeting new maidens like you and watching them grow is a great joy for me. And it's interesting to watch the world change. New technologies, new cultures, new stories... The power that sustains me is this constant process of learning and experiencing."

Mai handed the leaf to Izumi.

"The things you transform into, like robot vacuums or magnifying glasses, are truly fascinating things to me. Just like this shrine we live in, the world is constantly changing and developing. My life is about finding my role within that change."

Listening to Mai, Izumi found herself thinking once again about the meaning of her small body and the life that lay ahead. Mai-senpai, despite her young appearance, was a being who held the deepest wisdom and time. Through their conversation, Izumi began to vaguely grasp the weight of living as an eternal child, and at the same time, the meaning of life that could be found within it.^[7:2]

...

On the surface, Mai's day seemed as peaceful and simple as any child's. But her every movement and thought was steeped in hundreds of years of time.

Mai would wake in the predawn quiet, long before sunrise. She would slip out of bed and head to the small garden beside the Great Maiden's residence. Mai tended to this garden herself; it was a space where her oldest memories were sown like seeds. She would touch the soil with her small hands, examining the new sprouts. It was as if the soil held the memory of seeds planted centuries ago, and the sprouts held the promise of flowers yet to bloom.

After an early breakfast, she often went to the shrine's main hall. In her child's body, she would sit before the altar and quietly close her eyes. For Mai, prayer wasn't just for the present moment. She felt the prayers offered to the Divine by maidens of the past and foresaw the wishes of maidens yet to come. It was a time when all of history flowed through her consciousness like a single river.

In the mornings, she would study or play with the other maidens. To the younger ones, Mai was both a senior and a friend; to the older ones, she was perhaps their most ancient colleague. She enjoyed hearing about new technologies and changes in the world. Time spent watching the news on a tablet (a transformed Aki) or discussing new cultural trends while eating ice cream made by Aoi was a continuous and welcome stream of learning for her.

"Mai-senpai, how's this?" Izumi asked, dressing a doll that Mai had transformed into. Maintaining the doll's form, Mai enjoyed the sensation of Izumi's touch. Yet even during play, she might suddenly see glimpses of the future or recall a moment from the past. She might, for instance, foresee that the doll Izumi was playing with could become a crucial clue in a future event. She wouldn't reveal what she had seen, offering only a smile.

In the afternoons, she would wander the shrine, helping with small errands or organizing old artifacts. When she touched an old piece of jewelry, she could feel the hands of the maiden who first made it, or recall the stories of the long years tied to the object as vividly as if it were yesterday.

As the sun set, Mai would return to her small garden or retreat to her personal 'study' in a corner of the Great Maiden's residence, its shelves packed with rare and ancient books. She would move among them, searching for information or simply savoring the scent of age-old paper, immersing herself in times past.

Before sleep, Mai would once again close her eyes and reflect on her day. To her, a day wasn't just twenty-four hours. It was an endless, unfolding tapestry of time, where past memories, present moments, and future premonitions mingled and flowed. And so Mai lived the quiet, daily life of the shrine, forever in the form of a child, embracing all of time.^[7:3]

...

Sitting before the Great Maiden, Lua cautiously posed a question. Ever since her visit to the Shrine of Time, she had been unable to shake her curiosity about the nature of the maidens there.

"Great Maiden, we the corporeal maidens are called to this shrine by the Divine. But are the temporal maidens also called at some point to become maidens like us? Or... do they become maidens in a different way?"

Lua's question was born of more than simple curiosity; it was a fundamental inquiry into the difference between two shrines with such distinct ways of being. The Great Maiden closed her eyes serenely, then slowly opened them. Her gaze seemed to pierce through to a distant, ancient past.

"Your question is an important one, Lua. If the corporeal maidens are beings who 'transform' into new existences through their contact with the world, then it would be correct to understand that the temporal maidens are beings 'born' with the world's 'time'."

The Great Maiden began to explain in a low voice.

"They are not recreated in human form by a divine call at a specific moment. The temporal maidens are beings formed when the very essence of time coalesces and takes shape, much like a river of time might condense to form a body."

Lua's eyes widened. The explanation was beyond anything she could have imagined.

"Then... they're maidens from the moment of their birth?"

"That is correct. They are born into human bodies, but their souls are, from the very beginning, connected to the flow of time itself. It is as if a piece of time that has existed since the world's inception manifests in human form. Therefore, they are born with the innate ability to perceive and utilize all facets of time, without undergoing any artificial 'calling' or 'ritual'."

Lua felt a profound sense of awe. They weren't beings who 'became' maidens through some event, like her and her sisters, but beings who were 'born' as time itself. As a maiden who dealt with matter, she vaguely understood that while her own power was to transform and create external objects, the temporal maidens dealt with the intangible concept of time itself.

"Their bodies are not bound by the world's clock, and their consciousness embraces the past, present, and future simultaneously. They are, quite literally, the living witnesses of time, the guardians of the world's temporal balance. So you see, their existence in the world is fundamentally different from that of you, the corporeal maidens."

Lua nodded. She finally understood why the temporal maidens had such serene, deep eyes, and why their foresight was so unerringly accurate. They were beings who transcended time, yet were born with it and lived through it.^[7:4]

...

After the in-depth explanation of the temporal maidens, Lua's mind swirled with thoughts. There were her kind, the corporeal maidens, and the maidens who handled time. Could there be others? Her thoughts naturally expanded to the world's fundamental elements. A word surfaced in her mind.

"Great Maiden... in that case, perhaps... do luminous maidens exist as well?"

At Lua's question, the Great Maiden wore an expression of interest, a rare sight. A faint smile touched her lips.

"My, my, Lua. And what led you to that thought?"

Lua hesitated at the Great Maiden's question in return. She had no logical reason; it was pure intuition.

"Well... we handle matter, and the temporal maidens handle time. So it occurred to me that another fundamental element of this world... something like light... might also be connected to the maidens."

Lua shared her thoughts honestly. The Great Maiden nodded as she listened, her eyes filled with satisfaction and praise for Lua's insight.

"Indeed, your insight is quite sharp, Lua. Yes. As you surmised, a luminous maiden does exist."

Lua's eyes widened at the Great Maiden's confirmation. The moment her vague fantasy became reality.

"It is easier to understand if you think of the three fundamental currents of the world manifesting in the form of maidens. You handle matter, the temporal maidens handle time, and the luminous maiden... handles everything that moves at the speed of light."

The Great Maiden continued, her voice holding a slightly more mysterious resonance than usual.

"Have you ever wondered how telepathy is possible among us maidens?"

Lua nodded. Telepathy was such a natural ability among them that she had never given it much thought.

"The one who makes that telepathy possible is none other than the luminous maiden. It is a being who governs the flow of information and communication. Possessing the trait of being as fast as light and able to reach everywhere, it serves to connect and mediate the thoughts and information among maidens. It has the ability to interpret and transmit all waves and signals in the world."

Lua was filled with shock and awe. To think their telepathy was thanks to someone's ability! She thought of Aki. It occurred to her that Aki's ability to manipulate digital networks might share something in common with the traits of the luminous maiden.

"The luminous maiden cannot transform matter like you, nor traverse time like the temporal maidens, but it is connected to all the information in the world. In its eyes, all communication appears as a constant flow of light. From unseen places, it helps connect us maidens and, at times, conveys vital information about the world to us."

The Great Maiden smiled again. Lua's heart swelled at the realization that a single question had unveiled such a massive piece of the world's secrets. The world was far more mysterious than she had ever imagined, and the world of the maidens was deeper and wider still.^[7:5]

Having heard about the existence of the 'luminous maiden' from the Great Maiden, Lua immediately went to find Aki. She found her in the main hall, moving among various electronic devices and making adjustments. Aki had an exceptional talent for managing the shrine's communication network and gathering external information.

"Aki! I heard about the luminous maidens from the Great Maiden. Do you know anything about them?" Lua asked, her voice brimming with excitement.

Aki turned and smiled at Lua's question. "Ah, Lua. So you've finally heard the story. It was something I had vaguely surmised myself."

Aki paused in thought, then began to explain using analogies Lua could easily understand. In her regular work with satellite signals and complex networks, she had naturally become familiar with basic concepts of physics, so it was no great leap for her to connect them to the maidens' abilities.

"It's easier if you think of the world as having three main types of flows," Aki said, holding up three fingers.

"First is the flow of things with physical bodies, like us. Just as we create objects or transform, material things always move 'slower than light.' We, the corporeal maidens, who create, change, and move things within space, can be seen as handling this 'slower-than-light flow'."

Lua nodded. The explanation perfectly matched her own abilities.

"Second is the flow of time. Just as we can only move forward into the future, time always flows in one direction. But the temporal maidens move through time as freely as we move through space, as if they are traveling 'faster than light.' That's why they can see all of time at once and possess foresight that spans the future and the past."

Aki continued.

"And the third and final type is the luminous maidens. You could say they literally handle everything that moves 'at the speed of light.' That includes information transmitted as quickly as light, waves, and things like the telepathy between us. They are almost unbound by the limits of time or matter, and they serve to connect and transmit all the 'flows of information' that exist in the world."

"So, we handle matter that exists and changes in space, the temporal maidens handle the flow of time itself, and the luminous maidens are the medium of information and communication that links the two."

Aki's explanation assembled the scattered pieces in Lua's mind. Though the maidens had different abilities, they were all fulfilling their roles according to the fundamental laws of the world.

"Then we are beings who help maintain the harmony of these three flows," Lua said in admiration.

Aki smiled brightly. "Yes, that's right. That must be what the Great Maiden means by 'the harmony of the world.' We may have different abilities, but in the end, we all exist to protect the world and maintain its balance."

The conversation between the two maidens brought the profound principles of their mysterious world into sharper focus.^[7:6]

...

In the quiet routine of the shrine, Mai would sometimes lose herself in her own small projects. This time, it was a rare moss, nestled in the deepest shade of a rock crevice by the stream behind the shrine. The moss was so tiny and delicate it was nearly invisible, yet Mai knew this fragile life-form needed direct sunlight, if only for a brief moment once a month, to survive. But with

the lush leaves and the rock's shadow, it was next to impossible for light to reach it, even when the sun's angle was just right.

Mai tried everything she could think of. She transformed into particles smaller than dust motes to manipulate the air's subtle currents, and tried to shift the angle of the leaves, bit by bit. Every attempt failed. No matter how masterful the corporeal maidens were with the flow of matter, controlling the trajectory of a single photon or the near-random direction of the wind within nature's grand currents was an impossible feat. Overcome with despair, Mai finally went to the library where Miho was in her form as a bookshelf.

"Miho-nee, this moss desperately needs light, but I've tried everything and I don't know what to do," Mai's telepathic voice was laced with weariness.

Miho's calm voice echoed among the shelves. "Sometimes, Mai, there are realms beyond the reach of a corporeal maiden. Realms of pure 'flow' and 'essence,' beyond the subtle laws of matter." Miho recalled an ancient legend, faintly remembered among millennia of accumulated knowledge. "It is a story passed down from long ago. That when we face an uncertainty we cannot overcome, we can seek wisdom from the 'luminous maiden'."

Mai's eyes widened. "Luminous maiden? Such a being exists? I thought, besides the Great Maiden and the temporal maidens, there was no one else but us..."

"It is different from us. It exists in a way unlike us, who have material forms, or them, who handle the flow of time. It is said one cannot even describe it as having a specific form, that it is pure 'light of wisdom' itself." Miho paused. "The legends say that if you offer a 'prayer' to it, you can receive the 'inspiration' to find the clearest path within the flow of matter. That you need only open your senses and call for that light from the deepest part of your heart."

Mai was skeptical, but her fervent desire to save the moss spurred her to follow Miho's words. She sat on the sun-drenched veranda and closed her eyes, focusing all her senses on her desperate hope for the moss. Just as Miho had said, she concentrated her consciousness, as if reaching from her deepest core toward an ineffable 'light'.

Her consciousness began to expand. She didn't sense the voice or form of any particular being. Instead, she felt her own consciousness dissolving into a single, vast 'flow'. It was not multiple beings. It was the sum of all understanding and clarity in the universe, a single, immense consciousness that transcended all form and time. In that instant, Mai understood. The 'luminous maiden' was not multiple beings, but a perfect, singular unity, like the concept of 'light' itself. Her small consciousness became a single wave, mingling in that vast ocean of knowledge.

And in that ocean, she found the answer. It wasn't a direct set of instructions. It was a moment of perfect comprehension—of the moss before her, the sunlight, the subtle currents of air. She knew the precise moment a gust of wind would blow at a specific angle to pull back a leaf's shadow, the exact wavelength of light that would most effectively reach the moss in that fleeting instant, and the subtle 'form' she would need to assume to 'merge' with that flow. Everything became clear.

Mai opened her eyes. She immediately transformed her body into infinitesimally fine dust particles, merging with the air currents around the moss. Then, at the perfect timing she had calculated, she induced a tiny vortex of air. As if by a miracle, a single ray of sunlight pierced the canopy of leaves and illuminated the moss. It lasted only for a few seconds, but in that moment, the moss seemed to drink in the light, absorbing the energy of life.

It was a success. Mai's heart swelled with emotion. The joy of saving the moss was immense, but it was the experience of understanding the essence of the 'luminous maiden' and communicating with it that sent a thrill through her entire being. Now she knew. No matter how skilled the corporeal maidens were with matter, there were times they needed a source of pure 'wisdom' and 'clarity' that transcended matter. And that source was not a specific being, but a single, all-encompassing light.^[7:7]

VIII. Eternal Poison

That day, the weather was exceptionally good, making it a perfect day for grocery shopping. Lua and Shizuku decided to go themselves, seizing the opportunity to visit the market after a long time. Normally, it was an unwritten rule for the maidens to operate in pairs. If one maiden transformed into clothing or an object, another would wear or carry it. There was no need for a shopping basket, as plastic bags from the store were sufficient, and money was taken as needed from Lua's or Shizuku's pockets, so additional personnel rarely transformed to accompany them.

But that day, Akane insisted on coming along. "Wouldn't it be more convenient if I transformed into a wallet? I wouldn't be a burden, and I could provide money exactly when it's needed!" At her words, Lua and Shizuku exchanged a glance. It was true she wasn't strictly necessary, but it was hard to refuse the eager hope in Akane's eyes. Finally, Lua relented, saying, "Alright, but I'll only put in just enough money. It would be a problem if it gets too heavy." Akane then transformed into a small, elegant bifold wallet—a vibrant mix of red and white—and settled into an inner pocket of Shizuku's bag.

The market was bustling. All sorts of food and daily necessities gleamed on the stalls, and the air buzzed with the mingled sounds of chattering voices and haggling. Lua and Shizuku leisurely browsed the shops, picking out what they needed. From inside Shizuku's bag, Akane found the noisy energy of the outside world intriguing. Occasionally, when Shizuku opened the wallet to pay, Akane would catch a momentary glimpse of the outside light, delighted by the new experience. Everything was going smoothly.

Then it happened. As they passed through a narrow aisle, someone bumped hard into Shizuku's shoulder. "Excuse me!" The man offered a quick apology before disappearing into the crowd. Shizuku steadied herself and waved a hand to show she was fine, but a chill ran down her spine.

"Shizuku-nee! I... I'm getting farther away from you...!"

It was a sudden telepathic message from Akane. Shizuku felt the blood run cold in her veins. She frantically checked her bag. The inner zipper was slightly open, and Akane, who had transformed into the bifold wallet, was gone without a trace.

"Lua! The wallet is gone!" At Shizuku's urgent cry, Lua, too, realized what had happened. "It was that man! A pickpocket!"

Their world went dark. They could not use their powers indiscriminately as long as they did not defy human laws and order. They desperately wanted to transform into small birds to chase the man, but they couldn't risk revealing their identities as maidens in the middle of a crowd. Their most precious sister, Akane, was now lost somewhere in the human world.

Amid the panic, Lua managed to compose herself and led Shizuku to the nearest police station. They reported the pickpocketing, meticulously describing the culprit's appearance, which they recalled with their maiden's memory. At the same time, they sent an urgent telepathic message to Aki at the Shrine.

"Aki! Transform into a phone right now and stand by for a call! The police will be in touch!" Lua's voice was fraught with anxiety. Aki didn't know the reason, but sensing Lua's urgency, she unhesitatingly transformed into a smartphone to await the call. Akane communicated telepathically that she was on a bus, transmitting fragmented images of the passing scenery. Since her consciousness wasn't completely cut off from the outside world, the other maidens could at least determine her approximate location.

A few hours later, a call came from the police station. Aki relayed the news to Lua and Shizuku via telepathy.

"They caught him. The pickpocket. But... they couldn't find the wallet."

Lua and Shizuku stared at each other in disbelief. They were baffled that the wallet hadn't been found, even with Akane continuously relaying her location. The police's search was limited, and they couldn't rule out the possibility that the pickpocket had discarded the wallet or passed it to an accomplice.

At that moment, Akane's telepathic voice burst through, filled with a terror that bordered on a scream.

"Sisters... If I... if I can never return inside the Shrine's boundary... does that mean I have to live for an eternity... in this world... as a wallet? sob... That's possible, isn't it...?"

The color drained from Lua and Shizuku's faces. They couldn't say a word. Akane's question had struck upon the most primal and terrifying fear of a maiden, one they kept hidden in the deepest corners of their hearts. They whispered to themselves.

That's right... That could happen... couldn't it?

While nothing in the world was immutable, a maiden's transformation was the sole exception. Unless they returned within the Shrine's boundary, they were forced to exist forever in their transformed state. It was a truth like an immortal curse, one they had long forgotten. The lively noise of the market now faded into a meaningless hum. Akane's fear had become their own, a chilling and undeniable reality.^[8:1]

...

A heavy gloom seemed to press down on the tranquil air of the Shrine. Lua and Shizuku crossed the courtyard toward the main hall, their shoulders slumped. Their usual energetic gait was gone, each step weighing a ton. A shadow of exhaustion and indelible sorrow lay upon their faces.

Deep within the Shrine, bathed in sunlight filtering through massive wooden pillars, the Great Maiden sat in quiet contemplation. Her avatar was, as always, benevolent and gentle, but a flicker of deep concern crossed her eyes the moment she saw them.

"Are you all right, my dears? It seems something has happened." The Great Maiden's voice was soft, yet it held an insight that seemed to see through everything.

Lua raised her head and managed to explain. "Great Maiden... Akane... she transformed into a wallet and was pickpocketed. The police caught the culprit, but they said they couldn't find the wallet. We are still connected by telepathy, but... Akane is in utter despair. What will happen if she... if she can't return within the boundary..." Her voice trembled toward the end. Shizuku, too, bowed her head, biting her lip.

The Great Maiden was silent for a moment, her gaze meeting the two maidens' anxious eyes.

"Do you remember... the story from long ago, of those who abused the power of the maidens?"

Lua and Shizuku nodded in unison. It was the darkest, most forbidden chapter of the Shrine's history, one they remembered all too clearly.

"Then, what do you suppose happened to the maidens who wielded their power with such arrogance?" The Great Maiden's question was no simple inquiry. It was a probe that delved into their memories, as if stirring the waters of a deep spring.

The two maidens' eyes widened. A realization flashed through their minds like lightning. The maidens who had abused their power, who had harmed people and used their transformation solely for personal gain. In the end... they were cursed to be trapped in the world, forever in their transformed states. Permanently fixed as inanimate objects, unable to return to the Shrine's boundary or revert to their true forms.

They understood that their own question had led them to that very horrific possibility. The image of Akane, a wallet lost somewhere in the world, seemed to merge with the image of those ancient maidens suffering their punishment. It was a suffocating realization.

The Great Maiden quietly observed their pained expressions. After a moment, her voice regained its benevolent resonance.

"That is an ancient warning you must not forget. It was a punishment for those who, long ago, wielded their power with arrogance and shattered the world's balance. They were cursed to be trapped for eternity in their transformed bodies. But you are different. You protect the world with good will. Are you not diligently carrying out your duties?"

The Great Maiden sighed. "The Divine... will never abandon you to such despair, so long as you do not lose that path. Your sincerity and faith shall be your salvation."

Her words, like a faint ember on a cold winter's night, breathed warmth into the two maidens' frozen hearts. Their anxiety did not vanish completely. Akane had not yet returned, and the path to retrieving the wallet themselves remained unclear. But the Great Maiden's words planted a seed of faith—a belief that they would not be truly abandoned.

Lua was the first to squeeze Shizuku's hand. Shizuku squeezed back. The warmth passing between their hands eased their fears, if only a little. In all their time, they had experienced countless miracles. They remembered that the Divine's blessing, which transcended human logic, had always been with them.

"Yes... you're right," Lua said softly. "We have to... we just have to find a way," Shizuku's voice replied, a faint resolve now present in it.

They vowed they would find Akane, drawing comfort and courage from one another. In the stillness of the Shrine, the two maidens' hands remained tightly clasped.^[8:2]

...

The night deepened, but the Shrine's tranquility failed to soothe Lua and Shizuku's anxiety. Though their bodies no longer required sleep, they often sought it out of old human habit. That night, however, they remained sleepless, staying in the main hall, deep in silence, as they

thought of the absent Akane. After a long while, Lua took a quiet, deep breath. She knew she had to relay the Great Maiden's words to Akane.

Lua and Shizuku focused their minds, sending a telepathic message to the distant Akane. Though they were physically far apart, the connection between maidens transcended space. Lua gently channeled the Great Maiden's soft words into Akane's consciousness.

"...So long as you do not lose that path, the Divine will never abandon you to such despair. Your sincerity and faith shall be your salvation."

Akane's telepathic response returned, faint at first, then a weak sob mixed with relief. She was still trembling with fear, but the powerful faith in the Great Maiden's words began to steady her spirit. After they spent a long time comforting each other, simply affirming their connection, Akane's consciousness grew clearer.

"Sisters... I think... I'm in a place that's damp and... smelly. Maybe... a trash can... or something like it."

Within those words, Lua and Shizuku found a sliver of hope amid their despair. At least she wasn't on the street or in a more dangerous place. As dawn broke, the Shrine was busy from early morning. Lua and Shizuku hurried down to the village, accompanied by several other maidens accustomed to operating in the human world.

Their mission was to meticulously search every single trash can in the village. The collection was scheduled for the next day; if they didn't find Akane by then, she risked being taken to an incinerator, a landfill, or somewhere even more distant. Time was short, and they were short-handed. In her desperation, Lua contacted Sayuri. Sayuri didn't understand what was happening, but she sensed the urgency in Lua's voice and came at once. Though she lacked the maidens' powers, she possessed sharp intuition and exceptional problem-solving skills.

There were far more trash cans in the village than they had expected. The maidens took turns keeping watch while they and Sayuri emptied bag after bag, sifting through the contents. Foul

smells and sticky grime soiled their clothes and hands, but they paid it no mind. Their only thought was of finding Akane.

It happened during the long search. Akane's telepathy came through, much clearer than before. "Sisters! I can hear your voices! You're very close!"

Her words spurred them into action. They narrowed their search toward the direction of the sound. There, in an old, rusty metal trash can, stuffed deep within a pile of plastic bags, they saw a faint mix of red and white. Lua carefully reached in and pulled it out.

It was caked in dirt and stained with unknown liquids, but it was unmistakably the bifold wallet Akane had become. Its once-small and elegant form was now dented, stained, and unsightly. Yet a collective sigh of relief escaped everyone's lips. They had finally found her.

They took the wallet to a nearby public restroom. Lua and Shizuku carefully washed it with soap and water. As the sticky grime and dirt washed away, its original red and white colors began to emerge.

"Heehee, that tickles... but... it feels strangely good." Akane's telepathy was a mix of a ticklish sensation and undeniable relief. She had bathed countless times, but this—being cleaned so thoroughly after being so filthy—was a first. This sense of purity, discovered at the very edge of terror and despair, brought a relief more profound than any pleasure.

The moment she crossed the Shrine's boundary, Akane's body shimmered with a soft light and returned to its original form. She looked down at her own human hands, felt the wooden floor of the shrine beneath her feet, and wept with the overwhelming relief of being alive again.

She ran immediately to the main hall, where the Great Maiden was waiting. The Great Maiden smiled serenely, as if she had known all along that Akane would return.

"Great Maiden... I was so, so scared. I thought I might be trapped like that... forever. But... hearing your words, and watching my sisters come to find me... I've had a great realization."

Akane bowed deeply, her gratitude genuine and profound. She understood now. True despair wasn't being physically trapped; it was losing the good will within one's heart. And she knew that as long as they were together, they would never abandon one another, no matter what despair they faced.

The night of terror, the morning's search, and the dramatic reunion had shown the maidens another side to the blessing of their transformation. They emerged with a stronger trust and a deeper bond, their spirits forged anew.^[8:3]

IX. World in Crisis

In 2033, an unusual tension hung over the shrine. The maidens sensed the otherwise tranquil boundary subtly trembling with an unknown vibration. This was not the presence of ordinary visitors. It was proof that the temporal maidens were making their way directly into this space. Although their spatial movement was restricted, their coming here meant that a matter of great urgency and importance had arisen.

Lua, Shizuku, Aki, Aoi, Miho, Akari, and even young Izumi and Mai—all the corporeal maidens gathered in the shrine's main hall. The Great Maiden sat in her place with a serious and solemn expression, devoid of her usual gentle smile. Her eyes, deep and knowing, seemed to already foresee the impending situation.

A moment later, the shrine doors quietly opened, and two temporal maidens appeared. One was Kako, a maiden with wise eyes, and the other was an androgynous Temporal Guardian with mysterious eyes, as if holding all of time at once. Their appearance exuded a strange aura that seemed to distort the very flow of space and time.

The temporal maidens took their places in the center of the main hall. Their faces, stripped of their usual detachment, were etched with deep concern and urgency. The Temporal Guardian spoke first. Her voice was quiet, but its resonance seemed to vibrate throughout the entire shrine.

"Great Maiden, and corporeal maidens. We have come here in person to inform you... that an unavoidable period of great turmoil is imminent."

Lua and the other maidens held their breath. The phrase 'the period of great turmoil' was a prophecy that had been mentioned several times by the Great Maiden and the Temporal Guardian. But this was the first direct warning.

Kako added, "From what we have observed, in approximately four and a half years, early in 2038, there are signs that the world's fundamental balance will be severely shaken. This is not merely a regional disaster. It is an unprecedented threat... one where the material, temporal, and informational flows of the world could all be disrupted."

The Temporal Guardian continued, her eyes growing distant as if directly witnessing the future catastrophe.

"The specific phenomena are not yet confirmed, but our precognition warns of massive spatial distortion, temporal chaos, and a severance of information. It will be the beginning of a cataclysm that could shatter the very natural order of the world."

The Great Maiden listened intently to the temporal maidens in silence. An agony and determination deeper than any she had shown in any crisis in her long life flashed across her face. The corporeal maidens were also gripped by tension. Knowing better than anyone that their very existence was to protect the world's balance, they felt a heavy responsibility in the face of the great threat to come.

The temporal maidens' warning became a great wave that shook the quiet shrine, signaling the prelude to a fated battle.^[9:1]

...

The warning from the temporal maidens about a 'period of great turmoil in early 2038' unsettled the entire shrine. A heavy silence in the main hall soon gave way to troubled murmurs. All the

corporeal maidens gathered to discuss the precise nature of the impending crisis. The Great Maiden watched their debate in silence, waiting for their collective wisdom to find an answer.

The first to offer an opinion was Aki. As one who commanded electronic devices, she was deeply connected to the world's digital systems.

"Great Maiden, and all maidens. From what I've gathered, the most likely problem that could occur in early 2038 is the 'Unix time overflow'."

Aki continued, explaining in terms the other maidens could easily grasp. "Nearly all computers and communication systems in the world use a method called Unix time. It counts the seconds from midnight on January 1, 1970, and stores it as a 32-bit integer. However, at 3:14:07 AM on January 19, 2038, this number will reach its limit and can no longer be incremented."

She spoke with a serious expression. "Simply put, computer clocks could suddenly reset to a past date or freeze entirely, much like the Y2K scare. If that happens, all digital infrastructure—financial systems, traffic control, communication networks, power grids—could be paralyzed. Unimaginable chaos could erupt: planes could crash, banking could halt, hospital systems could shut down. Even with our abilities, restoring all these systems at once would be impossible."

After Aki's explanation, Miho presented her view. She was skilled at reading ancient knowledge and the flows of nature.

"While I deeply agree with Aki, I believe we cannot ignore other possibilities. Based on my analysis of ancient texts and natural signs, the year 2038 coincides with a period of peak solar activity. During this time, the probability of a powerful Coronal Mass Ejection, or CME, is extremely high."

Miho continued, "When powerful electromagnetic waves and plasma from the sun collide with Earth's atmosphere, they can cause massive power grid failures over wide areas. Not only would electricity be cut, but satellite communications, GPS, and countless electronic devices could malfunction and cease to operate. Modern society is entirely dependent on electricity, so this

would be a catastrophe on par with the Unix time problem. People would be unable to pump water or refrigerate food, and the world would swiftly plunge into darkness and chaos."

With two compelling scenarios presented, young Mai quietly raised her hand. She was the one who had observed the flow of time the longest.

"I... I think both of my seniors' points are valid. But... perhaps it is a more fundamental change, a disruption of the world's 'natural order' itself."

Mai said in a small voice, "The temporal maidens mentioned 'spatial distortion' and a 'severance of information.' A Unix time bug or a solar flare, while disastrous, cannot distort 'space' itself, nor can they make the concept of 'information' disappear. This might be a kind of chaos where the very laws of the world begin to warp."

Mai's remark cast a new shadow of contemplation among the maidens. The Great Maiden quietly listened to their opinions. She seemed to already see through all these scenarios, and perhaps the truth that lay beyond them. The shadow of the impending threat grew darker.^[9:2]

When the maidens' intense discussion concluded, the Great Maiden looked around at them with a serene yet resolute gaze that captured everyone's attention.

"All of your points have merit. Aki's and Miho's scenarios, in particular, are the most likely threats in the modern world."

The Great Maiden turned her gaze to Mai. "Mai's point is also correct. If the laws of the world themselves were to warp, that would shake the foundations of causality, and even we would have no way to prepare. However, that possibility is extremely slim. And even if it were to happen, it is beyond our power to prevent, so no special preparations would be required."

The Great Maiden's voice held unshakable conviction.

"However, the two threats presented by Aki and Miho—the Unix time overflow and power-and-device failures from solar flares—are different. Both are problems for which humanity theoretically possesses the solutions."

She looked at each maiden, emphasizing her next words.

"Human ingenuity will eventually find the solutions, but the problem is time. If humanity's technology and wisdom complete those solutions in 2040, or even later, they will not prevent the great turmoil of 2038. We have approximately four and a half years. Within this short time, we must work from behind the scenes to ensure humanity completes these countermeasures on its own."

The maidens' eyes wavered. The Great Maiden's directive was not direct intervention, but a quiet 'acceleration' of the world's progress.

"Our role is to protect the world's balance. Directly violating causality through intervention is a taboo even for us. However, helping existing solutions to be completed on time is another matter. For example, if a solution to the Y2K38 problem exists but its application is delayed, we can subtly accelerate its progress. If technology to reinforce the power grid against solar flares exists, we can accelerate its development and application."

The Great Maiden firmly commanded Lua and the other maidens.

"This is your new mission. Aki, you will use the world's information networks to identify which of humanity's technological solutions are delayed and analyze the reasons. Aoi, you will invisibly adjust the world's material flows to ensure necessary resources are supplied to the right places. Miho, you must find clues to connect ancient wisdom with modern technology. And Lua, you will use your contacts in the outside world, such as reporter Sayuri, to sway public opinion or leak necessary information, guiding this entire process so it proceeds smoothly."

The Great Maiden's explanation provided the maidens with a clear direction. Not to step forward and stop the world's destruction themselves, but to secretly help humanity solve its own

problems. It was a role only they could fulfill: to minutely adjust the course of history with an invisible hand.

"Time is short. From now on, you must mobilize all of your abilities and begin preparations to prevent the great turmoil of 2038."

The Great Maiden's voice filled the main hall, and every maiden steeled her resolve for the mission to come.^[9:3]

...

The stillness of the shrine seemed to permit no sound other than the occasional rustling of leaves, yet within it, an unprecedented academic fervor burned. The first six months after the Great Maiden's command were a period of pure investigation and analysis, with the maidens refraining from direct action. They devoted all their energy to devising meticulous strategies to most efficiently carry out the 'acceleration' operation that would decide humanity's fate: whom to inspire, which channels to use for influence, and how to allocate their limited resources.

The maidens were not numerous. As an elite few, they could not influence all of humanity at once. They had to focus on selecting key individuals with the greatest potential ripple effect and elevating their work. For the Y2K38 problem, legacy embedded devices were identified as the primary vulnerability. Miho tirelessly searched for relevant information within decades of accumulated knowledge, while Aki scoured global networks, meticulously analyzing why old devices resisted replacement, uncovering the hidden physical, economic, and psychological barriers. Ultimately, the maidens settled on a strategy to subtly create situations where replacing the old devices became unavoidable. This was a complex task that went beyond a simple technical fix; it required shaking humanity's deep-seated inertia.

Meanwhile, the acceleration strategy for solar flare (CME) prediction technology took an even more unconventional turn. As Mirai perceived the flow of the future with her keen insight and Kako found patterns in historical records, they decided to employ the ingenious tool of 'error.' They would induce small, artificial 'errors'—unrelated to actual scientific observation—to be simultaneously reflected in the prediction models of various research teams. It was akin to

throwing several small stones at once to create a large wave. These unintended 'errors' would cause research teams with disparate approaches to all predict the same specific CME, forcing humanity to take the warning seriously and compelling the rapid verification and improvement of their prediction systems.

All the maidens mobilized their expertise, conducting countless reviews and discussions to refine the most sophisticated and impactful strategies. As Mai, who looked like a child but had lived for centuries, marveled, "In all my time at the shrine, I've never seen it so focused on scholarly pursuits!"^[9:4]

...

The academic atmosphere deep within the mountain shrine now entered a new phase. When it was concluded that most of the 'acceleration' operation would take place overseas, the mission narrowed to three critical issues: infiltration, execution, and safe return. In addition to Lua, who was already familiar with the world's physical flows from her time as a car, Mai, an experienced and small-statured senior maiden, joined as her new partner. The two began practicing their transformation into small, highly energy-efficient drones.

In a cramped space behind the shrine's main building, parts for various small drones were scattered about. Lua examined the components with the familiarity of greeting an old friend. She paid special attention to the small battery, the heart of the drone, re-imprinting its complex internal structure and energy flow into her mind. The slightest difference in energy efficiency would decide the success of an intercontinental flight spanning thousands of kilometers. Her touch was precise and confident. Meanwhile, Mai watched with an awkward air. Though she had transformed into countless shapes over hundreds of years, this was her first time becoming a mode of transport. Every tiny wheel and wing was a new, strange sensation.

"This is the power source for flight, senior. The key is to efficiently control the charging and discharging," Lua calmly explained, unfolding a battery's circuit diagram. "When you change your body into this form, you have to be mindful of even the slightest air resistance. The angle of the fuselage and wings, and controlling the thrust, are all crucial."

Mai nodded, listening intently. Lua demonstrated her drone form, giving her a crash course on aerial posture control, how to ride the wind, and how to fly the maximum distance on minimal energy. Instead of a reckless attempt to cross the Pacific directly, they planned to follow the routes of migratory birds, hopping between settlements—specifically, those near "reliable sources of power." This method, though slower, allowed for timely refueling and opened a path to slip across the globe unnoticed. Based on current technology, a one-way trip was estimated to take less than a week, which they concluded was sufficient. The two maidens transformed, a low whirring sound filling the air as they flew around the shrine, their movements growing ever more fluid and silent. The mission was approaching.^[9:5]

...

In the shrine's basement, two small shadows hovered in the dimly lit training ground. One was a sleek, streamlined, silver-grey drone; the other, an endearing robot toy. The drone was Lua, and the toy was Izumi, specially prepared for deployment. A faintly glowing USB port was attached to Izumi's back. This was their first drone mission, a test flight to set in motion the first part of their CME prediction acceleration strategy.

Lua was tasked with delivering Izumi to a research lab in Denver, Colorado. Crossing the Pacific was still a formidable journey even for a maiden's body, so they followed pre-determined migratory bird routes, using islands and coastlines as stepping stones. When they flew low, skimming the water, the waves whispered below them; as they cut through the quiet night sky, starlight guided their path. They recharged under the eaves of a warehouse in a deserted fishing village and rested on a tree in a quiet city park to prepare for the next leg of their flight. The journey took nearly a week, but it was a necessary process to infiltrate the other side of the world in secret.

They reached the skies above Denver in the early morning, before the city had fully awakened. Hidden in the shadow of a skyscraper, Lua observed the target laboratory. Her precise sensors scanned the building's internal structure, security systems, and the movement patterns of key personnel. Lua infiltrated through a small ventilation shaft at the back of the building and placed Izumi in a secluded spot inside the lab. She then concealed herself perfectly in a narrow

crevice on the building's exterior, holding her breath and waiting for the plan to unfold. She could feel her heart trembling like a tiny drone motor, but she focused only on the mission.

As soon as Lua was gone, Izumi quietly rolled on her small wheels, moving under the desk with the target computer. Her robotic eyes tracked the faint glow of the monitor. Following Aki's guidance to the exact spot, Izumi deftly propped herself up and found the USB port. A flicker of movement, a soft click, and the USB was connected. It was time for Aki's instructions to be transmitted through Izumi's body. Though she had the form of a small robot, within her resided the soul of a maiden capable of manipulating data with extraordinary telepathic power.

Thousands of kilometers away in the shrine, Aki was receiving Izumi's screen feed in real-time on a dedicated terminal. The goal was to subtly alter the input values of a specific CME prediction model, causing multiple research teams to independently arrive at the same false prediction. While Lua and Izumi knew basic data manipulation, the delicate modification of sensitive scientific data was Aki's expertise.

Aki's eyes scanned the data. An unexpected problem arose. The file format wasn't a standard text or binary file, but an outdated Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. "Seriously... I can't believe a format this old is still in use," Aki muttered. Legacy Excel files had complex structures; a simple value change might not produce the intended result. Formatting, macros, or hidden cells could corrupt the entire file or leave traces of modification. A shadow of agony crossed Aki's face. Time was short, and failure meant the entire operation was over.

Aki closed her eyes. Her mind reached for the deepest part of the shrine, the domain of the luminous maiden. "O luminous maiden..." She prayed earnestly. "Please help this small maiden not to lose her way in the darkness. Grant me the light of wisdom, that I may borrow Izumi's hands to briefly control the flow of data. Please, lend me your strength, so that this first step to save humanity does not falter."

As the prayer ended, Aki felt a powerful beam of light extend from her consciousness and connect all the way to Izumi. It was more than just a shared signal; it was a clear sign that she had been granted direct control. She could now move Izumi's tiny body as if it were her own.

Aki immediately focused, looking at the Excel file through Izumi's vision. The complex cell structures and functions laid themselves bare before her.

Drawing on her vast knowledge and insight, Aki delved into the core of the data. With invisible, microscopic adjustments, she altered the values in specific cells and inserted minuscule error values into related functions. The changes were visually imperceptible, but when fed into the lab's simulation model, they would trigger a subtle malfunction, distorting the predicted probability of a CME at a specific time. Her work was swift and precise.

Once the manipulation was complete, Aki quietly disconnected the USB. Izumi returned to her hiding spot. Back at the shrine, Aki let out a sigh of relief. The mission was a success. Despite the unexpected variable, the first pilot operation was perfectly executed. She instructed Izumi to return, and Lua prepared to quietly leave Denver with her partner, beginning the long journey home. The invisible campaign for the world's balance had just begun.^[9:6]

...

Several operations proceeded with astonishing smoothness. Lua and Aki's first pilot mission provided a blueprint for success, and subsequent missions also flowed according to plan. Mai, despite her childlike appearance having spent the longest time at the shrine, perfectly adapted to her transformation and successfully completed her maiden flight. Her small, agile drone body was optimized for the most clandestine infiltrations, and the plan was now truly taking off.

Then one day, Mai was assigned a mission to take Izumi and Akari in their drone bodies to Sydney, Australia. Their destination was a solar flare research institute. It was a long journey across the vast Pacific, and it happened to be the great migration season for birds. Under the starlit night sky, adorned with countless stars, tens of thousands of migratory birds flapped their wings toward their destination. Normally, avoiding bird flocks would not be difficult with a maiden's keen senses, but the immense size of the flock exceeded Mai's expectations.

It was a sudden collision. A huge flock of birds swept over the drone's flight path as if to engulf it. With a dull thud, Mai's drone body shook violently. She barely regained her balance, but her attention immediately went to her back. It was to check if Akari and Izumi, who had

transformed to be sensitive to even the slightest impacts, were safe. A telepathic message came from Izumi that she was fine, but Akari remained unresponsive.

"Akari!" Mai's telepathy cut through the air. There was no reply. A chill ran down her spine. A fall? Had Akari been knocked off by the impact? Mai immediately lowered her altitude and began searching the vicinity. The problem was that Akari had transformed to be extremely small for the mission. Furthermore, having fallen from a considerable height, her landing spot would be within a vast area spanning tens of square kilometers. It was the middle of the night, local time, in the sparsely populated desert of Australia's Northern Territory.

Mai desperately searched for Akari. Finding a small object in the darkness was nearly impossible, but fortunately, she confirmed that she could still connect with Akari through a faint telepathic link. Akari seemed to have landed safely but relayed that it was difficult to ascertain her location due to the lack of distinctive landmarks.

"Mai-nee, I fell somewhere around here! I can't see anything. It's just sand everywhere..." Akari's voice was filled with panic.

Receiving Akari's telepathy, Mai mentally drew the precise search patterns used in maritime search and rescue. Like searching for a castaway in a vast ocean, she began flying in a spiral or grid pattern so that she might come into Akari's line of sight. However, Akari's voice remained confused. "I still can't see you, Mai-nee! There's really nothing here!"

In the overwhelming darkness, surrounded by nothing but sand, Akari was overcome with confusion. But she soon took a deep breath and regained her composure. If there was nothing to rely on around her, then the sky was the only guide. She looked up at the night sky. The stars seemed to spill across the sky, unfolding before her like a grand map.

Akari employed her honed observational skills. She was familiar with the constellations that appeared differently in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres and was skilled at determining the positions of stars as they shifted with time. Ursa Major, Cassiopeia, the Southern Cross... ticking off each familiar constellation, Akari began to estimate her current latitude through

their arrangement and altitude. It wasn't perfectly accurate, but it was enough information to significantly narrow down the search area from tens of square kilometers to just a few.

"Mai-nee! I... I think I'm roughly near 24 degrees 7 minutes South latitude! A specific constellation is visible at this angle!" Confidence filled Akari's voice.

Mai immediately adjusted her flight path based on the information Akari sent. Obtaining rough latitude information in the middle of a vast desert was an achievement beyond imagination. She now searched the much narrower area intensively, and within minutes, she detected Akari's small body, faintly visible on the sand.

"Akari! I found you!" Mai's telepathy rang with joy.

As soon as Akari saw Mai's drone descending towards her, she felt a wave of relief and made a strong resolution: I won't fall again! The moment Mai's drone body touched the ground, Akari clung to it without hesitation. The way she struggled to hold on with her small, toy-like body was as adorable as a child.

Mai chuckled at Akari's reaction. 'I'm usually the one who looks the youngest, so my sisters always protect me. It's strange to be in this position.' she thought to herself. For Mai, who had always been considered the "youngest" for hundreds of years, this situation of having to protect and be responsible for someone was unfamiliar, yet it brought a strange sense of pride. Mai firmly secured Akari to her body and soared into the night sky towards Sydney again. This time, she flew much more carefully, and with a bit more reassurance.^[9:7]

...

While manipulating research results to forcibly direct humanity's gaze toward the future, another strategy was secretly being executed at the shrine. This was an operation to make users 'voluntarily' replace old embedded devices. After Miho and Chie reviewed extensive data and Kako analyzed past cases, devices that posed a risk of causing great turmoil if not upgraded were prioritized. The key was not simply to break these devices, but to make users experience enough inconvenience that they would have no choice but to opt for replacement themselves.

The methods were diverse and unconventional. The most basic approach involved the corporeal maidens directly approaching the site. For devices in relatively close proximity, a corporeal maiden familiar with the area would transform and quietly approach. For example, Akane transformed into small particles of light and infiltrated the display of an old factory control system. She subtly distorted the screen's color palette or manipulated certain pixels to appear slightly misaligned. While not a complete malfunction to the naked eye, the screen's text would appear twisted, or image colors would subtly shift into unpleasant combinations. The operation itself wasn't critically flawed, but the method was designed to fatigue the operator's eyes and create a vague sense of unease in their minds, ultimately leading to a replacement request. They penetrated devices like an invisible hand, planting small discomforts in humanity's unsuspecting daily lives.

For long-distance operations spanning continents, Lua and Mai's assistance was essential. Lua sometimes corrupted the navigation systems of fast-moving cars, causing them to get lost, and other times generated inexplicable noise on the control panels of old airport baggage sorting systems, reducing their operational efficiency. Mai transformed into an even smaller drone to infiltrate hard-to-reach enclosed spaces or the control units of high-rise building display boards. They meticulously avoided tampering with core functions, yet subtly guided users to think, 'It's really time to replace this.' Old ATM machines with suddenly corrupted fonts or flashing, meaningless characters in the middle of the night, and industrial monitors whose screens inexplicably flipped upside down were all their handiwork.

In some cases, a sophisticated psychological operation involving document manipulation was employed instead of direct physical contact. Ritsu and Shiori infiltrated humanity's complex administrative systems, secretly creating new documents or altering existing ones to accelerate the replacement schedule for specific devices, making it all appear like a minor system error. These were hidden within documents that seemed perfectly normal at first glance, such as internal corporate inspection plans or government procurement lists. These manipulated documents were perceived as unintended 'administrative errors,' causing the relevant devices to reach their replacement cycle much earlier than expected.

One of the most shocking yet effective methods was devised by Mai. She transformed into a small bird and carried out an operation to intentionally scatter droppings on old devices exposed to the elements, such as old traffic light control boxes or CCTV camera lenses installed throughout cities. Bird droppings are highly corrosive and can be fatal to electronic equipment. Of course, a maiden's droppings were harmless to humans, but their effect on equipment was no different from that of an ordinary bird. Faced with blurry screens from the filth on the lenses or malfunctions from subtle corrosion inside control boxes, users gave up on the idea of repairing them and had no choice but to get new ones. Through these diverse and sometimes bizarre methods, humanity began to push its old systems into the past for its own convenience.^[9:8]

...

The maidens of the mountain shrine were not the only ones to sense and respond to humanity's crisis. In the outside world, there was one human ally who shared Lua's secret: Sayuri, an exceptional journalist who led an investigative reporting team. She wasn't aware of every subtle movement within the shrine, but she did know that Lua occasionally transformed into a car, and now a small drone, traveling across the globe. While the maidens planted seeds invisibly, Sayuri's role was to cultivate the world so those seeds could sprout.

Sayuri played a significant role in the widespread media coverage that multinational research teams' observations were converging on a solar flare (CME) being expected around 2037-2038, necessitating immediate preparation. As the subtle waves of data manipulated by Aki, Izumi, Mai, and Akari began to ripple through the academic community, Sayuri was on high alert. She personally met with various journalists worldwide, dedicating herself to processing complex scientific information into easily understandable language and disseminating it. It was thanks to her exceptional storytelling ability and command of the media that experts' warnings were not buried as mere rumors but were imprinted on the public consciousness as an urgent agenda. As the sense of crisis penetrated humanity's core, relevant corporations and government agencies reluctantly began to accelerate their development of countermeasures.

The intensive coverage of the Y2K38 problem was also the fruit of Sayuri and her investigative reporting team. While maidens like Miho and Shiori induced situations where old embedded devices had to be replaced, Sayuri's team uncovered and publicized the potential dangers.

In-depth reports continuously highlighted how old systems could lead to fatal consequences and what impact they could have on everything from individuals' daily lives to national infrastructure. People who had been considering voluntary replacement due to inconvenience finally realized, through the media reports, that the problem was urgent and critical. This was more than just reporting; it was part of a grand movement to guide humanity to confront its problems and find solutions on its own.

One day, Sayuri was on an overseas business trip to South America. She had been wandering through remote areas for several days for an in-depth report on the destruction of the Amazon ecosystem. As she dragged her tired body to a small hut to catch her breath, a very small, sleek silver-grey drone descended with a low whir before her eyes. It was Lua, who had coincidentally spotted Sayuri on her way back from a mission. Lua's drone body touched down on its small, foot-like landing gear and, surprisingly, began to write something on the ground.

Written in the dirt with a stick, one letter at a time, was the perfectly ordinary English phrase, 'How are you?'. Seeing this, Sayuri momentarily wondered if she was dreaming. In a remote South American wilderness, a small drone that had flown a great distance was greeting her in English! Perhaps it was the casualness after a completed mission or the happiness of seeing a colleague after a long time. But the surreal humor of the situation left Sayuri frozen for a moment, staring at the drone with a look of utter bewilderment. Only a hollow laugh escaped her lips. Her life and Lua's, bustling invisibly to maintain the world's balance, were filled with such extraordinary, and sometimes absurd, moments.^[9:9]

...

On the night of January 19, 2038, a strange sense of tension and anticipation permeated the main hall of the shrine. All the maidens, including the Great Maiden, gathered together and sat before Aki, who was placed in the center. Aki had transformed into a sleek, large flat-screen television, broadcasting the crucial special report that would determine humanity's great turmoil of 2038. From the corporeal maidens—Miho, Mai, Lua, Izumi, and Akari—to the temporal maidens—Mirai, Kako, Shiori, Chie, and Ritsu—all watched the screen with bated breath. This was the moment when all their invisible efforts over the past four years would bear fruit.

Around midnight, the announcer on screen declared with a tense voice that the Unix time countdown had finally crossed the critical point. A heart-stopping silence ensued. A moment later, news flashes from all over the world began to fill the screen. In some regions, old systems reported minor errors, such as incorrect times displayed on billboards or bank ATMs freezing for a few minutes. However, the catastrophic disasters they had feared—power grid collapses, transportation system paralysis, financial system failures—did not occur anywhere.

"Success..." A small whisper was the first to break the silence, and soon it filled the main hall. The maidens all clutched their chests and let out deep sighs of relief. The past four years—the countless nights Aki and Izumi spent manipulating data; the vulnerabilities of old systems unearthed by Miho; the clandestine infiltrations across the globe by Mai and Lua; the administrative documents altered by Shiori and Chie; and the warnings disseminated to the public through Sayuri's hands... It was a moment of confirmation that all their efforts had not been in vain.

"You all worked so hard," Mirai said, her eyes welling up with tears. Chie clasped Miho's hand and nodded. Mai beamed, patting Lua's shoulder. Their faces were filled with fatigue, yet also an inexpressible sense of accomplishment and pride. Instead of revealing themselves to the world, they had faithfully played their role, quietly pushing from behind so that humanity could solve the problem on its own.

Just then, Aki's television screen flickered briefly before displaying a new flash. It was news about the CME. A massive solar flare had indeed erupted early that morning, hurtling ferociously toward Earth. The maidens held their breath. They had been so focused on the Y2K38 problem that they hadn't checked the CME's final progress. However, the announcer's calm voice that followed reassured them. "It was the most powerful solar flare observed in decades, but fortunately, it narrowly grazed Earth's magnetic field, causing no significant damage. Analysts suggest that early predictions by research teams worldwide and their swift response helped minimize the impact."

A complex emotion flashed across Aki's face. She knew that her and Izumi's manipulation had played a decisive role in that early prediction. It wasn't that disaster hadn't struck, but that

humanity had been prepared, thus averting it. A deep sense of accomplishment bloomed on the faces of the maidens gathered in the main hall. The world might never know of their existence, but the fact that they could contribute, even a little, to humanity overcoming a crisis with its own strength was enough for them.

The Great Maiden quietly watched them. Her deep eyes held boundless trust and pride in her maidens. "You bought humanity the 'time' it needed, and you opened a 'path' for them to exercise their own wisdom. This is the role of the shrine, and this is your true power." Her voice was warm, as if embracing the entire shrine. The maidens looked at each other and smiled. The night was deep, but in their hearts, a radiant sense of accomplishment for having protected the world's peace lingered for a long time.^[9:10]

After the successful mission to avert the great turmoil, a peaceful tranquility once again settled over the shrine. However, this tranquility was permeated with the deep fatigue left by four and a half years of arduous effort. It was a time when everyone yearned for rest, both for body and soul.

Just then, Kana, who had quietly taken on a supporting role, stepped before the maidens. "Maidens, you all worked so hard, didn't you? I've prepared a small gift." Her face showed both apology and a hint of anticipation. For the past four years, Kana, in her boiler form, had faithfully done her part by providing heating and hot water to the shrine. But a sense of guilt had always lingered in a corner of her heart, for she had been in such a safe and comfortable place compared to the other maidens who had risked danger across the world. So, she decided to offer them all some comfort herself.

Kana guided the maidens to a small valley behind the shrine. The once-cold, babbling stream was now mysteriously steaming. On one side of the valley was a modest open-air bath, seemingly carved out of rock. Gentle lanterns hung around the bath, and flower petals were scattered on the clear water. Kana had already transformed into a massive boiler, submerged deep within the stream. The intense heat emanating from her body had turned the cold creek into warm spring water.

"Thank you, Kana! Thank you so much!" Lua exclaimed in admiration. Mai's eyes sparkled as she jumped into the water. Aki and Miho leaned their tired shoulders against each other, inhaling the warm steam. Mirai, Kako, Shiori, Chie, and Ritsu also submerged themselves in the water without hesitation. As the warm water enveloped them, they felt all the tension and fatigue accumulated over four and a half years melt away like snow.

"Ah, this is nice... This is truly heavenly," Akari mumbled, stretching languidly. Izumi happily splashed in the water.

In the warm water, the maidens looked back on the past. Lua's precarious first mission, Mai and Akari's unpredictable stranding in the desert, and the fleeting moments of manipulating data and disrupting systems through countless sleepless nights. All those difficult moments seemed to transform into beautiful memories, like flower petals floating on the warm water. Perhaps it was because of Kana's warm heart, but they felt their minds being purified as well as their bodies.

"This is all thanks to Kana. Doing something for us we didn't even think of!" Miho said, laughing, as she sent a telepathic message to Kana, who was submerged in the water. The warm comfort emanating from Kana's entire being was a deep solace for their hard work, and a new source of strength for the unknown future ahead. The long journey of four and a half years thus concluded peacefully, in a warm spring bath.^[9:11]

...

The rest in the warm open-air bath washed away the journey of the past four and a half years, instilling new vitality in the maidens. Now, the quiet daily routine returned. The temporal maidens returned to their respective shrines, where their inherent roles lay, and the corporeal maidens once again permeated various parts of the shrine in their familiar forms. The serene sense of accomplishment from the success of the grand mission still lingered in their daily lives, but the weight of tension was gone.

Kana once again transformed into a gently steaming boiler, infusing the shrine buildings with warmth. The water heated by her body flowed into the kitchen, the bathrooms, and the teapots

for brewing tea. In that warmth, the maidens shared simple meals and conversed over tea. Kana no longer felt apologetic. Everyone knew that the warmth she provided was the most fundamental form of support sustaining the maidens' daily lives.

Miho still remained transformed into a massive bookshelf deep within the shrine's library. Thousands of years of accumulated human knowledge and history were preserved intact within her wood-grained body. Occasionally, a curious Izumi would perch on a shelf to read ancient tomes, and Miho would quietly answer her questions, imparting knowledge. Records of solving complex problems from their recent past were also stored somewhere within her.

Aki no longer needed to transform into a television to analyze complex information. Sometimes she transformed into a small stone by the quiet shrine pond to calmly gaze at the ripples; other times she lay stretched out as a cat sculpture, basking in the warm sun on the veranda. Her keen senses for the world were still alive within her, but now she used them not for tension, but to savor the peaceful daily life.

Akane devoted herself to maintaining the shrine's beauty. Sometimes she transformed into a small gem catching the sunlight, making the grain of the wooden floors even more lustrous; other times she became a delicate ornament, adding a subtle elegance to the space like the chime of a bell in the wind. Wherever her touch reached, the shrine became even more perfectly beautiful.

Lua occasionally transformed into a small car to leave the shrine boundary and sense changes in the world, but now her purpose was closer to a simple 'stroll' than a mission. Mai and Akari, transformed into small toys, played around the shrine grounds. Sometimes they explored the forest, and other times they splashed their feet in the stream with Izumi, playing pranks. Their small bodies were no longer filled with tension, but with innocent laughter. Watching Akari and Izumi play with the same carefree abandon she once had as the youngest, Mai finally felt as if she had found true rest.

Though there was a subtle emptiness in the space left by the departed temporal maidens, the corporeal maidens found peace in their own ways. Each returned to their familiar form to become a part of the shrine, or transformed into a tiny being to enjoy her freedom. The threat of

great turmoil had vanished, and they felt the peace brought by their efforts throughout their bodies, waiting for the next era in the quiet embrace of the shrine.^[9:12]

...

For the temporal maidens, the past four years had been a period marked by incessant observation, calculation, and inner tension. Unlike the corporeal maidens, they were not permitted to transform their bodies and carry out direct operations out in the world. Their ability lay in 'time' itself, which meant a restriction on physical movement. In the deepest domain of the shrine, they could only watch over humanity's future by relying on their own abilities.

Their role was limited to observing the potential futures approaching humanity and informing the corporeal maidens of the probability of positive outcomes for the 'specific choices' they might take. Mirai, despite being the youngest maiden, saw farthest into the future, and Kako excelled at analyzing all records and patterns from the past to predict the results of current choices. Shiori subtly calculated the ripples that tiny changes in the present would create in the grand flow of the future, while Chie synthesized all this information to present the most optimal probabilistic paths. And Ritsu adjusted the flow of 'time' to be the most favorable for humanity amidst all those possibilities. If the corporeal maidens moved the world with invisible hands, the temporal maidens acted as the 'eyes' and 'compass' that showed the safest and most effective path for those movements.

However, their ability was to see 'all possible futures,' not 'a single, determined future.' Amidst the infinite possibilities interwoven with countless variables and humanity's free will, even if the probability of avoiding disaster approached 99%, the remaining 1% of uncertainty always weighed heavily on them. On the night of January 19, 2038, as they sat with the corporeal maidens before the television that Aki had become, the temporal maidens were gripped by an excruciating tension, more so than anyone else. This was because they had seen all the positive possibilities, but at the same time, they had also seen the terrifying possibilities of disaster striking.

When it was confirmed that Unix time had crossed its critical point and the solar flare had narrowly grazed Earth, the heavy burden that had weighed on their shoulders finally lifted. Only then did a pure smile bloom on Mirai's face, and Kako sighed deeply, nodding. Shiori released the tension that had been held taut for so long, and a palpable relief that the worst-case scenario had finally been ruled out was clear in the eyes of Chie and Ritsu. Only after confirming that all uncertainties threatening humanity's future had disappeared could the temporal maidens return to their own domain deep within the shrine and quietly slip back into their daily routines. True peace had finally found them.^[9:13]

...

Peaceful time once again flowed through the shrine. After successfully completing the grand mission, the Great Maiden, in her long-awaited leisure, finally opened the last volume of the shonen manga she had been unable to get to: *Flame Swordsman Kaen*. As she turned the final page of the grand narrative, a deep sense of satisfaction mixed with a touch of wistfulness crossed the Great Maiden's face. Even for her, who had lived for hundreds of years, the passionate zeal and straightforward storytelling of a shonen manga were sometimes more interesting than the complex balance of the world.

Just then, a subtle ripple disturbed the small teacup on the table next to her. The shadow reflected in the tea was so small as to be almost invisible, yet it was none other than Lua, who had transformed her body onto the surface of the water in the cup. Lua knew well how much the Great Maiden cherished *Flame Swordsman Kaen*. As if waiting for the very moment the Great Maiden turned the final page, she carefully sent a telepathic message.

"Great Maiden, you've finally finished *Flame Swordsman Kaen*."

The Great Maiden smiled and nodded. "Yes, Lua. I've been so engrossed in the affairs of the world that I couldn't finish it, but now I feel a sense of closure. Kaen's final flame is always magnificent." Her voice conveyed her affection for the work.

"I thought you might be looking for a new series, so I would like to recommend one." Lua's telepathic voice was imbued with confidence. She was skilled at collecting all sorts of information from the world and had an excellent eye for humanity's cultural content.

"Oh? You have one? What is it?" A spark of interest lit up the Great Maiden's eyes.

"It's a recently popular manga called *Aether, Wanderer of the Sky*. Its passion for swordsmanship and growth is on par with *Flame Swordsman Kaen*, and its elements of camaraderie with companions and the adventure of exploring unknown worlds are truly outstanding. The art style is also exquisite, and most importantly, it's not yet finished, which makes the future of the story even more exciting."

The Great Maiden let out a small laugh at Lua's explanation. "Not yet finished, you say... I suppose I'll have to endure another wait. But if you recommend it that highly, I'm sure it's entertaining." The Great Maiden reached out and gently touched a dry leaf on the table. It looked as if it had just emerged from the water in the teacup where Lua had briefly transformed. "Very well, Lua. As you say, I must find and read *Aether, Wanderer of the Sky*."

Lua, seemingly pleased with the Great Maiden's acceptance, expressed her joy by creating small ripples in the teacup. Though they were maidens who had saved humanity from a great crisis, their daily lives were always filled with such small joys and consideration for one another.^[9:14]

- The End -

Maiden Life Guide

Hey there! I'm Aki. So, I'm a corporeal maiden born, oh, about 251 years ago. Oops, my age is supposed to be a secret! But hey, once you've lived as long as I have, you'll figure out that age is just a number anyway.

There are two main reasons I decided to write this guide. First, I've really felt firsthand that the world ahead is becoming far more complex than we can imagine, especially for curious and quirky junior maidens like yourselves. As you know, we learn, know, and experience so much, but putting it all down clearly in writing is a whole other challenge. So, I wanted to explicitly lay out our abilities and way of life to help you gain a broader perspective and deeper understanding. Knowledge is power, right?

Second, you've probably noticed how fast times are changing. Nowadays, books aren't just paper ones you flip through by hand; they're coming out as e-books, too! (Honestly, it still amazes me!) I'm also curious about the possibilities new publishing media might hold, and I wanted to experiment with using it to share our unique maiden knowledge. Of course, the content in this guide won't be a perfect answer to every question. We all need to keep learning and growing, after all.

This booklet will hopefully help you understand the various situations you'll face as a maiden a little more easily. I've lightly covered topics like how we become maidens, how our

transformation ability works and what its limits are, what life is like inside and outside the shrine, and what role we should play in this rapidly changing world.

So, I hope this book brings a little light to your life as a maiden!^[A:1]

First Steps

If you're reading this guide, you've probably received a special calling from the Divine. Unless something else happened, of course. For ordinary humans like we were to be drawn into this shrine, it's all part of the Divine's will.

Our formal name is "the Corporeal Maiden." This might sound a bit unfamiliar. That's because we're not the only ones in the world. Far away in other shrines, there are Temporal Maidens who weave the threads of the future and past, and there's also the Luminous Maiden, who allows all of us to read each other's minds and communicate. I recently learned for sure through Mai that the Luminous Maiden is a single, unified being. It feels like she literally encompasses all the light in the world.

The reason we're called Corporeal Maidens is simple: we can manipulate matter in ways people can't even imagine, and we can even form our bodies from that matter. You could say we have the ability to literally "embody" matter. If you want, you can transform into a tiny leaf or even a huge car. Of course, your comprehension and belief play a big part in that process.

Thanks to this special ability, we've become immortal beings. We don't age, we don't die, and we can live perfectly fine without eating or sleeping. Sometimes I wonder if we're truly alive. But despite all that, we were originally human, right? So if we want to, we still eat delicious food and sleep in cozy beds. It helps us maintain our humanity, too.

But here's the important part: these abilities weren't given to us just to use and enjoy as we please. Never forget that all of this was granted to us by the Divine to maintain the balance of this world. That's our very reason for existing.^[A:2]

Transformation Ability

Alright, it's time to dive into our most important ability as maidens: transformation. You really, really need to get this right.

Within the shrine's boundary, we can freely transform into anything we want, whether it's living or inanimate. And changing back to our original form is just as easy. But once you go outside the boundary, it's a different story. Out there, it's impossible to transform or change back. If you need to operate in the outside world, you should assume you'll have to leave in an already transformed state.

And this is important: outside the shrine's boundary, we become completely naked. What do I mean? Simply put, our clothes and accessories don't transform with our bodies or come along with us. So, the usual method is for maidens to go out in pairs, where one transforms into the other's clothes to cover her up. You'll probably learn this clothing transformation first when you start practicing.

Our five senses remain the same after transformation. For senses like sight and hearing, if you've transformed into something that covers a body, like clothes, they'll be reproduced in a way the person wearing them would experience. For example, if you become a shoe, you'll feel the vibrations and see the world from a shoe's perspective. If you transform your entire body into something else, you'll have a completely new experience, like perceiving the scenery with your whole being. It might feel a bit weird at first, but you'll get used to it quickly, so don't worry. If you've played any of those popular first-person action games, you'll probably adapt easily.

The most crucial aspect of transformation is fidelity. Fidelity refers to how accurately and essentially perfectly the object you've transformed into is realized. Several factors are important for fidelity, but there are three main ones. First is the size difference between your original body and the object you want to become. If you're tall and try to turn into something tiny, your fidelity might drop. Second is how well you understand the object you're transforming into (comprehension). And third is your physical condition. If you try to transform when you're feeling stiff or tired, your fidelity can drop significantly, so be careful!

Of these, comprehension is by far the most important. When you're just mimicking a static object, like a stone or a wallet, simply remembering its appearance is usually enough for decent fidelity. But it's a different story if you're transforming into a complex, moving object like a car. You have to go beyond just its appearance; you need a detailed understanding of its engine, how all the parts are organically connected, and you must perceive those parts as if they were your own body. Only then can you go outside and pass as a proper car without getting caught. (If you're curious, go find Lua. She's a master of car transformation!) If you force a transformation into a car with low comprehension, it might move, but it will look bizarre to anyone, like it's being dragged along with its wheels locked up. Ultimately, the more you know about your target, and the deeper your knowledge, the more faithful and perfect your transformation will be. So, let's all study hard!^[A:3]

Let me tell you a little more about the transformation ability. When we transform into something sufficiently large, we can create an avatar near it. Of course, that avatar can't be larger than the object you've become, but when you make one, you'll primarily experience the world through the avatar's senses. That's not to say you lose all sensation in your original transformed body, so it can be very useful in various situations.

Maybe some of you junior maidens are scared about what happens if you get hurt while transformed. Well, to be honest, it'll really hurt. For example, if you transform into a glass bead and get shattered, the pain is surprisingly intense. But don't panic. As long as you can get most of those shattered pieces back inside the shrine's boundary, you can return to your human form completely, with no marks or injuries. If a terrible situation like that ever happens, the key is to hold on tight, keep recalling what your pieces look like, and constantly remind yourself that all of those pieces are 'you' right now. Remember how I said your comprehension and high-fidelity perception are important? The same principle applies here. If you can perceive your own shattered state as 'one complete self,' you can return to being whole again from that state.

We can only transform into objects that could physically exist. This is an important limitation. For example, a car that rolls on its own without any energy source can't exist in reality, right? We can't become something like that either. In other words, if you transform into a car, you'll continuously need fuel. Usually, we can substitute that fuel by eating. If you run out of fuel while transformed, you'll probably be forced back into your human form, which would put you in a

real bind, so it's best to eat regularly! Honestly, there haven't been many cases of us operating as complex, moving objects like this. So, we'll need more experimentation and experience in the future. If you discover anything interesting during your activities, please be sure to let me know!

One last piece of advice: for emergencies, it's a good idea to have a way to move yourself at least a little, even if you're an inanimate object. For instance, if you become a ball, it would be much more useful to have a counterweight inside that lets you control the direction you roll. Without that kind of preparation, you'd have no choice but to hope other maidens find and help you. Pretty scary thought, isn't it? There's no harm in preparing in advance, so be sure to keep that in mind.^[A:4]

Life at the Shrine

If you've entered the shrine, you've probably met her. There's a maiden who is truly beautiful, and whose words and actions carry a wisdom that feels ancient—that's the Great Maiden. To be precise, the Great Maiden we see is her avatar; in reality, the Great Maiden is the shrine building itself. She's the very first maiden of this shrine and the one who has lived the longest, so if you have a question that other maidens don't know the answer to, don't hesitate to ask her. You'll surely find your answer.

Let me tell you more about the maiden attire you're wearing. This attire is like a part of your body that only exists within the boundary. You can slip it off easily, like shedding skin, and if you leave it off, it will fade away after a moment. If you want to wear it again, just wish for it strongly in your mind, and it will reappear on your body. As I mentioned briefly, this attire disappears outside the boundary, so if you need to go out, make sure to take it off and change into clothes from the human world while you're still inside.

As I said before, we have bodies that don't need food or sleep. We don't age or die, after all. Still, maintaining regular meals and sleep, just like when you were human, is very good for your mental health. A regular routine helps calm the mind, as you probably know from before you became a maiden. The dining hall and bedrooms are right next to the main hall, so feel free to use them.

We maidens can communicate telepathically, all thanks to the Luminous Maiden. Telepathy always works, no matter where you are—even in an urgent situation where you have no idea where you are—so don't worry, just let us know what's happening. But there's one thing to be careful about: if you send telepathy to too many people at once, you can easily get a headache. So, getting to know which maidens are good at solving certain problems will be a huge help in an emergency.^[A:5]

Relationship with the Outside World

While we are spiritual beings, we also exist as part of this physical world. Therefore, it's crucial to respect the laws of the outside world. As long as it doesn't threaten the foundation of our shrine's existence, we must not recklessly challenge the world's order. For example, the land this shrine sits on has been legally passed down through generations to a maiden who is wise yet young enough by outside standards. As of my writing this, Lua is in that role. Someday, one of you reading this might take on that role, too.

You've probably all received your new maiden names by now. While it's natural to use your maiden name within the shrine, there will inevitably be times outside when you have to use the name from your human life. This might feel awkward or uncomfortable, but it's unavoidable, so we ask for your understanding. If it's too difficult or troubling, please talk to the other maidens in advance. We'll help you find a solution together.

We are the ones who maintain the world's balance, right? So, it's extremely important to keep up with how the world is turning. Especially these days, the tools of modern civilization like televisions, computers, and mobile phones are essential for understanding the world. When you need things like that, come to me (Aki), and I'll transform to help you out. But don't use me too much. Unfortunately, I only have one body.

When you go out into the world, you must be extremely careful not to let our secret get out. In truth, it probably wouldn't be a huge personal problem for us even if our existence were revealed. The problem is that the world would be turned upside down. If it became known that our abilities are verifiable superpowers, religious beliefs could be shattered, leading to great chaos like wars, and dangerous people might appear wanting to misuse our powers. Never forget that we are beings who quietly adjust the world's balance from behind the scenes. Always be

careful, careful, and more careful. If you ever find yourself in an unavoidable situation, the best course of action is to first send a telepathic message to the Great Maiden and ask for her wisdom.^[A:6]

In Conclusion

What else am I forgetting? Oh! You must always be careful to prevent ordinary people, non-maidens, from entering the shrine's boundary. If they do enter, their souls, unable to bear the shrine's spiritual weight, will suffer extreme pain. We usually immobilize them to protect them and then send them back outside the boundary, but pain is still pain, so it's best to prevent them from entering in the first place. There's a mailbox right in front of the boundary, so communicating with the outside world through analog methods like letters is one option.

The task we have is truly a heavy one. It's a job that might take an eternity. But that doesn't mean we can't have fun doing it, right? Don't be too impatient or push yourself too hard. The world is always changing, and new things are constantly happening, so I hope you'll sometimes tune into those changes and enjoy your life as a maiden for a long, long time. And who knows? When new maidens come to the shrine after you, you might get some unexpected, fresh inspiration from them!

Alright, I think that's all the basic stuff I can tell you for now. I sincerely hope this "Maiden Life Guide" is of some help to you in your new life at the shrine. Whenever you have a question, don't suffer in silence—come ask the other maidens or me. We're all here to help each other and be together!

So, I wish you all the best in unfolding your life as a maiden!

From Aki.^[A:7]

Side story: Hana's Teapot

Sitting on the veranda, bathed in sunlight where the breeze came to rest, Lua watched the Great Maiden's quiet tea ceremony. A considerable time had passed since she returned to the Shrine, yet the Great Maiden's daily routine remained devout and peaceful. The afternoon tea hour, in particular, was Lua's favorite moment. The meticulous purity in her every gesture simply had a way of calming the hearts of all who observed.

Suddenly, Lua noticed something peculiar. The Great Maiden always used an old porcelain teapot with a subtle sheen for her tea. However, she didn't steep the tea leaves and water directly in it. Instead, the Great Maiden brought over another, much rougher-textured black earthenware pot that sat beside it. From this earthenware pot, she first poured clear tea water into the porcelain one. A gentle steam rose as the liquid shimmered within. Only then did she pour the tea from the porcelain pot into her own teacup.

It was strange. Why use two teapots? She could have poured directly into the cup or steeped the tea in the porcelain pot itself. It was as if she intentionally added an extra step. Unable to contain her curiosity, Lua cautiously spoke.

"Great Maiden, that teapot... is there anything special about it?"

Lua's gaze fell upon the old porcelain teapot. The Great Maiden paused, her hand still holding the pot, and turned to look at Lua. Her smile was as gentle as ever, but for a moment, a flicker of ancient, profound sorrow passed through it.

"Indeed, Lua."

The Great Maiden's voice was calm, but it held a deeper resonance than usual.

"This teapot holds a very old story. But it is a story as difficult to hear as it is to tell. Are you certain you wish to know it?"

Lua hesitated. The weight in the Great Maiden's expression was unnerving. But Lua knew that when the Great Maiden spoke of 'difficult stories,' they were often truths that a maiden, a protector of the world's balance, had to know—truths that perhaps touched upon the very reason for their existence. Taking a breath, Lua nodded.

"Yes, I am certain, Great Maiden."

The Great Maiden smiled gently again. She picked up an extra teacup that sat before her and offered it to Lua.

"Then, let us talk as we drink tea together."

The warm teacup rested in Lua's hands. Inside, the pale brown tea shimmered quietly.^[B:1]

...

The Great Maiden's gaze was fixed on a distant place. Her eyes looked back seven hundred years, to a time when layers of history had settled like dust. "In those days, Lua," the Great Maiden's voice was low, as if tracing old memories, yet it carried an inexpressible weight.

"There were far more maidens than there are now. Far, far more than you can imagine."

Lua's eyes widened. She thought the number of maidens was considerable even now, but the Great Maiden's words implied that a countless host had existed in that distant past. The Great Maiden calmly continued.

"Easily hundreds. They were scattered across the world, upholding the will of the Divine, and each maintained a small balance in her own corner of the world."

She shook her head.

"It wasn't a closed system like now, where one is only drawn to the Shrine after hearing the Divine's voice. Back then, children with spiritual insight were far more common. Those who could hear the heavens' call and feel the earth's whispers abounded. If one had the gift and met the basic conditions, there was no reason to refuse her if she wished to become a maiden. The Shrine itself required a vast complex of buildings to house so many maidens."

Lua glanced around. The current Shrine consisted mostly of vast, empty spaces, apart from the main hall and a few auxiliary buildings. Lush forests and well-tended gardens stretched endlessly. As the Great Maiden said, these entire grounds were but a vestige of the maidens' former prosperity. The Great Maiden's gaze seemed to paint the shadows of past buildings and countless maidens into the empty air, lost in distant remembrance.^[B:2]

The Great Maiden's quiet voice drifted across the veranda. "But peace cannot last forever. After a long era of tranquility, the period of great turmoil came to this land."

The tea in her cup rippled gently. Her gaze was distant, as if staring at a far-off horizon. "The energies of heaven and earth twisted, and darkness deepened in people's hearts. Endless war, plague, and famine swept the land. The people groaned in agony, and in the end, the land was torn in two, birthing an age of profound conflict."

The moment Lua heard those words, she instinctively understood. The 'period of great turmoil' was none other than the Nanboku-chō period—the Age of the Northern and Southern Courts. It was an era of utter chaos, when the nation was split by warring emperors and suffering was a

part of daily life. Lua's heart beat low in her chest. To think the maidens had stood in the midst of such a time.

"Those who came to the Shrine of their own will, Lua, served the Divine faithfully in times of peace. But in an age of turmoil, their hearts wavered, and they found it difficult to resist the temptation to misuse their powerful abilities."

Lua was puzzled. She had learned that a maiden's transformation ability required a detailed comprehension of the target. A clumsy transformation would be easily exposed. How could it be 'misused'? Lua asked cautiously.

"But... doesn't a maiden's transformation require a deep comprehension of the object? If they transformed without that understanding, wouldn't they be easily discovered?"

The Great Maiden nodded. "To blend into the world unnoticed, one must indeed have perfect fidelity, as you are learning. But... if the goal is not to blend in but simply to create chaos, the story changes entirely."

She continued slowly, her words deliberate and clear. "To take the crude shape of a giant beast to shatter a castle's walls, to take a human form but move like the wind to commit banditry, to become a great boulder and block a vital road... wielding violent power without comprehension was not difficult. The world was in chaos, and people grew numb to such calamities. When the power meant to understand and preserve balance is used merely as a tool for destruction... its impact is beyond imagination."

Lua instinctively covered her mouth. This was a catastrophic possibility, utterly alien to the power she knew. She shuddered at the thought that destructive force could be wielded without true understanding.

"At first, one maiden succumbed. When she saw no consequence for her actions, two more followed. Then four, then eight... and just like that, a crisis erupted as most of the maidens surrendered to that temptation."^[B:3]

The heavens seemed to turn their back on the maidens. Voices of distrust and resentment against them erupted across the land. It was a natural consequence; their power, instead of saving the world, had become a tool to fuel the chaos. Of the hundreds of maidens, only one remained by the Great Maiden's side to the end: Yukina.

Yukina was a young maiden, but her talent was unmatched. Her intuitive talent for seeing an object, grasping its core principles, and replicating it perfectly was simply unrivaled. No one surpassed her in comprehension, so she felt a natural revulsion for the other maidens who ignored understanding to wield their power recklessly. The way they used their gift was a stain on the name of the maiden.

However, Yukina was also tormented by a different kind of temptation: the urge to use her immense power to fix the broken world. A core principle dictated that maidens, due to their great power, must never step into the forefront. It was an ironclad rule that they must act from the shadows, never disturbing the Divine's balance. But to Yukina's eyes, this rule seemed a mere excuse for incompetence and cowardice. The world was burning; were they to just stand by and watch? Though her intentions were good, a powerful impulse to shatter that principle grew within her.

One night, as quiet moonlight filtered onto the Shrine's veranda, Yukina knelt before the Great Maiden, Hana.

"Great Maiden... no, Hana-sama."

Yukina's voice was heavy with anguish.

"We cannot allow this to continue. The world is on the brink of ruin. Should we not... should we not use our power in a righteous way to correct this chaos?"

The Great Maiden closed her eyes, her breath calm. This torment was no different from that of countless maidens she had watched over for decades, even centuries. But in Yukina's voice, there was a genuine pain and desperation she had not felt from the others.

"Yukina. I know your heart. I know well how fiercely you wish to save this suffering world. But such a wish, when it becomes excessive, can curdle into arrogance."

Hana's voice was gentle, but firm.

"A maiden's power is for maintaining balance, not for forcing it. If we step into the light to change the world, we only become another cause of imbalance. It was true in the past, and it will be true in the future."

"But, Hana-sama! Look at the evil the other maidens commit! They destroy without any comprehension! We... we must be different! With my level of comprehension, I can surely...!"

Yukina's voice grew agitated, her eyes wavering. The Great Maiden slowly opened her eyes, her gaze meeting Yukina's.

"A blade drawn with righteous intent will inevitably turn upon its wielder. No matter how extraordinary your comprehension is, an act that defies the Divine's providence will only lead to ruin. Please, don't... don't become like them, Yukina."

In Hana's deep gaze lay the sorrow of one who had seen it all before, and a desperate plea for Yukina's sake.^[B:4]

...

That night, Yukina left Hana. Beneath the quiet moonlight, her departing figure was a shadow, both resolute and wavering. Hana could understand Yukina's heart—the fierce desire to not turn away from a burning world, to try and save it with her own hands. Though she knew it was the wrong path, Hana could only pray for Yukina's safety. Clutching her aching heart, she stared silently into the darkness where Yukina had vanished.

Months passed. The peaceful stillness of the Shrine was broken as tattered and broken figures began to return, one by one. They were the maidens who had left. They were in ruins. Their clothes were rags, their faces caked with blood and dirt. Their eyes swam with terror, despair,

and a raw, uncomprehending confusion. They were so ravaged that even their powerful transformation ability seemed a meaningless thing.

Before Hana could even ask what had happened, their condition screamed of a horrifying defeat. The Great Maiden understood everything from their eyes, and from the terrible aura of the world that clung to them. Yukina must have gathered followers and formed a militia to protect the suffering masses. But her ideals would have shattered against the colossal wall of reality. The other maidens had fared no better. They had clearly overestimated their power, only to be met by the unpredictable ingenuity and will of humans. They had learned the bitter lesson that human strategy and collective resolve could launch a terrifying counterattack even against a maiden's power, and they had fled here.

The Great Maiden sensed that the Divine's stern judgment would soon fall upon them. With a pained expression, she became the voice of the Divine and rebuked them.

"You have misused the power granted by the Divine and shattered the balance of the world. You have trespassed into the human realm and with your arrogance plunged the world into deeper chaos. Now, you cannot escape the Divine's wrath."

Their gazes were fixed on the floor, showing no hint of defiance. They only trembled in fear. The Great Maiden's gaze finally came to rest on the battered Yukina.

"Yukina. Though you began with a righteous heart, you ultimately chose the wrong path. You must accept that your arrogance, in its quest to save the world, has instead left a deeper wound."

The Great Maiden's rebuke was a sharp blade piercing their hearts. But the maidens had never witnessed divine punishment firsthand. The greatest pain they knew was the nullification of their own power. They could not begin to imagine the true meaning or the horror of the sentence that awaited them. They did not yet know that the very ground beneath their feet was about to swallow them whole.^[B:5]

A colossal shadow seemed to fall from the sky. The moment of the Divine's stern judgment was at hand. The broken maidens who had returned to the Shrine froze, trembling in terror. An

irresistible, overwhelming force washed over them, and before they could even scream, the body of every maiden began to dissolve into light.

When the dazzling, terrible light faded, nothing remained where they had stood. The maidens' bodies were gone. In their place were only scattered piles of fine sand and small stones. Their forms had been broken down into the smallest of particles, to be scattered on the world's winds, in its waters, and deep within its earth. It was a horrifying punishment: to remain conscious but without form, forever wandering the world without anchor or identity. An eternity of torment had begun.

Where all the other maidens had vanished, Yukina stood alone. She trembled, witnessing the unbelievable sight. She instinctively understood the horrifying implication of the others' punishment. That was the Divine's judgment. There could be no greater suffering than to exist forever, yet not exist at all. Knowing she would face the same fate, Yukina squeezed her eyes shut, her heart hammering against her ribs.

Then, a great voice echoed from the heavens once more.

"Yukina. Though you walked a misguided path, your heart was not moved by the selfish greed of the foolish. For this, you are spared eternal punishment."

Yukina's eyes snapped open. The verdict was unbelievable. All the others were gone, cast into endless torment, yet she alone was spared. Tears of regret and relief flooded her eyes.

"You shall become a teapot to hold and serve tea. You will humbly serve the world you sought to disrupt, and through this act, atone for your arrogance."

At that moment, Yukina's body began to glow. As her flesh slowly hardened into smooth, cool porcelain, the pain was immense, but she bowed her head, tears streaming down her face. A genuine gratitude for the Divine's mercy filled her. Thus, she was reborn—an object of punishment, and a vessel for atonement.

The Great Maiden Hana observed the entire process in silence, her face a mask of pain, sorrow, and resignation. When Yukina's forced transformation was complete, the voice from the heavens addressed Hana.

"She shall endure this penance for ninety cycles of ninety waxing and waning moons. You will watch over her and await the day her sins are absolved."

The voice from the heavens fell silent. The Great Maiden carefully embraced the newly born porcelain teapot, which glowed with a subtle sheen. Then, she looked at Lua and whispered, her voice carrying an inexplicable sorrow and the weight of untold ages.

"Ninety cycles of ninety waxing and waning moons... as for precisely how long that is... even I do not know, Lua."^[B:6]

...

Lua felt her hand, holding the teacup, tremble slightly. The story the Great Maiden told was a truth far more terrifying than she could have ever imagined. Eternal punishment. The existential agony of being scattered across the world as sand or dust, with only a conscious mind left to wander endlessly. It was a despair deeper than death itself. Lua broke out in a cold sweat, seized by terror. She had never dreamed that the "punishment" she had vaguely heard of carried such a dreadful meaning.

And then, like pieces of a puzzle, the aftermath of that horrific punishment clicked into place. After all the maidens who left the Shrine were punished and had vanished, the current community of maidens must have been slowly rebuilt, as if rising from ruins. It also became clear why Mai, though much younger than the Great Maiden, possessed the longest history among the living maidens. Mai was likely the first of that rebuilt community. Born around the time the conflict of the courts ended, she, at roughly 650 years of age, must have been the initial seed to receive the divine call after that era of destruction and chaos.

On the veranda, Aki, who had come to visit the Great Maiden only to overhear the entire story, was also in shock. Aki was a scholarly maiden. In her studies of ancient records, she had

occasionally encountered theories that the human population had once been drastically reduced by some unknown catastrophe before rebuilding to its current scale. Aki had regarded those stories as little more than ancient myths or legends. But now, hearing the Great Maiden's tale, she began to suspect that those 'theories' were the tragic truth of the maidens' own history. A chilling thought crossed her mind: that this monumental event that befell the maidens might have impacted the history of humanity itself.

The Great Maiden watched Lua sip her tea in silence. Then, she carefully picked up the teapot she had shared with Lua. Her touch was incredibly gentle and affectionate. As she stroked the smooth surface of the old porcelain, her eyes held both the regret of ages and a profound love.

The Great Maiden's fingers glided over the teapot. She gave a faint, distant smile and looked directly into Lua's eyes.

"Now, do you understand why I always keep this teapot by my side?"^[B:7]

The question echoed in the stillness. At that moment, a small movement came from the side of the veranda. Aki, who had been listening in secret, cautiously revealed herself, her face a mixture of apology and embarrassment.

"Great Maiden... I apologize. I did not mean to... but I heard the entire story."

Aki bowed her head low. The Great Maiden gazed at her for a moment, then waved a hand gently. "There is no need to apologize, Aki. It is a story all must know when the time is right. Your hearing it now may also be the Divine's will."

At the Great Maiden's generous words, Aki finally lifted her head. In her eyes, alongside the shock of the tale, flickered the maiden's scholarly inquisitiveness.

"Great Maiden, you mentioned 'ninety cycles of ninety waxing and waning moons' earlier. Does this perhaps mean 90 multiplied by 90—a total of 8,100 lunar months?"

Aki's voice was cautious, yet confident. The Great Maiden nodded silently. Aki let out a small sigh, her mind already racing. As if entranced, she traced the air with her fingers, making swift calculations.

"8,100 months... if an average lunar month is 29.53 days, that is roughly 239,200 days... which, converted to the solar calendar, is 655 years and a few months."

Aki took a sharp breath, her eyes wide.

"If the period of great turmoil you spoke of was in the 1380s, just before the reunification of the courts in 1392... then 655 years from that point... that time isn't years in the future—it's a time that has nearly arrived. Perhaps... perhaps the punishment is already over, and she has returned to her maiden form!"

Aki's voice trembled with excitement. Her gaze fell upon the Great Maiden's hand, still cradling the teapot. Lua gasped, stunned by the calculation. The hope that the terrible punishment, the long agony, might finally be over washed through her.

With a trembling voice, Aki asked her final question.

"Great Maiden... if she were freed... what would be the first thing you say to Yukina?"

The Great Maiden looked from Aki to Lua, and a small, chiding smile touched her lips.

"The teapot is right here, yet you ask me? You foolish girls."

But her eyes were infinitely warm and deep. The Great Maiden drew the teapot into her arms, holding it like a cherished child.

"What would I say? I would simply say... 'I have missed you, Yukina. I have longed to be with you again' ... and I would hold her tight." ^[B:8]

...

That night, the Great Maiden went to her rest as usual—a short, deep sleep, as was the maidens' custom. In the early morning, as the blue pre-dawn light filled the room, she opened her eyes. In her hazy consciousness, she felt a warmth beside her—a small, precious body heat she was not accustomed to feeling.

The Great Maiden slowly turned her head. There, in the faint light, a figure both familiar and strange lay sleeping peacefully beside her. Neat features, dark hair cascading calmly, the sound of peaceful breaths. It was no longer the cold touch of porcelain. The teapot was gone, and in its place was Yukina.

Aki's calculation had been correct. The long, long penance of 'ninety times ninety moons' had finally come to an end. A smile of regret, longing, and profound relief spread across the Great Maiden's face. More than six hundred years. A time of suffering and atonement had at last restored her.

The Great Maiden carefully reached out and gently embraced the still-sleeping Yukina, feeling the warmth and the soft rhythm of her breath. This was the moment she had awaited for so long. Now, everything was in its rightful place.

'It seems the time has come for that Maiden Life Guide Aki wrote.'

Holding Yukina gently, the Great Maiden closed her eyes again. Enveloped in a warm and peaceful aura, she drifted into a deep sleep. The dawn of a new era was breaking.^[B:9]

A missive about the *Maiden Life Guide*

To my esteemed Senior, Aki,

I have perused the *Maiden Life Guide* which thou didst strive to create. Upon first encountering this 'Guide,' I confess I comprehended not its meaning, yet by the context, I soon divined it to signify a book of precepts or a way-finding scroll. Throughout my perusal of the tome, I could feel thy deep wisdom and profound affection for the maidens imbued in every line. The exposition upon fidelity and comprehension especially filled me with no small wonder, for its teachings are far more ordered than the lore of my own corporeal days. I doubt not it shall be of great aid to young maidens such as Lua and Izumi.

Howbeit, Senior, one great regret lingers within me regarding this guide. Thou didst declare it for 'those newly become maidens,' yet wherefore is there no section for one such as myself, who, freed from long penance, is a maiden once more?

Verily, I am one of the eldest maidens, yet during the past six hundred and fifty years when my flesh was a teapot, the ways of the world and the life of a maiden have transformed beyond measure. My transformation ability remains, yet the sensation of my body floating, untethered to the ground, or the feeling of my inner essence diffusing as tea leaves steep in water—I find it nigh impossible to accustom myself to such things. The world I knew was of centuries past; this

world is vastly different. I do mightily wonder why counsel on how to live again as a maiden in a world so strange is absent.

As I understand it, my penance alone was finite. Perchance none shall again face a plight as peculiar as mine. Nevertheless, methinks a guide should rightfully encompass a broader range of readers. I urge you not to set forth all things in this volume at once. I did but wish to impart that consideration for the few, for the unique cases, is also needed. Should there be other maidens who have undergone such singular experiences, this guide would become more complete still were it to include even a small word of counsel for them.

Fortuitously, during my time as a teapot, through tales recounted by the Great Maiden and scripts newly encountered, I have come to grasp the new letters and speech of this land. By this good hap, I am now able to send this letter to thee, not in the Gothic script I might have penned aforetime, but in these new characters, which I deem fortunate.

Should my missive perchance have wrought e'en a slight wound upon thy labors, prithee, judge it with a generous heart. Know, I pray thee, that these words were tendered solely from a heart that wishes this guide to shine forth as a brighter star unto all maidens.

May thy days be ever tranquil.

From Yukina.^[C:1]

Used Prompts

This novel is almost entirely (>95%) written using Gemini 2.5 Flash LLM (Large Language Model). As such, it was decided to disclose prompts used for the sake of transparency. Maybe some may consider these prompts as the true form of the novel. In any case, I hope these to be useful for those who want to see the writing process and inner thoughts during the writing. It should also be noted that these prompts were originally in Korean and translated into English, again with a tremendous help from Gemini.

I. Corporeal Maiden

[1:1] Write a story about a shrine. This shrine is located in the mountains, quite far from the city but not extremely remote. It has a boundary, and within this boundary, the shrine's maidens can transform their bodies into any form, including inanimate objects. If they transform their bodies within the boundary in advance, that form is maintained even outside the boundary (but they cannot return to their original form, etc., before returning to the boundary). Because of this, once they become maidens, they no longer age or die, and various necessities for life sustenance become unnecessary. As you might notice, even the shrine buildings themselves are the body of a person who became a maiden a very long time ago, and that maiden (called the Great Maiden) creates a separate avatar within her own body to act as a proxy so that other maidens are not confused. Of course, if this fact were to become known outside the shrine, a big problem would arise, so only maidens are strictly allowed inside the shrine, and this fact is meticulously hidden. The plot of this story begins when the protagonist girl one day hears a clear voice in her head telling her to go to a certain shrine, and she formally enters as a maiden. Her paired fellow maiden is

arranged to transform into each other's clothes during outside activities so they are never separated from each other for a single moment. Describe the story up to this point in great detail.¹

[1:2] Unlike the very solemn beginning, create a scenario where the maidens are surprisingly flexible in dealing with reality. For example, there's a maiden among them who often transforms into a television. This maiden not only simply transforms into a television but also knows all the technical requirements for being a television, such as the details of vertical blanking or the ATSC protocol, and acts as a television (even without knowing these specifics, she can transform into a television, but only simpler functions² would be possible. I'd prefer that these technical details are not revealed through dialogue—since only that maiden would know them). Describe up to the scene where Lua becomes interested that there are maidens who transform not just into clothes, but into items for convenient living.

[1:3] Describe a scene where Lua asks the Great Maiden why the Divine created such a unique boundary, and the Great Maiden answers. Do not add any commentary afterwards.³

[1:4] Describe in great detail the process of Lua transforming into Shizuku's clothes for Shizuku, who is briefly going out. The clothes Lua transforms into should be casual clothes, not the original maiden robes, and even afterwards, Lua should be able to maintain her five senses and communicate with Shizuku via telepathy. The setting is that maiden robes automatically exist as part of their bodies when maidens are within the boundary, but they become naked when they leave the boundary, so a maiden to become clothes in this way is needed.

[1:5] Depict a scene where Lua, having gone outside the shrine as Shizuku's clothes, is flustered as she experiences various hardships that clothes might endure.

[1:6] On the way back, describe a scene where Lua, flustered, telepathically asks Shizuku if this is okay, and Shizuku explains her own experiences, specifically what accidents she endured after transforming into other objects (the most severe scene should be her breaking after transforming into a glass object), and despite that, she reassures Lua not to worry, saying that the problem was resolved by the Divine's blessing. Indeed, Lua's body returns to normal as soon as she enters the shrine. As a side note, for the

¹ I'm still not sure how the name *Lua* emerged. I kept this possibly awkward name largely as an inside joke for those who are aware that I had been heavily torn during the use of the Lua programming language.

² That sounds okayish, but I actually wanted it to be an analog television with only System M and NTSC support and thus utterly useless in the digital TV era. This small detail was later hugely bloated into a large worldbuilding as one can see from the *Maiden Life Guide*.

³ Gemini tended to append its own commentary so I had to keep it from doing so. You'll see this kind of prompt over and over later.

incident where Shizuku broke as glass, the setting is that she was restored after the large glass fragments were brought into the shrine.

II. Automotive Maiden

[2:1] Describe Lua deciding to become an electric car to help other maidens move around, and reading car maintenance manuals to the point of memorizing the detailed structure of a car. Before Lua, maidens had to walk or use public transport, which was inconvenient when visiting other shrines or for various reasons.

[2:2] Describe Lua's debut as a car in a novel. Lua's "fuel" is replaced by eating a lot of delicious food in advance, and Lua's own avatar is in the driver's seat to avoid problems if she gets caught by enforcement. Include a scene where Lua gets her driver's license, and Shizuku transforms into Lua to drive Lua herself for car registration. A scene where delicious food is fed in real-time when fuel is low would also be good.

[2:3] This time, describe Lua, wearing clothes transformed by Shizuku, going to briefly greet her parents after a year. Since she was a student and suddenly disappeared, her parents must be very worried. While struggling to explain what happened due to confidentiality, Shizuku realizes through her mother's remark that Lua's mother was a close friend she knew in her childhood, and successfully uses this to prove that the Divine's power is not just mere words (since she cannot show transformation ability, it's good to borrow Shizuku's knowledge). It would also be good to include Shizuku's reaction of wondering what to do when the mother asks her to say hello to Shizuku. Oh, and of course, the names 'Lua' and 'Shizuku' are maiden names, not their birth names, so their parents should not use 'Lua' or 'Shizuku'. Do not include commentary at the very end.

[2:4] Lua, walking back to the shrine, suddenly wonders why she can exist as a fully clothed avatar in the driver's seat when she transforms into a car, but it's impossible to choose clothing as part of her body in other cases. Shizuku also agrees, realizing it's true and curious, then they ask the Great Maiden and hear an old story that explains the reason.

[2:5] Describe Lua discovering the unexpected side of the Great Maiden, who likes shonen manga. The Great Maiden should be a little embarrassed about it but explain the reason calmly. Do not add commentary.

[2:6] Describe Lua, wanting to revisit the piano she learned as a child, asking Aki to transform into a piano. Aki is knowledgeable about electronics and electricity but surprisingly not about this, so Lua teaches Aki about the structure of a piano. Aki's usual demeanor should be well-described, and also

depict several other maidens watching due to the unexpected sight of Lua teaching Aki. It should end with Aki transforming into a beautiful upright piano and Lua playing it.

[2:7] Describe the shrine's appearance during winter. The setting is that when in human form, maidens and their avatars also feel cold. (Since clothes, which are part of their bodies, do not change, something else would be needed.) There would be some maidens who transform into boilers or braziers, and it would be interesting to have a maiden who surprisingly transforms into an air fryer to roast winter food. Do not include commentary.

[2:8] Describe a scene where they help with a village festival as one of the shrine's external activities. Since they cannot enter the shrine grounds, the festival location is decided around the flat ground near the shrine entrance. Depict the maidens performing kagura as is customary for shrines, and also introduce the maidens playing the roles of costumes and bells who perform the kagura together (it would be good if one of the previously introduced maidens overlaps). Also describe what Lua does. Naturally, the shrine's secret must not be leaked during this entire process. Please refrain from commentary.

III. New Maidenhood

[3:1] From Lua's perspective (in the third person), depict the process of a new maiden receiving inspiration and coming to the shrine, just as Lua did. Describe how the maidens learn that a new maiden is coming and what preparations they make.

[3:2] Describe what happens when the girl who will become the new maiden and her younger brother appear together at the shrine. Normally, the girl would come alone, but somehow, her brother followed her and even entered the shrine. Imagine what happens when an ordinary person comes to the shrine.

[3:3] Describe the scene where the girl introduces herself and explains how her brother came along. She says that since she lost her parents and her brother is her only blood relative, if she were to disappear, her brother would not be able to live alone, so she brought him with her to the shrine. This puts the maidens, including the Great Maiden, in a difficult situation. They agonize over why the Divine would make a maiden out of a girl in such circumstances.

[3:4] After long contemplation, the Great Maiden telepathically sends a message to Lua (currently: first-aid kit) and Shizuku (currently: protective barrier), who were waiting outside in transformed states, to ask her younger brother Ren if he is willing to become a maiden (because the Great Maiden cannot go outside. Decide on your own which of the two transforms into clothes and which remains a maiden). To the obvious question of whether a boy can become a maiden, they tell him that for a boy to become a maiden

means to abandon his masculinity. The moment he answers that he would gladly do so if it meant being with his sister, a miracle occurs: Ren's body changes into the distinct form of a girl, though still somewhat boyish, and he becomes able to enter and exit as a maiden. Along with the Great Maiden, who answers that she merely discerned the thoughts of the Divine when the two are amazed by her wisdom, describe the appearance of the (now) sister maidens who receive new names.

[3:5] Describe the mischievous shrine life of Izumi, who was originally a boy. She shouldn't cause anything too serious. And stop adding commentary at the very end.

[3:6] Akari, while taking maiden lessons, realizes that if growth stops the moment one becomes a maiden, then Izumi will have to live forever in her child's form. She asks the Great Maiden for confirmation, and while confirming it, the Great Maiden also adds that there might be objects that are easier to transform into precisely because they are small, and wonders if this might be the Divine's true intention. Describe this scene.

[3:7] Describe Izumi 10 years later. If she hadn't become a maiden, she would be a young adult in her twenties, but she remains a little girl. Although her inner self has fully matured into a lady, she feels a slight lingering regret about her small child-like appearance, but finds greater joy in being able to live with her sister, now Akari, because of it. Lua asks Izumi, who is contemplating this, if she wants to go for a drive since Lua can transform into a car. Izumi agrees happily, but after a moment of thought, Lua realizes that she would need a child seat to have Izumi in the passenger seat, and the story ends with Lua being chided by Izumi, who has reached the same conclusion.⁴

IV. Temporal Maiden

[4:1] Describe Lua going for a car inspection according to the law. Focus on how she feels about the process of her inner body being meticulously examined by others. The repair shop where the inspection takes place has no particular connection to the shrine.

[4:2] Describe in a novel how Izumi transforms into a small object and helps the shrine.

[4:3] Describe a scene where the Great Maiden tells the story of when she became a maiden. Since the Great Maiden is set to be the first maiden of the shrine, she must have lived for a very long time, making it likely a story from a mythical era.

⁴ And that was the original end of the story as you can guess. But I still had so many things to tell so I kept writing, and oh dear, it ended up with more than three times the original text.

[4:4] If this shrine transcends the limits of matter, set another frequently visited shrine as one that transcends the limits of time (not simply that the maidens become immortal, but that they become beings who transcend time by simultaneously perceiving past and future). Describe what happens when Lua and others visit that shrine with a letter from the Great Maiden. Given that this shrine must also maintain strict secrecy, even to fellow maidens, they can only speak of the future in a limited way.

[4:5] Tell some minor stories that happen at the Shrine of Time. In this description, mentions of the future are entirely possible (since this content is not revealed to the corporeal maidens).

[4:6] Describe the maidens who have returned from meeting the temporal maidens meeting the Great Maiden and hearing about them.

V. Lovers' Reunion

[5:1] Describe a scene where Lua's old girlfriend⁵, now an adult working as a reporter, is driving and spots Lua (specifically, the avatar inside the car Lua transformed into; remember that Lua's real name is "Suzuki Yui" and she does not use the name "Lua") who seems not to have aged at all, and thinks she's seen a ghost.

[5:2] Sayuri, who memorized the car's license plate, spots the car parked again and sees Yui (Lua) sitting idly inside. Sayuri doesn't know this, but Yui was waiting for the maidens who went shopping and couldn't stray far from her main body, the car, so she kept sitting there. Earlier, Yui herself had felt nostalgic seeing Sayuri and was a little nervous if Sayuri recognized her, but now, being in avatar form and unable to escape, she had no choice but to admit she was indeed Yui, leading to their reunion.

[5:3] Yui (Lua) suggests Sayuri come inside the car for a moment because it's hot. Yui explains, within the permissible scope, that she became a maiden and, though she doesn't quite understand why, her growth stopped after becoming one. She also mentions she's currently waiting for the other maidens who are shopping. Sayuri is somewhat relieved when Yui replies that she meets her parents every few years when asked if she's seen them. Conversely, continue describing Sayuri's reply that she's working as a reporter, in response to Yui's question about what she's doing now.

⁵ The Korean word for a girlfriend is virtually the same as the word for a friend who happens to be female. Gemini confused them and thus this work became a yuri fiction among others.

[5:4] Describe Sayuri wondering why a maiden would drive such a new model car, even though she thinks the car (into which Lua transformed) looks nice. Yui, pleased by the compliment to her car, talks about it (excluding the fact that she herself transformed to create it). Sayuri is slightly flustered but reassured that Yui, who was a chatterbox in her student days, fundamentally hasn't changed.

[5:5] After the other maidens return to the car, Sayuri briefly greets them and then leaves. Describe Sayuri's growing curiosity about what kind of shrine it is, along with her relief that Yui seems to be doing well.

[5:6] Describe the Great Maiden calling Lua after she returns from shopping, praising her for handling the situation wisely. Then, the Great Maiden encourages Lua to get along well with Sayuri, saying Sayuri will be helpful to the shrine even if not a maiden. When Lua asks if this information came from the Shrine of Time, the Great Maiden smiles without giving a direct answer, simply saying, "Perhaps."

[5:7] Describe Sayuri, using her authority as a reporter, starting an investigation based on the car's license plate she remembered. She finds it odd that the car model she saw was released only three years ago, but the car was registered over a decade ago, with no other changes in between.⁶

[5:8] With a headache, Sayuri goes for a drive by the riverside at night. During the drive, she realizes that "a new car is created whenever needed" would explain everything, and thus she uncovers one possibility regarding the shrine's abilities. She does not know Yui's maiden name (Lua) and has not yet imagined transformation (only guessing that they can simply 'create' things).

[5:9] The Great Maiden tells Lua to go for a drive to clear her head, and sure enough, Lua is again spotted by Sayuri, who was lying in wait. When Lua waves her hand, saying she's not some celebrity to be secretly followed, Sayuri suggests they drive together. During the drive, Sayuri, based on her discovery, directly asks if the shrine's secret is the ability to create objects at will. Realizing she's been transforming into too many new model cars and can no longer avoid it, Lua reveals the exact truth. Sayuri's reaction is disbelief at the even more shocking truth that the car she is currently riding in is Lua herself. So, as the car battery runs low, Lua offers to show her directly. After ordering a hamburger at a drive-thru, Lua demonstrates the shrine's secret by showing the car's battery charging (without any separate connection) while Lua's avatar enjoys eating the hamburger. Describe Sayuri's thrill at a truth far beyond her imagination as a novel.

⁶ Because I'm pretty sure that Lua is unable to keep the model exactly the same over the course of 10+ years. It turned out to be a good idea.

[5:10] Describe Sayuri, despite being overwhelmed with emotion, intuitively understanding why this must remain a secret. She pledges to keep the secret. Yui (Lua) responds, scratching her head, saying she'll be more careful when transforming herself.

[5:11] At the same time, a maiden examining letters in the mailbox at the shrine's boundary rushes to the Great Maiden with a surprised expression, holding a letter. Describe the Great Maiden, guessing its contents, inwardly thinking that Lua handled it well and there's no need to worry, then receiving and beginning to read the letter. Do not mention the recipient of the letter, and set the sender as a construction company.⁷

VI. Edge of Development

[6:1] Describe the Great Maiden explaining to Lua what is happening after she returns from her drive. A construction company plans to develop apartments on the mountain where the shrine is located, and since the shrine is prominently situated in the middle, they contacted them regarding land compensation. Lua is surprised that the shrine's land was even registered. The Great Maiden explains that maidens who are wise enough but not overly old by worldly standards were legally registered as the land's owners, and currently Izumi holds that role, but Lua is next in line. Lua immediately understands what she needs to do and begins looking for Sayuri's contact information.

[6:2] With the help of Aki, who transformed into a mobile phone, Lua calls Sayuri. Sayuri hears the situation and feels a sense of wonder, realizing this is why she was made to meet Yui, and promises to help diligently. Since simply refusing land compensation will likely not be enough to resist, describe various maidens beginning to investigate the company's financial situation and illegal activities to find its Achilles' heel.

[6:3] Imagine and describe the internal state of the company as discovered by the maidens. First, it needs to be stated that they were suffering significant financial deterioration due to reckless project acquisitions and debt-financed operations, and were therefore pursuing the apartment development project as a big gamble. Describe the illegal activities as you see fit.

[6:4] Sayuri, having received all this information, breaks an exclusive story. The apartment development project is halted as it's exposed that it's not merely a matter of a small shrine plot but involves various intertwined issues. Soon after, the company goes bankrupt, and Lua acquires the forest surrounding the

⁷ This was originally about to be the 'period of great turmoil' but the event was too tame for that. So this became a mere sign of that and the true turmoil was described in Chapter 9.

shrine at a bargain price when it goes up for auction, bringing the incident to a close. Write a detailed novel up to this point.

[6:5] Describe the aftermath. Include the scene of Lua formally receiving the land transfer from Shizuku, and Sayuri, grateful for the exclusive information, coming right up to the shrine boundary to meet the Great Maiden and Lua. Specifically, Sayuri asks the Great Maiden to take good care of Yui, who, unlike herself, will live an eternal life. The Great Maiden responds that they owe Sayuri a great debt this time and looks forward to her continued help.

[6:6] It's peculiar that Sayuri and Yui were in a relationship in the past. Describe this in detail, imagining it. Their last meeting before Yui became a maiden was around their first year of high school.

[6:7] Describe Yui and Sayuri going for another drive to celebrate the resolution of the incident, while chatting about their past relationship. Also, describe how Yui (Lua) feels about Sayuri being inside her body (the car), explained through Yui's own words.

VII. Luminous Maiden

[7:1] Describe the maidens enduring the unusually hotter-than-usual summer weather due to abnormal climate⁸, using various methods. It would be good if there's also a scene where they ask the Great Maiden if it was this hot in the past (the model answer is that days this hot occurred often, but continuous days of such heat are new in recent years).

[7:2] Show a senior maiden who became a maiden at a young age, besides Izumi, and describe her setting through Izumi's conversation with that maiden.

[7:3] Describe Mai's daily life.

[7:4] Describe Lua's curiosity about whether the temporal maidens are also called to become maidens at some point like the corporeal maidens, or by other means, and the Great Maiden's response to her.

[7:5] If so-called corporeal maidens and temporal maidens exist, do other maidens also exist? Describe the content up to the point where the Great Maiden expresses interest when Lua unintentionally asks if "maidens of light" also exist, asks her back why she thought that, and later reveals that the luminous maiden does exist and is none other than the entity mediating telepathy. For reference, these maidens

⁸ This too alludes to the 'period of great turmoil'.

correspond to physics' spacelike (matter), timelike (time), and lightlike (light), but the Great Maiden's decision to use this explanation or not is at your discretion.

[7:6] Describe the scene where Aki talks about the luminous maiden. Aki, having basic knowledge of this type of physics (because she has to deal with satellite signals), makes the (correct) conjecture that corporeal maidens correspond to spacelike, dealing with things slower than light; temporal maidens correspond to timelike, dealing with things faster than light; and Maidens of Light correspond to lightlike, dealing with things at the speed of light. In Aki's actual dialogue, summarize the content so that it can be understood even without physics knowledge.

[7:7] I want to describe more interaction with the luminous maiden. In the last part, there's a scene where they pray to the luminous maiden to exert additional powers, and this needs to be justified. So, there must be an experience where something difficult happened. They first learned that they could pray to the luminous maiden (not from the Great Maiden, but from another maiden), and it worked when they tried praying. The person who tries this doesn't necessarily have to be Aki, but it must be one of the corporeal maidens.

And I want to show more explicitly that it's not "Maidens of Light" (plural); unlike the corporeal and temporal maidens, which are plural, I think the luminous maiden should be a much more unified being (just as all objects moving at the speed of light in reality have zero mass)⁹. This should not come out as an explanatory statement, but rather be realized naturally during the process of communion with the luminous maiden.

What kind of episode would be good to achieve both of these goals simultaneously? This episode should come after Lua and Aki discuss the three types of maidens, but before 'the period of great confusion' (and there should be no mention of the period of great confusion)¹⁰.

VIII. Eternal Poison¹¹

[8:1] One day, Lua and Shizuku go shopping. Although it's typical for an even number of people to go shopping (one transforms into clothes and one wears them), Akane expresses a desire to go along and

⁹ It is actually possible to make this plural if we strictly adhere to physics, but the title explicitly says *luminous*, i.e. photon, so it seemed better to make it a unified entity that is indistinguishable from others.

¹⁰ [7:7] was written to support [9:6] and thus written much later than the entirety of [9:*]. Gemini revealed the future story too much that I had to explicitly suppress that.

¹¹ This chapter was written after Chapter 9 in order to account for the Gemini's criticism that the plot is too bland.

transforms into a wallet. Usually, they carry money in pockets, and shopping bags from stores are sufficient, so an extra person isn't needed, but the maidens who were originally going decide to agree, thinking a wallet would be convenient. For a while, there are no problems, but suddenly Akane telepathically says that she's moving away from the maidens, and it's revealed that the wallet has been stolen. The person they almost bumped into earlier was a pickpocket. The remaining maidens are startled and go to the police station to report it. They telepathically contact Aki at the shrine, asking her to transform into a cell phone to receive calls at any time. Several hours later, Aki telepathically informs them that the pickpocket was caught, but the wallet was not found, leaving the maidens bewildered. This happened even though Akane's telepathy allowed them to estimate her location to some extent. Akane despairs, asking if she'll have to live eternity as a wallet if she can't return within the boundary, and the maidens, unable to say anything, silently think, "Is that so...?" Describe the entire content with sufficient detail. Shiori, being not a corporeal maiden, should not appear anywhere.

[8:2] When Lua and Shizuku return to the shrine in a somber state, the Great Maiden asks if they are okay. The maidens briefly explain the situation and express concern for Akane. The Great Maiden then asks if they remember her mentioning past maidens who misused their powers, and they confirm. "Then what happened to those maidens?" the Great Maiden asks, and the two maidens recall Akane's situation and gain understanding. However, the Great Maiden reassures them that such despair is reserved for those who maliciously abuse their powers, and since they are good and fulfilling their maiden duties well, they need not worry. She adds that although such incidents may occasionally occur, the Divine will not abandon them. Describe in detail the two maidens, still a little anxious but having witnessed divine blessings so far, tightly clasping hands and vowing to somehow overcome the situation.

[8:3] Late at night, after transmitting the Great Maiden's words to Akane telepathically, Akane stabilizes somewhat and mentions she feels like she's inside a trash can or something similar. The next day, at dawn, the two, accompanied by a few more corporeal maidens, descend to the village and meticulously search through trash cans. Trash collection day was the next day, so there was a risk of her being carried even farther away if not found that day. They were so desperate that even a cat's paw would have helped, so they contacted Sayuri, who arrived late and also assisted. Soon, Akane says she hears the maidens' voices nearby, narrowing down the location. Eventually, they discover the wallet Akane had transformed into; although quite dirty, it was unmistakably Akane. To take it back, they clean it thoroughly, and Akane, perhaps relieved, comments that it felt better than any bath she'd ever had. Upon entering the boundary, Akane returns to her original form and expresses gratitude to the Great Maiden, saying she was afraid but gained great enlightenment. Write this chapter in Korean.

IX. World in Crisis

[9:1] Describe the scene where information from the temporal maidens arrives at the shrine, indicating that something major will happen in early 2038. This point in time is about 4 and a half years after the current time in the story. This time, since it's a major event, the temporal maidens visit the shrine in person, and the Great Maiden listens intently, her usual smile completely gone.

[9:2] Describe the maidens discussing what exactly the great confusion refers to within the uneasy shrine. The main opinions of the maidens were split into two: one possibility was that the widely used time system in computers, known as Unix time, would experience a range issue similar to Y2K¹², and the other was the possibility of widespread power and mechanical failures in large areas due to a coronal mass ejection (CME) occurring at the peak of solar activity. Have a maiden representative for each opinion explain their respective scenarios, and if there are minority opinions, think of and add them.

[9:3] The Great Maiden's conclusion was that if the laws of the world were indeed distorting as Mai suggested, there would be no way to prepare beforehand, so no special preparation was needed. However, both leading scenarios could theoretically be prepared for by humanity, and fortunately, there was still time. Therefore, they should move towards accelerating existing solutions secretly from people. For example, if a solution existed but would only be finalized in 2040, problems would arise, so they needed to discreetly adjust things behind the scenes using various methods to ensure completion before 2038. Describe her persuasively explaining this to the maidens.

[9:4] For the first six months, no actual actions were taken. Instead, they spent time investigating which people needed to be inspired or influenced, and how resources should be allocated to efficiently accelerate the solutions. Since the number of maidens is limited, they cannot influence many people at once. For the Y2K38 problem, old embedded devices were identified as the biggest issue, so the strategy was to intentionally induce situations where old devices had to be replaced. For CME, despite being unrelated to actual scientific observations, a "mistake" was introduced to induce multiple research teams to simultaneously predict the CME, thereby forcing rapid change. Borrowing Mai's expression, who, despite appearing as a young child, has lived for hundreds of years, she stated that never in her time at the shrine had the entire shrine been so academic, indicating the extensive review the maidens undertook. Describe the above content in great detail as a novel.

¹² My previous work, *Synchronicity*, also happens to make use of 2036 NTP timestamp overflow as its core plot device. Hopefully this trope won't last in my next work.

[9:5] In this plan, virtually most operations take place overseas, so it's crucial to quietly enter foreign countries, perform operations at precise locations, and return safely. Therefore, in addition to Lua, who was originally active as a car, the very small senior maiden Mai is assigned, and the two practice transforming into energy-efficient small drones. Instead of directly crossing the Pacific, they travel by visiting inhabited areas where they can find good food, like migratory birds do, allowing them to resupply energy on time. This way, they can secretly travel across the globe, even if it takes a little longer. At the current technological level, the one-way travel time was judged to be just under a week, which was deemed sufficient. Describe Lua reviewing the structure of small batteries used in drones and giving Mai, who had never transformed into a mode of transportation before, crash course on necessary details.

[9:6] Describe Lua embarking on her first drone mission. Lua's objective is to deliver Izumi, who has transformed into a tiny toy with a USB, to a research lab in the US. Izumi's role is to plug the USB into the necessary computer and manipulate data according to Aki's telepathic instructions. Lua and Izumi also know a certain amount from Aki's teachings, but Aki knows best exactly how to fix the data, so they follow her instructions. This first drone mission also has a pilot nature. Lua successfully delivers Izumi near a computer in Denver, Colorado, USA, after a nearly week-long long-distance flight around the Pacific. While Lua hides and waits outside, Izumi moves on her own to plug in the USB, and lo and behold, it's an Excel file format. Aki thinks that this won't be simple to modify, so she prays to the luminous maiden, asking for temporary help to manipulate the file on Izumi's behalf, and it happens as requested. Describe the successful manipulation of data without being detected and within the time limit, in about 20 paragraphs.

[9:7] After several successful operations, and with Mai also successfully completing her maiden flight, the plan was gaining momentum. One day, Mai was carrying Izumi and Akari to Sydney, Australia. Coincidentally, it was precisely the migratory bird season, and the drone collided with birds, resulting in an accident where Akari fell in Australia's Northern Territory at night local time. They tried to find her immediately, but she had transformed so small and fallen from a considerable height, making it a search in an area spanning tens of square kilometers. Fortunately, telepathy was usable, so Mai began moving using a search method similar to maritime search, trying to get into Akari's line of sight. Akari, unable to see Mai and with no distinctive terrain around, worried, but successfully calculated her approximate latitude by observing the constellations. Based on this, Mai significantly narrowed the search area and finally found Akari. Seeing Akari clinging tightly to Mai's drone body, vowing not to fall again, Mai thinks, "So this also happens to me" (since Mai usually looks like the youngest maiden). Describe this in detail as a novel.

[9:8] While manipulating research results, other maidens decided to undertake an operation to gradually damage old embedded devices, prioritizing those that would cause serious problems if not upgraded. They

wouldn't break the devices' functionality but would make the display act strangely or in other ways force people to replace them voluntarily. Various methods were employed: some maidens approached devices directly if they were relatively close, others received help from Lua and Mai, some manipulated documents to accelerate replacement times, and some even transformed anew and scattered excrement on exposed devices to cause them to malfunction. Describe the above content in detail as a novel.

[9:9] Sayuri, who knew Lua's secret, wasn't just observing. The fact that multinational research teams' observations converged on a CME being expected around 2037-38, and the resolution to prepare swiftly being widely publicized, was largely due to Sayuri meeting various journalists and processing and disseminating the information in an easy-to-understand manner. The concentrated coverage of the Y2K38 problem was also the fruit of the investigative reporting team, including Sayuri. Although Sayuri didn't know everything happening at the shrine, she knew Lua transformed into a drone and traveled around the world. As a bonus, she was dumbfounded when a small drone, having completed its mission, appeared before her during an overseas business trip to South America and wrote on the ground. Describe the above content in detail as a novel.

[9:10] On the night of January 19, 2038, four years later, as if to confirm their efforts, all the maidens sat in front of the television, which Aki had transformed into, watching a special broadcast. With not only the corporeal maidens but also the temporal maidens watching with bated breath, everyone breathed a sigh of relief as minor issues appeared after Unix time exceeded its range, but no fatal problems occurred, and they congratulated each other on their hard work. Meanwhile, the thought might arise, "Did the CME not occur?" Later, Aki confirms that a CME did occur on the same day but narrowly missed Earth, causing no damage. Describe the maidens and the Great Maiden feeling a sense of accomplishment for having contributed even a little to all these events.

[9:11] To thank the hardworking maidens, Kana announces she has dug an open-air bath and invites them. Kana had also worked hard for four years, but unlike the maidens who were on the front lines, most of her work was support, and she felt sorry for not being able to help with the difficult tasks directly. So, on this occasion, she used her usual boiler form to heat the stream water, creating a warm bath. Describe the maidens concluding their four-and-a-half-year journey with warm hot springs, accompanied by words of gratitude.

[9:12] Describe the shrine returning to its mundane daily life as a novel. The temporal maidens have now returned to their original shrine.

[9:13] Summarize the past four years from the perspective of the temporal maidens. Since their physical movement was relatively limited, all they could do was inform the corporeal maidens how much a specific

choice could probabilistically change outcomes. (The temporal maidens can see "all" possible futures from the present, allowing them to calculate probabilities.¹³) Even until the very last moment, they were tense, unable to guarantee that the threat had 100% disappeared, and now, finally, they are relieved that all such possibilities have been excluded and have returned to their daily lives. Describe this up to that point.

[9:14] Describe the scene where Lua realizes that the shonen manga (*Flame Swordsman Kaen*) the Great Maiden had been reading for a while had concluded some time ago, but she hadn't had time to read it due to being busy, and has finally finished it, and Lua recommends a new series.

Maiden Life Guide¹⁴

[A:1] From Aki's perspective, imagine creating a small booklet titled "Maiden Life Guide" and write its preface. It should feel like speaking informally to a junior maiden (it can start with "Hello! I'm Aki. I'm a corporeal maiden who..."). In the preface, Aki reveals the reason for writing this book: to explicitly put down what she has learned to expand her comprehension, and also for the purpose of experimenting with rapidly changing publishing media (e.g., e-books at the current time). It would be good if, during her self-introduction, Aki tries to mention her age (251 years old as of 2038, meaning born in 1787; in the actual text, only mention the age), then gasps, "Oh, this is a secret," and slightly regrets it, but then reassures(?) the reader that if you live long enough, age is just a number. Then, the preface should conclude with a brief overview of the booklet's contents.

[A:2] The following content begins with the subtitle "First Steps." It needs to cover the following:

- Confirm that if there's nothing else happening, the maiden reading this book has likely been called by the Divine.
- State that the maidens of this shrine are formally called "the corporeal maidens," that "the temporal maidens" exist in a separate shrine, and that "the luminous maiden" exists, enabling telepathy and such. Reveal that the fact of the luminous maiden being a single unified entity was learned from Mai's experience.
- Explain why they are called the corporeal maidens: because they can manipulate matter in ways unimaginable to ordinary people and use it as their own body.

¹³ It may be an allusion to the interpretations of quantum physics, but the actual intent was much more about the modal logic. Yes, I learned that in my Master's curriculum!

¹⁴ This and all subsequent chapters were written because I let Gemini look for as many plot errors as possible and I successfully defended almost all questions; at this point it seemed like a waste not to make use of the resulting conversations. That's also why prompts are comparatively long and so specific that some prompts literally made into the novel itself. Ironically enough, this chapter was much more favored than other chapters when Gemini and other LLMs were asked to review them....

- Thanks to this, they are immortal and can survive perfectly well without eating or sleeping. Of course, despite this, since they are fundamentally human, they still eat and sleep normally if they wish.
- However, don't forget that these abilities were bestowed by the Divine to balance this world.

[A:3] The following content begins with the subtitle "Transformation Ability." It needs to cover the following:

- Transformation is our most important ability, so it's good to understand it precisely.
- Within the shrine's boundary, you can transform into either living creatures or inanimate objects, and return to your original form at will.
- Outside the shrine's boundary, both are impossible, but if you've already transformed and gone outside, that state is maintained. If you need to be active in a transformed state, assume this is usually the case.
- Since we become naked outside the shrine's boundary (to be explained later), when one maiden goes out as a pair with another, the other typically transforms into that person's clothes to cover them. This will probably be the first thing you practice when you first transform.
- After transformation, our five senses remain the same. In particular, senses like sight and hearing are reproduced in a way that the person wearing the transformed clothes would have experienced if you transformed into clothes. Otherwise, you'll feel as if your entire body is experiencing the outside scenery. It might feel a bit awkward, but you'll quickly get used to it. If you've played popular first-person action games recently¹⁵, you might adapt easily?
- The most important aspect of transformation is fidelity. Fidelity refers to the degree to which the transformed object faithfully reflects reality. Major factors include the size difference from your original body, your comprehension of the object, and your physical condition. If you're tall but try to transform into a small object, your fidelity will decrease. If you try to transform into an object you don't know well or if your body feels stiff, your fidelity will also drop significantly.
- Among these, comprehension is by far the most important. If it's simply a static object, remembering how it looks is mostly enough to perfectly mimic it. However, for example, if you try to mimic a car, you need to understand the principles of the car in detail and perceive its parts as if they were your own body to function as a proper car outside without being detected (if you want to know more, go find Lua). If you transform into a car with low comprehension, it will move, but its wheels might be fixed and drag, making it look strange to anyone.¹⁶
- The more you know about the subject, the more faithful your transformation can be, so let's study hard!

¹⁵ Refers to a classical first-person shooter (FPS) like *Counter Strike* (2000). Aki isn't that much into PC gaming so the error of about 30 years should be expected.

¹⁶ But this kind of incomplete transformation poses no threat if it is fine to publicly show that, making the maiden's ability extremely powerful and very dangerous to abuse. The *Guide* doesn't explicitly mention this mainly because Aki is not necessarily aware of this fact and also it is so scary to think about, but it's enough of the reason why the Divine's judgement turns maidens to inanimate objects for eternity.

[A:4] I want to continue the content related to the "Transformation Ability" subtitle. The following is the subsequent content:

- If you transform into a sufficiently large object, you can create an avatar that can exist near that object. (The avatar cannot be larger than the object you transformed into.¹⁷) When you create an avatar, you primarily perceive the sensations it experiences, but the sensations from the original object don't disappear, so it can be used for various purposes.
- You might be scared of what happens if you get hurt while transformed. Of course, if you transform into a glass marble and it breaks, it will really hurt. However, if you bring most of the broken pieces back into the boundary, you can return to human form, and no trace or wound will remain. If such a situation occurs, don't panic and keep reminding yourself what the pieces look like and that those pieces are now your body.¹⁸ High comprehension applying to this situation as well, allowing for excellent transformation.
- We can only transform into objects that can physically exist. For example, a car that rolls without any energy cannot exist, so we cannot transform into one. In other words, if you transform into a car, it will continuously need fuel, which you can usually substitute by eating. If the fuel runs out, you'll probably be forced back into human form, which would be very troublesome, so you should eat regularly, right? Actually, there aren't many cases of transformation like this yet, so more experimentation is needed in the future.¹⁹ If you find anything interesting, let me know!
- Finally, what I want to tell you is that it's good to have a way to move, even if it's an inanimate object, to prepare for unexpected situations. For example, if you transform into a ball, it would be good to have a movable weight inside to adjust the direction the ball bounces. Otherwise, you'd have to hope that other maidens find you, and isn't that a scary thought? There's no harm in preparing beforehand.

[A:5] The following content is under the subtitle "Life at the Shrine." It needs to cover the following:

- At the shrine, you'll see a truly beautiful²⁰ maiden whose words and actions show deep experience; that's the Great Maiden. More precisely, the Great Maiden is the shrine building itself (what we see as the Great Maiden is her avatar). The Great Maiden is the first maiden of this shrine and the one who has lived the

¹⁷ If this were allowed, it is possible that a pair of maidens can transform into each other's clothes and give them to their own avatars. This would dilute the original narrative intent.

¹⁸ While this explanation is ordered in this way for convenience, it is actually the opposite; the very act of "collecting most fragments" is an extremely efficient method to convince oneself that those fragments are indeed one's own body.

¹⁹ This ought to be the beginning of maidenology.

²⁰ The novel proper didn't ever mention the Great Maiden's appearance. Without this note of being truly beautiful, it would be difficult to immediately recognize who the Great Maiden is as the novel portrays.

longest, so if you have questions and other maidens don't know, you can ask her, and you'll find an answer.

- To talk a little more about the maiden attire you're wearing now, that attire is part of your body that exists only within the boundary, but it's possible to shed it like a skin. Of course, the shed maiden attire will disappear soon after. If you want to wear maiden attire again, simply wish for it strongly in your heart, and it will reappear. The maiden attire disappears when you go outside the boundary, so if you're going out, take off your maiden attire within the boundary beforehand and put on clothes.

- As I mentioned before, we don't need food or sleep, but it's good for your mental health to continue eating and sleeping regularly, just like when you were human. This is true even if you're not a maiden. The dining hall and bedrooms are next to the main hall, so check them out.

- Thanks to the Luminous Maiden, we maidens can communicate telepathically. Telepathy can be used wherever you are, even when you don't know where you are, so in urgent situations, don't hesitate to inform us of the situation via telepathy. Of course, sending telepathy to too many people simultaneously can easily give you a headache²¹, so it helps a lot to know which maidens are likely to solve the problem well beforehand, right?

[A:6] The following content is under the subtitle "Relationship with the Outside World." It needs to cover the following:

- Although we are spiritual beings, we also exist as part of the real world, so we must respect the laws of the outside world. We must not fight against them as long as they do not undermine our existence. For example, this shrine's land has been legally inherited by successive generations of sufficiently young and wise maidens according to outside standards. As of the writing of this book, Lua, whom I mentioned earlier, holds that role. Perhaps someday, the maidens reading this book may also take on that role.

- You've probably already received your new name, your maiden name. We use our maiden names within the shrine, but outside, you may unavoidably have to use your birth name. Please bear with it. If it's difficult, you can tell other maidens in advance, and they will help you find a way.

- As maintainers of the world's balance, we must continuously grasp how the world works. Especially, televisions, computers, and cell phones will often be needed. In such cases, come to me (Aki), and I'll transform to help you. But don't use them too much. Unfortunately, I only have one body.

- When going out into the outside world, you must be extremely careful not to reveal our secret. In fact, it might not be a big problem for us if we were exposed. The problem lies in the world being turned upside down. Religious beliefs could shatter, leading to wars, and those who wish to misuse our abilities might appear. Always remember that we are merely quiet balancers working behind the scenes and always be

²¹ Originates from the fact that the end-to-end (E2E) encryption for group chatting typically takes $O(n^2)$ connections and thus is considered a difficult problem. Also that prevents an accident like sending a message to everyone else, as it's common in instant messengers.

careful. In the unlikely event of an unavoidable situation, it's best to telepathically contact the Great Maiden first and request her wisdom.

[A:7] The following content is under the subtitle "Conclusion." It needs to cover the following:

- What else have I missed? Oh, be careful not to let ordinary people who are not maidens enter the shrine's boundary. If they enter, they will suffer extreme pain, unable to bear the weight of the soul. Usually, to protect them, we take measures to immobilize them and then send them outside the boundary, but since it's painful, it's best to prevent them from entering in the first place. A mailbox is installed at the boundary, so using letters is one method.
- The work entrusted to us is so weighty that it requires an eternity of investment. But that doesn't mean we can't enjoy it, does it? Don't be too hasty, sometimes listen to new things happening in the world, and try to live your maiden life so you can enjoy it for a long time. And you never know. If new maidens join after you, you might get fresh inspiration from them?
- (End of concluding remarks)

Side story: Hana's Teapot

[B:1] As an external story, write the following as a novel. Lua observes the Great Maiden drinking tea in detail and notices that instead of filling the teapot directly from a container, she brings another container, pours tea into the teapot, and then pours from the teapot into a cup. Thinking this strange, she asks what's special about that teapot. The Great Maiden confirms that there is indeed something special, but it will be a difficult story to tell, asking if Lua is okay with it. When Lua agrees, the Great Maiden says, "Then let's talk while we drink tea together," and hands her another cup. Novelize this up to just before the story begins.

[B:2] The Great Maiden's recollection begins, maintaining the third-person narration. Approximately 700 years ago from now, the number of maidens was much larger than it is today (on the order of hundreds). While today maidens gather in response to the divine call, back then, there were many more individuals with great inspiration, so there was no reason to refuse those who had inspiration and met basic conditions and wished to become maidens. The shrine also needed many more buildings to sustain such a large number of people. (The current shrine grounds maintain their size from that time, so there is much more empty space compared to the shrine buildings.)

[B:3] Continue the recollection. And then came a period of confusion. So chaotic was it that a new nation was established in this land as a result (Lua immediately realizes this refers to the founding of Joseon and

infers that the story points to the chaotic political situation of the late Goryeo period²²). Maidens who voluntarily came to the shrine served the Divine well during relatively peaceful times, but during chaotic periods, it was difficult for them to resist the temptation to misuse their powerful abilities. When Lua asks back if the maidens' transformation ability doesn't require detailed comprehension of objects, she receives the answer that it is necessary to avoid being exposed to others, but if one disregards that and intends to misuse the power, it's not difficult to cause chaos without comprehension. Lua needs to be startled by this possibility. Anyway, one maiden succumbs to such temptation, and when one person seems to have no problem doing so, two more follow, then four, eight, and thus, in an instant, most of the maidens fall into temptation.

[B:4] Amidst rising distrust of the maidens, the last one who remained by Hana's side was a young maiden named Yukina (around 150 years old at the time, this number should not be explicitly stated in the novel). Yukina was a maiden unparalleled in comprehension, capable of intuitively grasping the principles of objects simply by looking at them and replicating them precisely. Because she was such a Yukina, it was inevitable that she felt resentment towards other maidens who wielded power arbitrarily, disregarding comprehension. On the other hand, she was tormented by a different kind of temptation: whether she shouldn't use her power for the right purposes. The important principle that maidens, due to their powerful abilities, should not act on the front lines, could have been broken, even if their intentions were good. There must be a small argument between Hana and Yukina at the end, and the Great Maiden's maiden name, "Hana," should be naturally revealed during their conversation (thereafter, maintain the title "the Great Maiden" in narration, but use her name in dialogue). Content about the teapot should not appear yet.

[B:5] That night, Yukina leaves Hana. Hana could not help but understand Yukina's thoughts and simply wished her well. Several months later, Yukina and the other maidens who had left the shrine all returned, severely battered. What happened was that Yukina had subsequently gathered common people and formed a militia to protect them, but failed. The other maidens, overconfident in their own power, were counterattacked by human wisdom and fled back to the shrine. The Great Maiden immediately sensed that they would soon be judged by the Divine and, acting as the voice of the Divine, reprimanded them. She reprimands Yukina separately. However, having never witnessed divine punishment before, they could not comprehend the true meaning of the punishment.

[B:6] Soon, punishment descends upon them. For all maidens except Yukina, this punishment was to be transformed into tiny particles like grains of sand or earth and scattered across the world. Unable to fully

²² In the English version, this became the Nanboku-chō period of Japan instead. By the way did you know that the end of the Nanboku-chō period and the fall of Goryeo do coincide (1392)? I didn't!

perceive their own existence, their consciousness remained, but it was a terrible punishment to wander the world eternally in a fixed form. Yukina, who was to receive the punishment last, realizes its implication and shudders, closing her eyes tightly, expecting the same fate. However, although Yukina had walked a wrong path, her reasons were understandable, so she was spared the eternal punishment and instead judged to atone by becoming a teapot that holds and pours tea. Describe Yukina crying tears of gratitude for the Divine' mercy just before her forced transformation. In the voice of the Divine, Hana is told that Yukina must endure the punishment for "ninety moons waxing and waning ninety times," and the Great Maiden explains this, stating that she herself doesn't know exactly how long that refers to.

[B:7] Upon hearing all this, Lua is horrified that the eternal punishment is even more dreadful than what she had heard, and she surmises that the current group of maidens gradually rebuilt after the complete disappearance of the former group. She also realizes that the reason Mai is much younger than the Great Maiden yet the next oldest (around 650 years old, similar to the founding of Joseon) is because she was the first maiden of that rebuilt maiden group. Also, express Aki, who, while trying to visit the Great Maiden, inadvertently overheard the story, realizing that such an event must have happened, considering the theory that humanity's population drastically decreased before being rebuilt to its current size²³ (the two still haven't noticed Aki, and do not use the phrase "choke point"²⁴). Novelize up to the Great Maiden stroking the teapot and asking if they now understand why she keeps this teapot by her side.

[B:8] Aki reveals herself, apologizing for unintentionally overhearing the entire conversation so far (to which the Great Maiden dissuades her, saying there's no need). Aki then proposes the hypothesis that "ninety moons waxing and waning ninety times" might mean $90 \times 90 = 8100$ lunar months. After converting this time to solar years, Aki, who estimated the story to be around the 1380s and did the calculations, reveals that if her estimation is correct, the punishment should be almost over now. She then asks what the Great Maiden would first say to Yukina, once freed from her punishment. The paragraph should end with the Great Maiden gently chiding Aki, asking why she would ask such a thing with her right there, but then answering that she has missed her and looked forward to being with her again, and that she would surely embrace her.

[B:9] The next day, after the Great Maiden slept as per the maidens' habit, she woke early in the morning to find Yukina, finally freed from her punishment, sleeping beside her. She quietly thinks that Aki's

²³ Intended as a reference to the [Toba catastrophe theory](#), but Gemini somehow interpreted it as massive flood myths around the world. In any case, they are much older than the demise of the past maiden group.

²⁴ This term was used to refer to the model for the corporeal maiden population and was not suitable for the novel setting, hence the constraint. By the way, the simulation concluded (and eventually I agreed) that there were close to 40 corporeal maidens in 2038; did you get any closer to that?

calculations were correct, smiles, embraces the still-sleeping Yukina, and then thinks that the "Maiden Life Guide" Aki wrote is now needed, and falls back asleep, concluding the story.

A missive about the *Maiden Life Guide*

[C:1] Finally, write feedback from Yukina to Aki about the Maiden Life Guide. Yukina, though actually older than Mai, is still a novice in maiden life and therefore calls Aki "senior", who has lived as a maiden longer than her. She complains, in a quite long letter, about why there's no content for maidens like herself who've been freed from punishment, making an absurd request to consider a more diverse readership. As a side note, she luckily learned Hangul and modern Korean²⁵ during her time as a teapot, so there's no need to write a Hanmun version. However, since this is her first time writing modern Korean directly, avoid foreign words and adjust the Korean to have some slightly awkward parts (since "guide" itself is a foreign word, there should also be a statement that she didn't know what this word meant at first but guessed it meant "manual" or "handbook"²⁶). Also, avoid jokes or slang that a modern Korean speaker would use.

²⁵ In the English version, this became the Gothic script and (sorta) modern English.

²⁶ In the English version, this point was replaced by the fact that the word *guide* wasn't originally used for books until the 1830s. This again was a lucky coincidence for me.

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