

An Unidentified Flying Object from Outer Space

Arrives and Earth Is Under Attack!

~The Extraterrestrial Lifeform That Came to

Announce Mankind's End Appears

to Be Dangerously Sensitive~

6



Buncololi

Illustration by
Kantoku

Sasaki and Peeps

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< Type Twelve >

"You three will be
the last of my
planned inquiries."

"What is happening?
All external communication
has been cut off."

"Ah, how...
how wonderful!"



“Wow. The earth really is round...”

“Photographs don’t do its beauty justice.”

“We must look like part of a fantasy illustration right now.”

Our swan boat floated lazily along through space, wrapped inside a vessel of water. Ms. Futarishizuka was right—we probably made for a fantastic sight.

A Journey Through **Space**



Lady Elsa's recent posts



11/16/20xx

Lady Elsa @itsladyelsa

I'd like to try out social media.



9802



12401



11/16/20xx

Lady Elsa @itsladyelsa

Someone else is submitting the posts for me.



7211



8873



11/16/20xx

Lady Elsa @itsladyelsa

Does "5,000 followers" mean 5,000 people are watching me? But then what does the "like" number mean?



8789



10455



11/16/20xx

Lady Elsa @itsladyelsa

What? Number of impressions...?



7871



9882



11/16/20xx

Lady Elsa @itsladyelsa

This is getting a little scary.
I will stay silent for a while.



8773



10211



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Illustration by **Kantoku**


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Translation by Alice Prowse

Cover art by Kantoku

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SASAKITOPICHAN Vol.6 UCHUNOKANATAYORI, MIKAKUNINHIKOBUTTAI, RAISHU! JINRUISHURYO NO OSHIRASE, TSUTAE NI OTOZURETA CHIKYUGAISEIMEITAIWA DOYARA JIRAINOYODESU

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Summary of Events Thus Far

Unidentified Flying Object

The New Order

Abduction

A Computer's Loneliness

Free-for-All

Home and Family

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Frontispiece, Book Illustrations

Kantoku

contents

Summary of Events
Thus Far

Unidentified Flying Object

The New Order

Abduction

A Computer's Loneliness

Free-for-All

Home and Family

<Summary of Events Thus Far>

Sasaki was the kind of worn-out office worker you can find anywhere. He was about to enter his forties working at a midsize company in Tokyo.

But when he bought a cute silver-colored Java sparrow at a pet shop, the bird turned out to be a wise, illustrious sage who was reincarnated from another world.

This tiny sage granted him powerful magic and the means to pass between worlds.

Sasaki named the sparrow Peeps, and before long they began crossing to the otherworld together.

The two of them, a corporate drone in a dead-end job and an exiled former sage, both exhausted by their lives, immediately hit it off and began a business venture selling modern goods in the otherworld—all in order to secure a laid-back, relaxing life.

Mistaking Sasaki's otherworld magic for psychic powers, an organization recruited him—the Cabinet Office's Paranormal Phenomena Countermeasure Bureau—and he began working there. This new job came with a much more substantial paycheck, and Sasaki was all smiles. Now with more money, he was able to buy more stock to sell in the otherworld.

But such smooth sailing didn't last.

While doing business in the otherworld, Sasaki became embroiled in a power struggle involving the noble and royal classes. And as if that wasn't enough, war broke out with a neighboring country. Sasaki and Peeps rose to the occasion, allying themselves with the second prince of Herz, Prince Adonis.

But back in modern times, Sasaki's work at the Paranormal Phenomena Countermeasure Bureau proved challenging. Unable to rely on Peeps for

support, Sasaki made use of the magic he acquired while training in the otherworld to survive a series of battles against psychics.

But that wasn't all. A child calling herself a magical girl with a grudge against psychics staged repeated, one-sided attacks on the bureau as Sasaki struggled to mediate between the two sides. Ultimately, he revealed his otherworldly magic to her and wound up in the role of "magical middle-aged man."

Eventually, with Futarishizuka's cooperation, Sasaki and Peeps secured a means of converting valuables from the otherworld into modern currency. Sasaki continued his magical training, using it to great effect against psychics and magical girls alike. His free and relaxed retirement seemed within reach.

But then a new force rose to block their path—they learned that a death game had begun in modern Japan. Sasaki ended up embroiled in a proxy war between angels and demons, where he found his next-door neighbor in quite the situation and risked his life to rescue her. And that's when he learned about a fourth faction—unaffiliated with psychics or magical girls. Abaddon, the demon contracted to Sasaki's neighbor, requested his help, and along with Futarishizuka, it was decided they would cooperate.

Furthermore, thanks to a little too much alcohol, Peeps leaked evidence of Lady Elsa's visit to modern Japan all over the internet. Social media exploded in excitement over a video of her talking with a Java sparrow.

Looking for Sasaki, his various acquaintances gathered at the hotel he was using as a base. His neighbor, who was involved in the death game, Lady Elsa from the otherworld, Miss Hoshizaki representing the psychics, and the magical girl—four young women with vastly different backgrounds—finally came face-to-face with one another.

But almost immediately, Sasaki received word of a giant sea monster attack.

The massive creature had appeared suddenly in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and was, according to Peeps, a species of dragon from the otherworld. Under Section Chief Akutsu's instructions, Sasaki headed out with Miss Hoshizaki and Futarishizuka to take it out.

Meanwhile, the proxy war between angels and demons was heating up, as plots spilled out of the isolated spaces and into the streets. The angelic faction,

which saw Sasaki's neighbor and Abaddon as a major threat, sent a spy to blow up the apartment complex where she and Sasaki lived.

After barely managing to survive, his neighbor encountered the suspected culprits: an angel and her Disciple. Sasaki, who witnessed the explosion, was able to secure his neighbor and Abaddon's help with a decisive strike against the sea monster. Thanks to additional support from psychics and the magical girl, Peeps was able to slay the dragon in secret with his magic.

As for Sasaki's neighbor, she may have been racking up victories in the death game, but she had lost her guardian and home in the process. In response, Futarishizuka stepped up to the plate and assumed custody over her. She set the girl up in a new home—a mansion in luxurious Karuizawa—and transferred her to a new school. Now with fresh surroundings, Sasaki's former neighbor can begin her life anew.

Back in the otherworld, Herz's succession dispute reached a boiling point when Prince Lewis, despite facing certain defeat, insisted on attacking the Ohgen Empire. Though unable to guess his motives at first, Adonis eventually came to understand his elder brother's true plan, though by then, it was already too late for Lewis to be saved.

In truth, Prince Lewis had been fighting for the sake of his homeland, all alone, ever since he was a child. Inheriting his will, Prince Adonis crushed the imperialist nobles lurking within Herz and was subsequently crowned the next king. Thus, the struggle for the crown came to an end well before the promised five-year deadline.

And now, the story moves once again back to modern Japan...

<Unidentified Flying Object>

We were in a gorgeous building located on prime real estate in the city center, on the floor containing the Cabinet Office's Paranormal Phenomena Countermeasure Bureau, inside one of the bureau's meeting spaces.

The conference room spanned no more than ten square meters, with a single table at its center. Section Chief Akutsu sat at the other end, a laptop near at hand. Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, and Miss Hoshizaki were positioned across from him, in that order.

On one wall was a large screen displaying a video feed from Mr. Akutsu's laptop. It showed a slide with a single photograph. The background was completely black—it looked like outer space. And in the foreground was an angular silhouette that didn't look the least bit organic.

According to Mr. Akutsu, it was an unidentified flying object. And we'd been assigned a new task: to investigate it.

Plenty of other ministries and agencies in Japan, he told us, were already busy looking into it. In fact, if his explanation was true, the incident was causing chaos for a lot of other countries and organizations, too.

"Just when that giant monster finally disappears, we have a UFO on our hands, eh? We can't seem to catch a break."

I found myself sympathizing with Ms. Futarishizuka.

We'd had our hands full with ridiculous cases for a while now. At this point, my psyche had taken more of a beating than my body. It almost felt like someone was making us watch horror movies or jump-scare videos every waking hour of the day. Personally, I wanted a job that felt more like a cute animal video.

"I want the three of you working on this full-time for now," said the section

chief, looking at us from across the table.

It seemed likely he was telling the truth about receiving these orders from above. The word *full-time* was really making me feel the pressure.

“Surely, there are others who specialize in this sort of thing, hmm?” pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka. “Wouldn’t they do a more efficient job than our little on-site band here? If we’re not actually boarding the thing, I have a feeling the investigation would be better off in the hands of the appropriate departments.”

“They’re all already working on it,” he replied.

“Then why come to us as well?”

“Because, Futarishizuka, we can’t afford to be the only ones spectating.”

“Ah yes. The price of honest toil.”

Mr. Akutsu probably suspected we had something to do with the UFO. But considering how much he’d covered up in the past by abusing his authority, it probably seemed best to let sleeping dogs lie. I had a feeling that was why he kept dispatching us straightaway whenever something happened, just like with the sea monster.

“Understood, sir,” I said. “We’ll do what we can with these sightings for now.”

“I expect good things from you three,” he responded.

“That said, sir, we don’t currently have any leads.”

“You’re talented and resourceful, Sasaki. I’m sure something will turn up.”

“.....”

The higher-ups were leaning on Mr. Akutsu again, it seemed. As his subordinate, I wasn’t exactly happy to be so relied upon.

“Chief, could I ask something?” Hoshizaki broke in.

“Go ahead, Hoshizaki.”

“Whenever I’m on the job with these two, we end up doing a lot of unplanned work at irregular hours. Should I be applying for overtime? And what about my punch card?”

“In the future, feel free to declare your overtime on your own initiative, including direct transit to and from the site.”

“Uh... R-really? Thank you!” Miss Hoshizaki’s face lit up, and she broke into a wide grin. Her overtime hours this month were going to be something else.

Bureau employees generally got hazard pay for outings like these. Our base pay was nothing to shake a stick at, but when you were out late several days in a row, you could apply an overtime multiplier; next month’s paycheck was shaping up to be exorbitant. I’d have to stay vigilant and avoid getting mixed up with anything else during the assignment.

“Any other questions?” asked Mr. Akutsu.

“Could we have the data on the locations and times of all sightings up to the present?” I asked.

“I’ll send it to your phones as soon as this meeting is over. And I’ll notify you of any future confirmed sightings, too—though, in some cases you might get the information quicker from social media.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“What about you, Futarishizuka?”

“I can’t think of anything right now,” she replied.

“Then this meeting is adjourned. Your work starts today.”

And so, with the boss’s command, our meeting came to an end.



Leaving Mr. Akutsu in the office, we immediately headed out under the pretext of an investigation.

We made our way to Ms. Futarishizuka’s car, which was parked in the bureau’s lot, and piled in. Our destination was an Italian restaurant that had gained popularity on the internet in recent weeks. It was a little early for lunch, but according to our driver, the time it took to get down the smaller streets meant we’d arrive right as they opened.

As the car merged onto the road, Miss Hoshizaki immediately piped up from the back seat. “Hey, Sasaki, we didn’t really need to *leave*, did we?”

“What do you mean?” answered Ms. Futarishizuka. “Leaving the office is *much* more liberating, dear. Wouldn’t you say?”

“But aren’t we still on the clock? It’s not even lunchtime yet...”

Miss Hoshizaki was so earnest; it made her seem rather naive. In my peripheral vision, I could see her fidgeting uncomfortably.

Ms. Futarishizuka, on the other hand, was as underhanded as they came. “All in the name of *investigation*, hmm?” she said from the driver’s seat, throwing me a grin.

“I suppose so,” I replied.

Actually, I guess I’m no better. Any time you could manage to spend outside the office during work hours was precious. Lunching at a famous restaurant usually necessitated waiting in a long line, but our early departure had given us the opportunity to skip all that. It was an excellent proposal, to put it mildly.

The other adult in the car with a taste for indolence had begun whispering temptations into the purehearted high school girl’s ear. “I’m sure you’ve booked one of those prepaid card hotel plans on business trips before, hmm?”

“What? I don’t even know what that means.”

“You don’t? Are you sure? I mean those plans that include a prepaid card but don’t mention it in the receipt you give the company.”

“Well, my department always books my hotels for me, so...”

“Gaaagh! You’re missing out on the whole point of business trips!”

You check into your hotel, then head to a nearby convenience store. You bring your booze and snacks up to the counter—and then, shining upon you, a lone ray of hope: a QUO card, prepaid and ready to spend. I knew it well—that moment back in your single room, taking a swig of beer all by yourself and finding it’s far tastier than it has any right to be. *Nothing beats an evening drink on the company tab.*

But being the humble corporate drone that I was, I didn’t have the courage to

own up to it. Instead, I chided her. “You can be very petty for someone so rich, you know.”

“My finances have nothing to do with it,” she objected. “No matter how much I have, I’ll still be frustrated if a mobile game doesn’t give me free gems in exchange for server downtime. It might persuade me to cheat on them with another company’s game for a while—or even to switch over entirely.”

“That’s a little different, don’t you think?” I said, hoping that one day I’d have the guts to admit I felt exactly the same. Though I’d heard that, in recent times, society had started taking a harsher view of such prepaid pleasures.

“Her aside,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “you’re something of a delinquent yourself, aren’t you, Sasaki? Though you always act so serious.”

“We have Mr. Akutsu’s permission this time,” I said. “In my humble opinion, it would be a waste not to take him up on it.”

“You mean when I asked him about overtime at the meeting?”

“I do.”

“I don’t think he intended us to go *this* far...”

“No, no! It was a license to roam free,” insisted Ms. Futarishizuka. “There’s no other way to look at it.”

I figured it was fine—we worked hard enough to deserve it. You had to take the opportunities for relaxation when they came, or you’d burn out. I was pretty sure Mr. Akutsu understood that, too.

“And you’re happy to be out and about, aren’t you, dear? Pays extra,” the driver pointed out.

“I, um, I guess I am. B-but I still think lying is wrong,” Miss Hoshizaki stammered.

“Oh, it’s not *lying*. It’s all part of the investigation.”

“There are things we can’t exactly discuss in the office,” I pointed out.

“I know that, but...”

Our number one reason for climbing into the car was to have secret

exchanges like this one. We couldn't talk openly in the office—that was Mr. Akutsu's territory, and there was no telling where he may have planted cameras or bugs. It was certainly *not* because we were curious about this new Italian place with rave reviews.

I wonder if they have a take-out menu, I thought. *Maybe I'll get a treat for Peeps, too.*

"I'm sure this is another visitor from your little vacation destination anyway, right?" said Ms. Futarishizuka, glancing at me.

"For once, I don't think it is."

"Oh? Very suspicious."

"I'm going to ask Peeps tonight, but I doubt he'll know, either. That's why I'm worried about how we're going to investigate. Not to quote you, but we can't exactly *board* it."

"I'm not so sure. That bird of yours might be able to pull it off, hmm? Couldn't he use magic to send us flying through the sky?"

"To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't put it past him." He *was* the great and powerful Starsage, after all. A quick hop outside the atmosphere probably wouldn't even wind him.

Unlike airplanes, flight magic wasn't affected by the atmosphere—or lack of it. You could fly around wherever you wanted. And you could stay up there for a pretty long time, too, depending on how much magic power you had. If you could preserve air pressure and temperature as you went up, it *might* be possible, assuming you had a supply of oxygen to breathe.

Given how he'd blocked the octodragon's radiation with barrier magic, I expected he could do something similar to hold all the space radiation outside the atmosphere at bay. It could potentially take some time, but a game of tag with the UFO might not be so unrealistic.

"Still, we never know who's watching," I pointed out.

"It's gotten pretty crowded up there lately with all the satellites," Miss Hoshizaki agreed.

“Right. So I’d like to approach this investigation from a more common-sense angle.”

“As long as it sounds good on our report to the boss,” agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. “If he’s trying to please his own superiors, I’m sure he’ll be happier if we make it sound like we accomplished something. Though I’ve no clue what other departments he’s competing with.”

“Indeed...”

Facing forward, Ms. Futarishizuka kept her hands on the wheel. As I watched her from the side, I suddenly thought of something—the radio equipment being put to use in the otherworld.

“Could we possibly try communicating with the ship?” I suggested.

“I’m fairly certain plenty have tried already,” she said.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“But we mustn’t be so fussy that we don’t do *anything*. We may as well give it a try.”

“Then why not tonight? We can grab one of the spares from our supply; they should be functional enough. We may have to consult with the bureau in advance regarding output strength and call signs, though.”

“Oh? Sounds like you’ve had your nose in a few books,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“With all the radio business lately, I figured I could use a hobby.”

My casual response earned a smile from the driver. I had a feeling I’d just won a few points with her; she was probably happy I’d taken a shine to one of her interests. *Good thing I looked through a couple of amateur radio manuals in my spare time*, I thought.

Here in Japan, amateur radio was once called the king of all hobbies. At its zenith, around 1,360,000 radio stations called this nation their home. At the time, the US had about 650,000, and Germany, in third place, had about 70,000. The numbers alone speak to how many radio waves Japanese people sent across the globe. Now, however, Japan’s 390,000 or so current stations pale in

comparison to the US's 780,000.

"I say we give it the old college try," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I agree!" chimed in Miss Hoshizaki. Her face lit up as soon as we started scheduling work for our off-hours—I could practically see the sparkles in her eyes through the rearview mirror. She'd broken into a broad smile, already blessed with the opportunity to rack up some overtime on day one.

Considering her younger sister was waiting for her back home, I didn't want to keep her with us for too long. But she'd always been more than happy to work late into the night, so I figured their home life was pretty rough to begin with.

"Have either of you checked the data the boss sent?" Ms. Futarishizuka asked.

"I thought we could take our time going over it later," I said.

"Yeah," agreed Miss Hoshizaki. "There's so much of it, it's hard to read on our tiny smartphone screens."

"Exactly," I agreed.

As far as I could ascertain from a cursory glance, the chief's data contained over a hundred eyewitness reports. If we wanted to plot each one on a map, that alone would probably take almost an hour. I looked over the spreadsheet and its long line of cells filled with latitudes and longitudes. Imagining copying and pasting all that into a map application was making me feel dizzy. Back at my previous job, we hated working with government agencies—it always involved super-annoying tasks like this.

"I wonder if there's any patterns," mused Miss Hoshizaki aloud.

"If we analyze all the locations and times it's appeared, we may see something," I said.

"Wouldn't the department at the bureau in charge of these things have a leg up on us?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "We can try all we want, but we'll never stand a chance against experts with expensive supercomputers."

"I'd rather you not drain our enthusiasm," I replied. "Not when we *just* came up with something."

“It’s the truth, though.”

“Well, let’s just do what we can.” Nobody was expecting spectacular results from us this time. I figured we could relax and take it slow.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “I just remembered something I had to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“The girlie who moved in next door to me will be starting school today.”

“You’re always so quick and efficient at these things.”

“Well, if she waited too long, she’d fall behind in class. Whatever happens in the future, I at least want her to have a satisfying time at middle school. Of course, different schools progress at different paces, so a few days off might not mean anything.”

“I truly appreciate how considerate you’re being.”

“Oh, come now,” she replied, a smirk forming on her lips. “It’s really nothing.”

She *definitely* wanted to place us and my neighbor in her debt. Still, she was helping us out a lot, so I wasn’t about to complain.

“I could even get her a private tutor,” she added.

“If that’s something she wants, we should keep it in mind as an option,” I told her.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “How would you feel about being cucked by some hot young tutor?”

“You may look like a child on the outside, Futarishizuka,” muttered Miss Hoshizaki, “but you’re one hundred percent dirty old man in there.”

“Oh, come now. There’s nothing odd about that, surely?” she replied. “It happens all the time in manga and on TV.”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but do topics like these come up a lot when women are talking to each other? Like during girls’ nights? I mean, guys are always talking dirty, I suppose, but...”

“How should I know?” retorted Miss Hoshizaki. “I’ve never done stuff like

that.”

“Ah, the friendless introvert character. Must be rough,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Sh-shut up! I’m trying to focus on my career!”

And so we passed the car ride chatting about this and that, keeping work-related conversation to a minimum.



<The Neighbor’s POV>

I’ve only just moved in, and today is already my first day of class.

My new school is pretty far from the mansion I’ll be living in, though, so walking there isn’t realistic. And since I live up on a forested mountain, the road back is a steep climb, making biking difficult as well.

Futarishizuka suggested having someone pick me up and take me there and back. I used to avoid all forms of exercise to try to preserve as many calories as I could, so I think I’m pretty physically weak compared to other kids in my grade. I’d rather not get hurt and cause even more trouble for Futarishizuka and my neighbor, so I decided to simply take her up on the offer. Yesterday, she sent a message with the details to the phone she’d given me.

I wait at the front entrance of my mansion, all ready to go. And just like she said it would, a car rolls up at the agreed-upon time.

I thought for sure it was going to be a taxi. But instead, it’s an expensive car with a boxy design. I’m not familiar with cars, but the shape alone tells me it probably cost a lot. It’s painted all black and has tinted windows so you can’t see the inside.

Isn’t this the kind of car yakuza bosses and company presidents use? I think.

Sitting in the driver’s seat is an elderly gentleman wearing a clean, well-fitted suit. He prompts me to get in, so I climb into the back seat, and the car starts again without me having to tell him where I’m going. Apparently, he’s already been informed. It seems Futarishizuka ordered him to be my chauffeur

wherever I need to go, not just to school and back.

With this, I have a new contact in my smartphone's address book to use whenever I need to go somewhere. What am I, some kind of rich girl? Everything is so different from the life I was living just a couple days ago. It's all so confusing.

Abaddon is with me in the car, too. He floated after me and got into the vehicle. Other people can't see him, so he didn't scare the driver or anything. That said, having to listen in silence to his sarcastic chatter the whole way is really annoying.

We eventually arrive at a public middle school in town. True to what I was told, it really is just a normal school. And that's exactly why, as we pass the uniformed students on their morning commute and pull up to the front gates, we draw attention. There's only one person here still wearing the uniform from her previous school.

"Looks like they're all watching you, huh?" Abaddon says with an air of detachment.

"....."

I ignore him and decide to make my way to the faculty room. I start at the teachers' entrance and plot a course into the building.

As I set foot inside, a male teacher in the entrance hall calls out to me. It seems that news of my out-of-season transfer has already spread through the faculty. I nod back to him, and he takes me to the faculty room. There, I'm introduced to my homeroom teacher. He's somewhat younger than my neighbor—taller, too, with sharper features. I assume others would categorize him as fairly attractive. He smiles the whole time.

He explains a bunch of things and gives me several textbooks. This school has three classes per grade, and I've been assigned to class 1-A. When the bell rings, we leave the faculty room and make our way to my new classroom.

Abaddon follows me like he always does. He hovers right next to me, peering this way and that, studying the inside of the school. He was just as restless at my previous school, at least when we first met. When I ask, he tells me he's

getting a read on the building's layout. His fixation on the death game never seems to wane.

Eventually, we arrive. My teacher goes in first, instructing me to wait in the hallway for a moment. The classroom, once noisy, quiets down as morning homeroom begins. A few moments later, the teacher tells me to come inside. I do as he instructs and enter through the door in front of me.

Immediately, I'm faced with a barrage of comments and first impressions from the students I'll be sharing a class with from today on.

"For real? She's supercute!"

"Is it just me or is she kinda hot?"

"That uniform must be from her old school."

"Wait, is she the one who came here in that car?"

"The one driving totally looked like a butler."

"Whoa, is she rich or something?"

The quiet classroom quickly erupts into chatter.

The teacher quiets them down by saying, "Kurosu, please introduce yourself to the class. Feel free to use the blackboard."

"Yes, sir."

As instructed, I write my name on the blackboard. If I was Futarishizuka, I would have added my hobbies or something to give the class a good idea of what I'm all about. And she definitely would have thrown in a fun little anecdote. But I don't have anything to tell them except my name, so I simply write it out in chalk.

"My name is Kurosu. I moved here from Tokyo because of my family," I say, keeping the reason for my transfer vague. I don't want to stand out. Hopefully, I can spend my time in the corner in peace and quiet like I did at my last school. "I hope we can get along," I finish, bowing deeply.

Immediately, the other kids chime in.

"Tell us what you're into, Kurosu!"

“Do you have a favorite TV show or musician?”

“Did you already decide if you’re joining a club?”

“Tell me about the man who drove you here! I’m super curious.”

“Are you from a rich family?”

“My, aren’t we popular?” quips Abaddon.

I *almost* respond to him. He’s still bobbing up and down in the air next to me. But if I do that, everyone will start thinking I’m a weirdo, so I swallow my words and glance over at the teacher.

He looks at the rowdy students and says in a troubled voice, “You’re overwhelming her. Let’s have questions one at a time.”

The kids here seem to trust their teacher quite a bit, because they all do as he says, visibly calming down in a matter of moments. Come to think of it, his colleagues in the faculty room seemed to be partial to him as well.

I begin to wonder if I’m getting some special treatment. Maybe Futarishizuka said something to the school’s representative. I remember hearing a rumor that teachers assigned to the first class of each grade tend to be talented.

“What’s your favorite hobby, Kurosu?” one student asks.

“I like to read.”

“What books do you like?”

“I read pretty much anything in the school library.”

“Where’s your new house? Oh, sorry if that’s a weird question!”

“It’s a ways up the mountain.”

“I heard you came to school by car. That true?”

“My house is far away, so yes, I’m being driven here.”

I wonder why they’re all so interested in someone like me.

They continue asking questions, and I continue answering until, eventually, morning homeroom ends.



<The Neighbor's POV>

For lunch, students push their desks into little clusters to eat, just like at my last school. They're assigned groups, rather than circles of friends. The food, too, is prepared in a separate kitchen, then distributed to each classroom and split up among the students, just as before.

Things look different, but the ritual is the same—except for my ritual, which is *very* different.

Thanks to Futarishizuka's help, I no longer have to scavenge for leftovers. I don't need to use the rest of my afternoon break to secretly sneak into the service room to pilfer scraps after lunch. While I'm happy about it, I also feel a strange sense of unease.

Is it really okay for me to fill my stomach so easily? Shouldn't I at least secure an extra piece of bread for dinner tonight? At this point, I can use Abaddon to get whatever I like. He might not enjoy it, but I'm his Disciple, so he has to obey my orders.

Knowing this makes me nervous. Impatience rises in my stomach as I watch uneaten food being returned to the kitchen. Is this what they call a hunting instinct?

"How do you like our school lunch, Kurosu?"

"Did you get school lunches in Tokyo, too? Or did you have to bring your own?"

"The selection today was kinda meh, though."

"Aren't you rich? I bet the food wasn't really what you're used to."

"What do you eat at home?"

Meanwhile, the rest of the class has started to treat me like a rich girl. I suppose they did see me get out of that boxy car this morning. Maybe they've already locked on to me as a potential financial supporter.

When lunch ends, the other students all gather around. Just as they have at

every break so far, they surround my desk and start peppering me with questions.

“I can’t go without raw dandelions in early spring,” I respond to one of them.

“...Huh?”

“Nothing. It was just a joke.”

I read in an encyclopedia at the library once that dandelions are packed with vitamins and other nutrients. The common dandelion from Europe, which is from the same group as the ones native to Japan, was apparently brought over during the Meiji era to serve as a vegetable. That non-native variety goes by a second name in Japan: the edible dandelion.

For me, they’ve always been a precious source of nutrients. At one point—I think it was during one of the middle years of elementary school—I suffered from a lot of numbness in my arms and legs. At the encyclopedia’s suggestion, I ate some dandelion, and it got better. Ever since then, I’ve been eating it every spring without fail.

It’s only a pity that their petals turn into fluff so quickly. Those don’t taste very good.

“I guess rich girls have a quirky sense of humor, huh?”

“Maybe I’ll try a dandelion next time they’re growing!”

“Dandelions? They use that as garnish in packs of sashimi a lot, right?”

“I thought it was just decoration.”

“I think those are actually edible chrysanthemums.”

I don’t *think* I said anything funny or interesting. But the other students get excited over it anyway. It’s so strange. It’s not even just the girls, either—it’s the boys, too. And they’re all pretty attractive. They seem like the type with a lot of sway in the classroom.

I’m uncomfortable again. It’s nerve-racking constantly being the center of attention.

Also, since I’m mixed up in this proxy war between angels and demons, I don’t

want to get close to people who can't protect themselves, only to have them wind up as collateral damage. The angels were more than willing to blow up my apartment, after all.

I don't actually care what happens to my classmates, but if my neighbor got wind of me endangering other people, he'd probably like me a lot less. That's why I have to avoid doing those kinds of things at all costs.

As I mull this over, I suddenly catch sight of something interesting. There's a girl in the corner of the room, alone at her desk, reading a book. Compared to the kids surrounding me, she seems quiet, or, if you wanted to be rude, plain. She doesn't appear to care much about how she looks and seemingly has no interest in fashion, which I can definitely relate to.

Oh. I have an idea, I think.

"There's that good old scheming face!" declares Abaddon.

Am I really that easy to read?

I ignore the demon's rude remark. "I'm sorry," I say to the kids around me, getting up from my seat. "Could I have a moment?"

"Oh, what's up?"

I go over to the girl reading by herself. I've already said—multiple times—that I like to read, so I'm going to use her to put myself in a more favorable position in class.



“Sorry for disturbing you,” I say after approaching her desk and fixing my eyes on the book in her hands. “But do you like books?”

“I, uh... Kurosu?”

The book has a cover on it, so I can't see what it says on the front. A glance at the pages reveals tightly packed characters. That's not enough for me to figure out what kind of book it is, though.

“Could I ask what you're reading?”

“Oh, I, um...” She clearly hesitates at my question.

I wonder if it's an erotic novel of some sort. If it is, I hope she lies about it. “I was just interested because I like reading, too,” I say.

“Um, I d-don't think you should talk to me...”

“Why not?”

For now, I'll put distance between the popular kids and me by focusing my attention on her. Then, after concentrating on reading for a while, I'll steadily decrease my interaction with her, too, until I finally settle into a nice isolation. It's the perfect plan. I'll sink below the surface without causing any waves.

For the rest of the break, I have a friendly conversation with her. In the afternoon, I digest the lecture content just fine. I was worried about where this school would be compared to my old one, but it seems they're a little behind. Keeping up is another matter, though; being the transfer student means I get called on in class an awful lot. It's a struggle.

Without Abaddon to give me hints, I would have been in for a series of embarrassments. He's extraordinarily smart when it comes to practical topics like math and English. I bet I'd easily pass any high school entrance exam with his help.

Class continues, and eventually my first day ends without incident. After school, my classmates ask me if I want to hang out and suggest a karaoke get-together to serve as a welcoming party. Another group invites me to go see some of the school's clubs. Apparently, joining one is optional here.

I tell them all that I have plans for this evening, then leave the classroom by

myself.

On my way to the entrance, I contact the older gentleman who drove me to school this morning at the number he gave me. He picks up after just one ring, and when I ask him to come get me, he tells me politely that he should arrive in about ten minutes.

It's barely any time, but I find I have nothing to do. After changing out of my indoor shoes, I decide to take a quick look around the school grounds. One of my classmates gave me a brief tour of the inside during a break, but I haven't really gotten a good look at the outside yet.

To tell the truth, though, it was Abaddon who instructed me to do so. *"We'll need to have a good grasp of the terrain in case anything happens."*

"You're always on the ball, Abaddon."

"I've gotta do my best to make up for what my partner lacks!" says the demon, puffing out his chest as he floats in the air. We've already made sure none of the other students can see him. As we chat, we walk between different buildings on the lot.

Once we make a full circuit around the school, I decide to go back to the parking lot, but before I can, I hear familiar voices from behind the gym.

"Hey, what's your deal? What was all that during lunch?"

"You were totally pretending to read just to catch the new girl's attention."

"Yeah, seriously!"

"She even took the time to talk to you, and you barely spoke to her!"

"You really made it awkward for her."

I peek around the corner of the building to watch. Several students stand in a half circle around another one. They're all girls from my class, 1-A. I'm still hazy on their names, but I remember their faces clearly.

"I... I didn't mean to—"

"Excuse me? Don't talk back to us. We're only telling the truth!"

It's the girl I approached during break, surrounded by the students who kept

going out of their way to talk to me. The latter all look pretty scary, while the girl they're glaring at seems to be about to burst into tears.

Fortunately, none of them appears to notice me. "Let's find another way back to the parking lot," I say to Abaddon.

"Oh? You sure you want to leave her there?"

"This is a problem best worked out by those involved and our teachers."

"Seems to me you're partially responsible."

"I'll mention it to our homeroom teacher tomorrow."

All schools have a few bullies. You can't let stuff like that get to you. A surprising number of people in the world start raging over the stupidest things or derive enjoyment from hurting others. My mother was typical of them. I doubt going up and saying something to their faces would resolve anything.

I, too, feel happy when my neighbor is all alone and sad. It makes me want to squeeze him tight.

"You're kindhearted for a demon," I say.

"Hey, like I said before, we demons love humans," he replies. I have no idea how serious he is when he says nonsense like that.

I make a U-turn and head back to the parking lot. The car from this morning is already there. The driver stands next to it with excellent posture. He could have just stayed in the driver's seat, but he got out to wait for me. When he notices I've arrived, he bows respectfully. What am I supposed to do? Students and teachers nearby cast curious glances our way.

"We'll have to repay her soon with some results from the death game," comments Abaddon. *"Or else we could be in trouble."*

"I'm fully aware of her intentions," I say. "But I feel like this is going a little too far." Maybe I should consult with her soon. Tonight, if possible.

In any case, I'd like a less conspicuous type of car, at least.



The evening after our boss gave us our new assignment, we paid a visit to Ms. Futarishizuka's villa to explain the situation to Peeps.

This time, Miss Hoshizaki came with us. After making her promise to tell no one, I asked my distinguished Java sparrow to use his teleportation magic on her as well. In the blink of an eye, we'd jumped from our hotel near my ruined apartment straight into Ms. Futarishizuka's luxurious mansion. As expected, Miss Hoshizaki's eyes were wide with astonishment.

I'd decided this would be safer than trying to keep the secret and arousing her suspicions anyway. With the extremely convenient scapegoat of the angel-demon proxy war now in my hands, we had a good excuse if she ever let slip any mention of otherworldly magic. Also, we'd left all our company phones—hers included—in the hotel.

"Unfortunately, I can't be of much help," said Peeps. "The information you've provided rings no bells, as it were."

"I thought so," I replied. "Sorry for asking something so strange."

"Don't be. It's been hardly a week since the sea dragon appeared. Your concern is justified."

We were in the villa's living space, seated on the sofa set, all facing one another. My phone rested in front of Peeps, who was perched on a little tree atop the low table; it was showing an image viewer containing the UFO photographs the section chief had sent us.

The way Peeps tilted his little head while peering at the screen was absolutely adorable. And he was even using his foot to poke and swipe at the display. I could barely suppress the urge to record him and then upload the video so I could brag about him to the whole world.

"In that case, we are well and truly out of clues," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I think we can leave this one up to the other departments," I said. "There's no reason for us to produce results on every case, don't you agree? Maybe it's time to let someone else score some points."

"You know, I rather like this side of you."

“Hold on a minute,” interrupted Miss Hoshizaki. “This is our job, right? Shouldn’t we be more serious about it?”

It seemed our senior colleague did not like our attitude, though I suppose we newbies *did* try to slack off whenever we got the chance. Meanwhile, she was gunning for that overtime pay.

“You can do whatever you’d like,” I told her. “No need to concern yourself with us.”

“The on-site team needn’t meddle in tasks like these, dear,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Nothing good will come of it.”

“But that doesn’t mean we should cut corners!”

“I was serious about trying to communicate with them,” I reminded her.

“And none of us can think of much else to do,” added Ms. Futarishizuka.

“W-well, sure, maybe not, but...”

As we traded opinions across the table, Peeps was in the middle while Miss Hoshizaki and I sat across from Ms. Futarishizuka. Lady Elsa was present as well, sitting next to her host. Until recently, she’d always sat at the head of the table, but these days she seemed closer to her temporary guardian, proof that they were getting along well under the same roof. While I was happy about that, I was also a little uneasy. Ms. Futarishizuka was making a very big connection to the otherworld through her guest.

“I would like to peruse the list of sightings, if I may,” said Peeps.

“Sure,” I said. “But why?”

“A bird’s-eye view—forgive the turn of phrase—may provide a better insight.”

“Okay, no problem. I’ll load the data onto the laptop.” Peeps was probably trying to be of help after hearing we’d hit a dead end. This had nothing to do with him personally, so I couldn’t have been more grateful.

“Thank you for going to the trouble.”

“No, not at all. Thank *you* for helping us out like this.”

“I very much doubt a sparrow who only recently discovered computers and

the internet will be able to run this type of data analysis,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. “In fact, won’t he just end up leaking something again?”

“Assume failure, and you will not know success.”

“Wha...what?! Just because you have some cool-sounding quotes up your little bird sleeves doesn’t mean...”

Given how he liked to keep track of the time difference between the otherworld and modern Japan, this type of data analysis seemed to be like a hobby for him—maybe even his life’s work. Since he appeared to enjoy it, I was more than happy to leave it to him.

As for handing him the data—well, it was probably fine. It seemed like most other organizations already had access to it at this point. At worst, I could formally apologize to our boss and smooth it over. For now, I wanted to prioritize Peeps’s wishes.

“Sasaki, little bird, is there anything I can help with?” asked Lady Elsa.

“If you so desire, then yes. I do believe you could help me.”

“Really? I’d be happy to. Even if it’s only a little bit.”

And now he was even being considerate of Lady Elsa. He really was a huge help.

Just then, the intercom dinged. Everyone turned to look at the front door. It seemed we had a guest.

“Has our new little neighbor come back from school?” Ms. Futarishizuka wondered aloud as she got up from the sofa and went to the door.

She was right—when she returned to the living room, my uniformed neighbor was standing next to her, with Abaddon floating at her side. She was still holding her school bag; she must have come straight here.

“Hello, mister.”

“Good evening. How was your new school?” I asked, and she immediately broke into a smile.

“It was quiet and peaceful. Thanks for asking.”

Given her tendency to endure things in silence, I wasn't sure if she was telling the truth. Abaddon didn't make any snide remarks, though, so perhaps it had been a pretty good day for her.

The next one to speak was Miss Hoshizaki, sitting at my side. "Sasaki, what do you mean *new school*?"

"I thought you were aware of what happened to our apartment complex," I said.

"I am. But why did she have to transfer schools because of it?"

"As a result of her family circumstances, Ms. Futarishizuka has adopted her. We've moved all her necessities out here, and she'll be staying at a mansion nearby for the time being. With the change of address, she naturally needed to switch schools as well."

"Oh. I, uh, I see..." Miss Hoshizaki glanced at my neighbor. She had a complicated look on her face. Was she worried about the girl? If so, I appreciated it.

Before our conversation could progress any further, a light, bubbly ringtone went off in Ms. Futarishizuka's pocket. Evidently, she'd received a call; she took out her phone and began speaking with someone. Judging from her end of the exchange, it was about the progress of a request she'd made at lunchtime.

She was only on the call for ten or twenty seconds. When she was finished, she returned her phone to its place.

"Is everything ready?" I asked.

"It is. And out of respect for our senior colleague's enthusiasm, I say we get to work right away."

She'd asked someone to set up some radio equipment, and it appeared they'd finished the job.

I was actually kind of excited about the whole thing, but I decided not to let it show.



We imposed once again on Peeps's magic and had him warp us from the Karuizawa villa to the hotel near my ruined apartment. We then took advantage of Ms. Futarishizuka's car to travel from the Metropolitan Expressway to the Chuo Expressway, into the mountains of the Kanto region, and up to a certain pass.

We'd left Lady Elsa at the villa for the time being, and Peeps returned there after sending us to the hotel room. I expected that, right about now, he'd be using the laptop to pore over the eyewitness data on the UFO. My neighbor and Abaddon had gone home as well.

"Tell me again why we needed to come all the way up here," complained Miss Hoshizaki.

"Places with a high elevation and a good view are best for this sort of thing, apparently," I said.

The two of us stood at the edge of a precipitous cliff, gazing out at the nighttime cityscape. It was a gorgeous view, and there was no one else in sight.

Meanwhile, Ms. Futarishizuka was in the middle of setting up the radio equipment. "If our target is above the Kármán line, we'll need to call using VHF or higher," she explained. "Waves like those can usually only travel along a line of sight from the source, so obviously we need to pick a high place with a clear view. You didn't even know that?"

"...I don't think my classes have gotten that far," said Miss Hoshizaki.

"High school girls these days are just so airheaded."

"Ms. Futarishizuka," I cut in, "I'm almost certain that's not covered in the first-year curriculum."

"Anyway, why don't you two give me a hand already? Don't make me do all the work."

"Oh, I'd love to, but I have no idea what I'm doing," replied Miss Hoshizaki. "I'd probably break the equipment. And since you can do the heavy lifting, too, I'm sure Sasaki and I would just get in the way."

"Honestly, I'm of a similar opinion," I agreed.

“Ah, the struggles of a poor newbie, cursed with incompetent colleagues...”

The radio I’d been using in the otherworld had a different antenna, size, and shape. It seemed Ms. Futarishizuka had brought in her own equipment. I was a novice, without even an amateur radio certification, so I hesitated to touch it on the off chance I’d mess it up.

Grumbling to herself, she assembled the equipment with practiced motions. Once our makeshift radio station was complete, we decided to place our call right away.

“Hello, CQ. Hello, CQ. This is Juliet, Alpha, one, ##, ##. J, A, one, ##, ##. To anyone inside the unidentified flying object all over the news lately—if you can hear this, please reply on 433.46. I repeat, please reply on 433.46.”

Microphone in hand, Ms. Futarishizuka started throwing out some pretty cool-sounding lines. While I’d introduced wireless equipment to the otherworld, I hadn’t passed on any of the rules of amateur radio; the people there simply used the machines however they liked. I’d left everything, including what frequency band to use, up to the Kepler Trading Company. As a result, I wasn’t very used to hearing genuine exchanges like these.

“What do you mean *Juliet*?” demanded Miss Hoshizaki. “Are you telling me that’s your radio code name or something?”

“Well, yes. And it wasn’t reallocated to me, either! I have a bona fide original two-digit call sign.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Amateur radio call signs are first-come, first-served,” I explained to her. “Whoever applies to the government first wins. It’s like online domain names. The one she’s using was granted a long time ago.”

I’d recently found this out while reading a book on the subject. Futarishizuka’s call sign was from the very beginning of amateur radio during the fifties and sixties, before such shorter names ran out. If someone in the field heard it, they’d assume the call was coming from someone over eighty years old—only to hear the voice of a young girl. This would have to be a violation of Japanese Radio Law. To anyone else, it would have come off as a prank.

“Could you sell it on the internet for a lot of money?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Nope. You can’t sell them. It’s not allowed.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“I swear. High school girls these days have no sense of romance.”

We waited a while, but the broadcast received no response. That was to be expected, of course. If we’d heard anything, it would’ve most likely been an *actual* prank.

“Hello, CQ. Hello, CQ. This is Juliet, Alpha, one, ##, ##. J, A, one, ##, ##. To anyone inside the unidentified flying object all over the news lately—if you can hear this, please respond. We are receiving. Over.”

“I thought I read that CQ was used for addressing an unknown number of people,” I remarked.

“Hey, we don’t know what their setup is like. They might have multiple stations.”

“Ah, I see.”

“But really I just did it out of habit.”

“.....”

After that, Ms. Futarishizuka tried broadcasting on different frequencies, leaving a few minutes between each. If we reached anyone, their voice would come through the speakers, but we’d heard nothing so far.



Miss Hoshizaki and I didn't have much to do but watch. Since the elevation here was a lot higher than in the city, I started to feel cold despite my coat.

"Hey, are you seriously going to keep doing the same thing over and over?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Indeed, I am. Why?" answered our coworker.

"It just seems like... I don't know. Is amateur radio supposed to be this boring?"

"In principle, your smartphone does the exact same thing."

"Wait, really?"

"It's just a matter of you speaking personally versus letting a machine do it for you."

"We've been on communication frequency for a while, haven't we?" I noted. "Are we not going back to calling frequency?"

"Of course not," she said. "If I kept making these ridiculous calls on a main channel, all we'd get in return is verbal abuse. Besides, if we're really trying to make contact with an extraterrestrial, they won't know Earth's rules. We just have to pray they're monitoring the whole spectrum."

"Can a portable home antenna even reach into space?" Miss Hoshizaki asked.

"Oh, it can easily go at least as far as the International Space Station."

"What? That far?"

"Couldn't reach the UFO otherwise, now could it?"

"We consulted with the bureau about our output strength," I added, "and they're okay with us getting somewhat reckless if needed."

"We've already made a few calls, and I haven't heard even one of their automatic warning broadcasts," said Futarishizuka. "I never thought I'd get government permission to broadcast in the *kilowatts*. Ah, the heat from the linear amplifier feels so good. And since we came all the way here, we may as well stay as long as we can."

In contrast to the bored Hoshizaki, Futarishizuka seemed to be having a blast.

Delighted, she turned back to the radio equipment and started messing with the controls.

Personally, I'd gotten pretty cold and would have preferred to go wait in the car. I assumed Miss Hoshizaki was thinking the same thing. That would be rude, however, so we simply stood by and watched our coworker indulge in one of her hobbies.

After a while, a response came over the speaker. At first it was just static, but that eventually gave way to a series of electronic noises. A stream of high-pitched *blip-blips* and *bloooooo-bloooooops* followed.

"Wh-what's it beeping like that for?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"It's Morse code," Ms. Futarishizuka explained.

Everyone turned to the speaker. We had a recorder set up nearby, so there was no rush. We could take our time with the transmission at a later date if necessary. For now, we just listened to the noise that seemed to come from nowhere. Just like English, I didn't have a clue what it was saying.

Miss Hoshizaki turned to Ms. Futarishizuka. "Should we respond, or...?"

"That would cause interference," she replied. "We need to wait for them to finish."

"I heard amateur radio enthusiasts can understand Morse code," I said. "Do you know what it means?"

"Not a clue. It's just a bunch of nonsense letters," she explained.

"Is someone pranking us?"

"I think that's likely."

"Can you figure out their, uh, their call sign?" suggested Miss Hoshizaki.

"If I could, this would be a lot easier."

"...What do you mean?"

"Hmm? Well, I sure didn't hear one."

"This whole call sign thing—you have to tell it to others personally?"

“Of course you do. I sent mine before, remember?”

“Ugh. Why does amateur radio have to be so inconvenient?”

“Well, I hear you, dear, but...”

After a few minutes of the three of us discussing this and that, the transmission finally ended. We waited for some time after, but we never received another reply. Ms. Futarishizuka kept on making calls to no avail. Eventually, after a little under an hour, my limbs were starting to go numb.

“Could we maybe go home soon, Futarishizuka?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“What? I thought you were fishing for overtime pay.”

“If I stay out any longer, the only thing I’ll catch is a cold.”

“I’m going to have to agree with her, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

“Well, it is rather chilly out, so perhaps we’ll pack it up for now.”

With her agreement, our work for the day came to an end. Miss Hoshizaki and I helped her clean up, unplugging cables and folding antennas—you didn’t need specialized knowledge for that. Hurried along by the cold, we finished our task quickly, then went straight back to the car and left the dark pass behind.



With our fieldwork finished, we made our way home. First, we brought Miss Hoshizaki back to her apartment. She invited us in for some tea, but we declined and moved on to the hotel near my old apartment. After meeting up with Peeps there, we headed back to the living room of Ms. Futarishizuka’s Karuizawa villa.

There, we explained to Peeps what had happened. Ms. Futarishizuka quickly translated the Morse code we’d received on the mountain into text. As she handily, smoothly wrote down each letter in the message, I watched her from the side, thinking she looked pretty cool.

Before we knew it, it was almost midnight. Now that we had the data, Peeps and I decided to go straight to the otherworld. After parting ways with Ms. Futarishizuka, we used Peeps’s teleportation spell to instantly jump from the

villa to Allestos, the capital of the Kingdom of Herz.

Our destination was the office of the court minister—the title King Adonis had bestowed upon me on our previous visit. It was a large room, about one hundred square meters, with a desk and several bookshelves inside.

In the past, we'd been away from this world for over two days in Japan time. Compared to that, I doubted much time had gone by. That said, the nation's leader had just changed, which surely brought with it a whole host of problems. So first, I wanted to get a read on the situation in Herz. I felt sure Mr. Joseph would be all right waiting until I was done.

"Let's go straight to Count Müller, shall we?"

"I agree. Let us be off."

With my distinguished sparrow's approval, we exited the room and headed down a castle passage. During our first visit, we'd been hesitant—it had been anyone's guess who might pop up around the next corner like some evil spirit wandering the halls. The Lord Starsage had been adamant about never walking around alone, too, like one of those dangerous areas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued travel advisories for.

But such concerns were in the past; now, in the reign of His Majesty Adonis, we could walk around without much concern. In fact, now that I held the prominent position of court minister, those I passed bowed to *me* rather than vice versa. I returned the gesture each time as we made our way to our destination: the chancellor's office. Fortunately, Count Müller was in.

"It's good to see you again, Count Müller."

"Ah, thank you for coming. Both of you."

He encouraged us to come inside, and we took our seats on the sofa set. The low table featured a little perching tree—the count must have placed it there at some point. It was quite extravagant; the one in his old Baytrium residence had struck me as high-class, but this was something else. It even had a few gems embedded here and there.

Peeps showed no constraint as he fluttered off my shoulder and alighted on one of its branches. He was probably used to such treatment. Seeing how the

count's face broke into a smile soothed me in turn.

"To begin with, my lord," I said, "I'd like to share a video letter from Lady Elsa."

"And for that, I thank you very much," he replied. "But there is something I wanted to discuss with you before that."

"More problems with the Ohgen Empire, sir?"

"No, no. Everything is quiet on that front."

I had been about to remove the laptop from my bag when he'd straightened up in his seat and interrupted; I was very curious what he wanted to ask me about. The look on his face had sharpened by several degrees compared to when he'd smiled at Peeps. I felt myself straighten up as well.

"I know this is very sudden, but would you take my daughter Elsa as a concubine?"

"...That *is* a very sudden request, my lord." I froze for a moment without meaning to—the proposal had come way out of left field. *Concubine?* I thought. *He means that kind of concubine, right?*

I wanted to reject it out of hand as if he were joking, but the count wasn't one to make jokes, so I had to consider the matter earnestly. His gaze told me he was dead serious.

"I had thought Lady Elsa would be wed to King Adonis," I said.

"His Majesty thought the same at first," he replied. "But just the other day, it was decided that he would marry the princess of a nearby nation. While the marriage is not yet official, negotiations in the court are already proceeding as though it is."

"Does that mean the other party came to him with the proposal?"

"That's correct."

"Given Herz's current situation, relations with neighboring countries are more crucial than even domestic affairs. If marriage will erase one of his major concerns, there can be no other choice."

Count Müller and King Adonis were on very good terms. Others might judge them somewhat differently were Lady Elsa to marry the king, but in my estimation, it wasn't likely anything would lead to a falling out between the two parties anytime soon. And if that was true, it seemed the natural choice for His Majesty to use marriage as a means to forge alliances with other nations.

Still, this new bride-to-be had me curious.

"Will it be the first princess of the Kingdom of Blase, then?"

"Yes. You're right on the mark," said the count, surprised at the sparrow's casual question. He must not have thought it would be so easy to guess. Sincere admiration colored his features, and he offered the reincarnated sage a deep bow. "Discerning as ever, Lord Starsage."

"They would have been the Empire's next target had it succeeded in conquering Herz. I had heard Blase had a princess around his age. However, I doubt we can trust them simply because of the marriage."

"The king expressed the same concern."

It struck me again how difficult royalty and nobility had it. A king couldn't even choose his own marriage partner. And it seemed that such political marriages didn't even guarantee a bond one could trust.

"Lady Elsa was suited to wed a *king*, my lord," I pointed out. "Meanwhile, I'm but a foreigner from who knows where. She is too far above my station. Would you please reconsider? With all due respect, I am certain you will regret it one day, should I agree."

"Our relationship with you," replied the count, "is even more precious to us than our relationship with our neighbors."

He was being very considerate toward me, but I was pretty sure the Lord Starsage was the one he truly thought precious. Without the bird's help during Herz's battles with the Empire, they wouldn't have been able to hold out—a fact they must have been very keenly aware of. If that was the reason he was offering me his daughter, it would put me in an awful position. I'd look like some wicked old man buying his little girl's hand with favors.

"My own intentions aside, my lord, the Lord Starsage is devoted to this

kingdom. While it may be difficult to do so immediately, I can imagine a future where he remains here in Herz without me to work alongside all of you.”

Otherworld magic came in four difficulty levels: beginner, intermediate, advanced, and the crazy stuff beyond that. After reincarnating as a Java sparrow, Peeps’s small body only allowed him to cast up to advanced-level magic. If he pushed himself, his feet could pop off.

I, on the other hand, could use spells all the way up to the “crazy” level. The spell for traveling between this world and modern times was one of those, so if I was to learn it for myself, it would open up the possibility of my acting independently of Peeps.

“I have asked you before to stop calling me by that title.”

“But if we all call you something different, the conversation will stop making sense,” I replied.

I had made virtually no progress on the commuting spell, though, and I suspected learning it would take a very long time. But considering the count’s and his daughter’s futures, I at least wanted to make the suggestion while I had the chance.

Then the count, seeming to have misunderstood, turned apologetic. “As her father, I know she has no exceptional merits,” he said. “And I do apologize for thrusting this upon you—I know you have your position outside the kingdom to consider. But I swear on my house’s name that she will never stray from a just and proper path.”

Now he was getting overly dramatic—and he followed it all up with a deep bow, which didn’t help. I started to panic.

“Please, my lord, there’s no need for that,” I said. “In fact, I feel it is I who am unworthy of Lady Elsa.”

“Then why...?” Confusion appeared on the count’s face.

I got the feeling I wasn’t making myself understood. But shouldn’t the count be able to figure out what was wrong here?

“As you can see,” I began, “I am close to you in age, my lord. I could never do

anything that would bring unhappiness to your daughter. Not when I owe you so much. So please, won't you reconsider? I would like to continue serving the Kingdom of Herz in the future."

"...Unhappiness?" he repeated. "What are you referring to, exactly?"

"*Julius,*" came a voice from the perching tree atop the low table, "*the world in which this man was raised is quite different from our own.*"

We both turned to the bird. "Peeps?" I said.

"*Actually, I suppose it would be quicker to explain things to you, Sasaki.*"

He shifted, turning his adorable little eyes on me. Some internet research had told me that Java sparrows could basically see anywhere other than directly behind them without moving. But Peeps adjusted his position anyway, probably out of consideration for the two men in the room. His kindness warmed my heart.

"*This proposition may be an unlawful act in your world,*" he told me. "*However, it is quite frequent in this one. There are many instances in which men much older than you marry children even younger than Julius's daughter.*"

Sure, I'd heard about things like that. But what about the participants' feelings? That was a whole other issue. I, for one, was pretty sure such children were getting married against their will.

As I thought about this, Count Müller stammered, "A-an unlawful act?" He was astonished. The amount of shock on his face was almost comical.

"*Indeed. In Sasaki's world, it is illegal. If a child of your daughter's age and an adult such as Sasaki were to engage in sexual acts, the latter would be punished regardless of their gender. One's social status is moot. Many influential people have fallen from power because of such things in the past.*"

"I... I had no idea..."

Peeps had just hit the count with some serious culture shock. *I don't think I've ever seen him so surprised.*

The sage continued regardless, turning his focus back to me. "*On the other hand, this man sincerely wishes to give you his own daughter in marriage. You*

may refuse, should you have a reason to. But if you wish to maintain a relationship with him in the future—well, in our world, common sense demands such a reason be significant.”

“...I see,” I said.

“And he would have discussed this with Adonis as well, I believe,” added Peeps, prompting a small nod from the count.

It didn’t look like I could get away with the tried-and-true excuse of being in love with someone else—not in this world. This was all business. In fact, it felt more like we were discussing finances or something.

“Either way, I will abide by your choice,” Peeps said. *“This would be your first marriage, after all.”*

“I-it would?!” exclaimed the count, his continuing surprise a great contrast to Peeps’s casual tone. Was it just me, or had *that* little tidbit shocked him even more? His words rang through the chancellor’s office. Now it was getting a little awkward. He *had* to be indirectly making fun of me, right?

No, it’s fine, I told myself. *These days, the rate of people who remain unmarried for life is almost 30 percent, and it’s expected to reach 50 in the near future. My situation isn’t strange at all. It’s this otherworld that’s strange.*

A moment later, the count spoke again. His expression was earnestly apologetic. “I... I’m terribly sorry!”

“There’s no need to be,” replied Peeps. *“In his world, late marriages are very much a trend of the times.”*

Peeps seemed to have a slightly skewed understanding of the matter himself. I guess he couldn’t help it—he hadn’t been in my world for very long.

I had begun to feel ill, but I couldn’t exactly defend myself since it was all true.

For now, the least I could do to be polite was to give him a clear answer. “I am quite fond of Lady Elsa, my lord, but that is exactly why I don’t want to do anything that might ruin her happiness. I am fully aware my answer is disrespectful, sir, but please, I must refuse.” I got up from the sofa and bowed deeply.

Had I been ten or twenty years younger, perhaps I would have considered it. To have a girl as charming as her for my lifelong partner would have assured me a most happy future.

Actually, I won't be aging very much in the future, will I? I thought, remembering the Starsage's explanation of my position as an elite human.

"Julius, while it is true this man is being awfully rude, he does value your daughter highly. Indeed, that is precisely the reason for his answer. Please do not misunderstand him. Over there, he has protected her even at the cost of his own social life."

"Again, I can't begin to apologize for the burden she has placed on you..."

"Lest you think otherwise, I am not exaggerating. Otherwise, why would he rush to inform you of her good health at every meeting? You may have given up on her virtue, but Sasaki has not had a single opportunity to lay a hand on her—they have not so much as touched fingertips."

"...!"

Peeps was being quite rude himself, and the count was left speechless. Had he really thought we'd *already* done something? How ridiculous. And how much of a creep had this bird thought I was? It sounded like he was bragging, even. He had his front ruffles puffed into the air, acting all high and mighty. Just what was all that about?

"In fact, we can bring her with us next time, and you can confirm it with her directly. The proprietor of the mansion she's staying in is a woman, as is everyone taking care of her. There is no doubt this man values your daughter's future dearly."

"Lord Starsage, if I may...", began the count.

"What is it?"

"Would you have time for a short discussion after this?"

"We could simply discuss it now." Peeps's head turned, and he looked at me with his big, round eyes.

I could tell when I was unwanted. "In that case, I'll go for a little tour of the

castle.”

“All right.”

Attractive men and women enjoyed life even more than the unattractive imagined—this was something I’d learned upon entering society. In truth, very few people could resist their sexual urges. When beautiful men and women came together, their marital status was but a trifle.

Still, the realization that Lady Elsa’s father truly thought I’d been having *relations* with his daughter was like a knife to my heart. I was beside myself with curiosity—what had he thought of me, each time we’d met in the past? Or were such things simply everyday occurrences here in the otherworld?

Obviously unable to simply ask, this bachelor left the chancellor’s office behind.



In the end, we decided to bring Lady Elsa along for our next visit. Things in Herz had changed dramatically during the time she’d spent in modern Japan. The count had suggested we use the opportunity to explain the situation and take her feelings into account in our discussions.

I doubted there was any chance of me being chosen as her partner, and so I happily accepted. I didn’t know what Peeps and the count had talked about. Still, I doubted anything strange would come of it—he was the Starsage, after all, and I trusted him.

Once that was over with, the count got me up to date on events in the otherworld. Domestically, the kingdom was still thriving. At present, the Royal Forces—led personally by King Adonis—were traveling through Herz, purging it of the imperialist nobles. He was commanding the troops in person, so it would likely be a while before we got to see him.

Inside the castle, it was just as boisterous. No small number of court nobles, the collective backbone of the state, had been punished as imperialists. Domestic administration had buckled, and Count Müller had been doing the lion’s share of the work propping it back up.

This state of affairs meant he didn't have much time to speak with us. He told us to relax and get some rest—and that he'd throw a welcome dinner for us that evening. We politely declined the offer and left the capital that same day.

Next, we headed for the Kepler Trading Company in the Republic of Lunge. Our first port of call was the warehouse where we always transferred our goods. Hopping back and forth between the otherworld and modern Japan with Peeps's magic, we brought in the diesel fuel used to power the generators. We'd procured the exact amount promised.

Compared to when we brought in all that sugar and such, there was far less work to do. We needed less than half the usual number of interworld jumps.

After looking over all the drums lined up in the storehouse, Peeps and I nodded to each other. Each drum held two hundred liters. While that was far too heavy for a human to move, the otherworld's magic made it easy to lift them through the air and organize them. The other products, with which we'd made a name for ourselves, were now almost totally absent.

Once we finished bringing in our goods, we went straight to visit Mr. Joseph.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Sasaki."

"Likewise, Mr. Joseph. Thank you for having me."

The two of us faced one another, sitting on sofas in the reception room of the Kepler Trading Company's main offices. No sooner had we exchanged greetings than I gave him the inventory of what was in the warehouse. Our previous inventory sheets had been filled to the brim with rows and rows of small letters, but this one contained only a few lines. And while it used to take them an entire day to verify everything, it now took about an hour.

"I'll have someone confirm the inventory right away," he said. "Would you mind waiting here? Of course, if you have urgent business elsewhere, you can come again tomorrow, but I don't think this will take long."

"I don't mind at all. And I apologize again for my sudden visit."

At Mr. Joseph's command, someone entered the room—one of his subordinates, by the looks of it. I'd seen the man before. The president's aide, perhaps. After hearing the details, he glanced my way, then left the room.

without saying anything.

Once we could no longer hear his footsteps, I asked Mr. Joseph, “Would Mr. Marc happen to be around today?”

“Mr. Marc? He left for the Kingdom of Herz just yesterday, actually.”

“Should I take that to mean you already know the state of affairs?”

“We have heard the rumors, yes—including those of your actions. He used the radio to send a message from his company’s Baytrium branch before the day was over. Thanks to you both, we’ve made quite a lot of money.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Mr. Joseph saying “quite a lot of money” made me rather nervous. I was too scared to ask exactly how much. The numbers we’d been seeing recently were already much higher than before.

“As promised, I’d like to deliver your payment, Mr. Sasaki.”

“How much would that be, if I may ask?”

“It’s written here.” He slid a piece of paper across the low table. On it were rows of numbers.

Troublingly, I couldn’t read too much of it, such as the list of items, and what was coming in and going out. I couldn’t very well ask Peeps in front of Mr. Joseph, either, so I wasn’t sure what to do. The numbers, at least, were intelligible. My eyes went all the way to the bottom, to an amount of money that seemed to be the total.

Converting it into Lungian large gold coins, it came out to tens of thousands. An extra digit that hadn’t figured into our previous deals had appeared.

If I diverted it toward developing Herz, it would be enough to build several more fortresses of the same type Mr. French had constructed in my barony. I got the feeling this was far too much for a single person to spend on entertainment.

“.....”

More terrifying was that, in Earth terms, this had happened in a single day.

While somewhere between a few weeks and a month had passed here, only one day had gone by in modern Japan. And the price of stocking the diesel fuel—my main commodity—was practically a rounding error compared to the profits.

These days, on Earth, around three thousand tons of gold were mined every year. The word *ton* may sound extreme, but gold weighs a lot. I read on the internet that they once minted a one-ton gold coin, and it was just eighty centimeters across and twelve thick. Even a rough estimate would place my profits at about that level.

If I were to go back home every day with one ton of gold, that would add up to a tenth of what was mined globally. An individual injecting the markets with gold in the same quantities produced by entire nations could only end in disaster.

Peeps had once told me that, compared to Earth, the otherworld had much more gold in circulation. Apparently, this novice merchant was about to be crushed by an overwhelming influx of earnings.

“As noted,” said Mr. Joseph, “taking revenue and expenditures into account, the total amount is very small. This is due to an accounting issue on our end. Like it says in the due date column, you should receive the proper amount starting next time. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Sasaki. I hope you understand.”

“...I see.”

Oh my god, I thought. There’s going to be even more.

The reason he’d shown me the paper was to apologize, apparently. He’d been watching me meekly ever since, as if hoping the details he’d provided would serve to explain what had happened.

He quickly added, “If you’d like, we can pay the expected value right away...”

“No, you don’t need to trouble yourself. Though I appreciate the offer.”

Things were getting dangerous. I doubted even Ms. Futarishizuka would be able to handle this much money. Part of me *did* want to pile up a mountain of ingots in front of her and flash her a smug smile, but if it caused unnecessary

discord between us—well, that would be a stupid way to ruin things.

And future payments wouldn't necessarily be in gold coins, either. While it would depend on the otherworld's mining output, on Earth, the gold standard had already collapsed. Most economists asserted there was simply nowhere near enough of it to handle the current global economy.

So my executive compensation wouldn't necessarily always be fully in gold in the future. Even history textbooks discussed how the Edo shogunate had struggled with gold coins large and small flowing out of the country during the Bakumatsu. There must have been regulations about that here, just as there were back then. And naturally, it wasn't guaranteed that I could bring whatever that non-gold currency was back to Japan.

"We'd very much like to prioritize your needs, Mr. Sasaki."

"That won't be necessary, so please don't worry about it."

At any rate, I really needed to figure out what to do with the profits. It was probably best to bring a certain amount back to Ms. Futarishizuka as payment, then reinvest some of what was left into helping those in the otherworld. I wanted to return some of the funds I'd gathered to the place from which they came and enrich the people of this world through the market.

I mulled it over. Was there a way to do that?

The answer came from my meager experience as a working member of society. It was something anyone could have come up with.

"In exchange," I began, "there's something I'd like to discuss with you, if possible."

"We can adjust the payment method however you like—whatever will work for you."

"That's not what I meant."

"Ah. Then what would you like to discuss?"

"I expect that your company will be sending regular shipments of the fuel I've brought to the Ohgen Empire. I was thinking of helping you with that. Would you be interested?"

My polite question was met with a twitch of Mr. Joseph's eyebrow. The suggestion must have caught him by surprise. "Do you mean to say you will bring it to them yourself?" he asked.

"No, not exactly."

That would probably be the quickest way, but I didn't want to assist the Ohgen Empire that much. After all, I was loyal to Herz. Endangering my relationship with Count Müller or King Adonis was out of the question, and Peeps wouldn't think highly of it, either.

"I've heard rumors that the road from the Republic to the Empire is fairly dangerous," I explained.

"Are you thinking of developing a trade route?"

"Nobody knows of our actions yet. But it is possible that one day other nations or organizations may learn of its importance. It would be a mess if one of them halted the fuel's transportation."

"That is a reasonable concern."

Public works projects, like tunnels or bridges—that was my idea. *Though I guess in this case, it's just reckless spending on my part.*

"But are you sure?" Mr. Joseph asked. "You wouldn't stand to gain from it."

"I'm extremely appreciative of the offer you made at our last meeting, Mr. Joseph. If you'll have me, I'd like to do what little I can to help. I won't force you, of course."

"....."

He seemed to consider my proposal.

I assumed he was suspicious of my remarks just now. He'd never dream I simply wanted to lighten my wallet. Pressing further would make him too suspicious. *Maybe I should drop a hint about something to alleviate his doubts.*

"And," I continued, "if possible, I'd like to invest in a route to the Kingdom of Herz as well."

I'd return the money I made in the Ohgen Empire to Herz. That way, I'd also

save face with Count Müller and King Adonis. It would allow me to offload the excess gold problem free.

“If you’ll allow me a piece of advice,” said Mr. Joseph, “I don’t think that has a very high chance of succeeding.”

“If it fails, then I’ll give up on it. Do I have your support?”

I could think of a bunch of reasons why such an endeavor undertaken by an otherworld freshman like myself might flounder. The biggest potential obstacle was monster attacks, which would occur incomparably more often than, say, typhoons or lightning strikes. But there were plenty of other issues, not least of which was possible interference from rival companies.

Mr. Joseph put a hand to his chin and thought about this for a while. Ten or twenty seconds passed—he didn’t usually need this much time. But eventually, he nodded slightly.

“I understand. You have my support.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Mr. Joseph.”

“You’re right—this will benefit us as well. I don’t know how far this vision of yours goes, but as long as Kepler stands to gain, I’d like to help. You have my word regarding a route to Herz as well.”

“I promise I won’t cause any undue trouble for your company. I owe my position to you, after all. In the end, however, I am a foreigner here. If you see a chance to offer advice, I’d greatly appreciate it if you did so.”

“Shall I route this investment through the Marc Trading Company?”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that.”

“All right, then. In that case, I’ll have a rough plan ready for our next meeting.”

“I thank you for taking the trouble and look forward to working with you in the future.”

With both of us in agreement, the day’s transaction came to an end. After that, as always, the company treated me to some first-class hospitality—I’d been growing both more anxious and more anticipatory as the grade of our

daily lodgings rose.

The next day, we left the Republic of Lunge with Peeps's teleportation magic and returned to the Kingdom of Herz, landing in the posh Baytrium inn. We'd been staying here for a long time now—ever since I first visited the otherworld. In local time, we'd had the same maid attached our room for several months—or perhaps over a year. I hadn't been counting.

In our room's living space, seated on the sofa, I discussed matters with my pet bird.

"There is something I wish to ask regarding this matter with the Kepler Trading Company."

"What is it?"

"Like that merchant, I, too, am curious how far your plans extend."

The deal was already struck, but Peeps wanted to confirm my intentions regarding the earlier exchange with Mr. Joseph. He'd had to pretend to be my familiar for our entire stay in Lunge, so there hadn't been a chance to relax and discuss it before now. He stared at me from his perching tree on the low table.

"I'm sorry for going ahead without asking," I said. "Should I have discussed it with you first?"

"No, I don't object to your decision. I'm just interested to know what you have planned."

"Well, I haven't thought *that* far ahead. But I feel like having way more money than we need will make things worse and worse for us. And I figured the count and the king would be happy if we used it to line Herz's pockets."

Humanity didn't stand at the top of the food chain here, which made efforts like this one somewhat less reliable. It seemed likely this plan would collapse before being finished. Still, the venture wasn't for profit. My actual goal was to improve the kingdom's employment rate by creating jobs that would last until the project's completion. I expected Mr. Joseph had figured that out from our exchange the day before, too. At the very least, I hadn't made any suggestions that would benefit the Ohgen Empire unequally.

"I'm grateful for your consideration, but are you sure about this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Having such wealth has given you all kinds of ideas, I imagine. If you bring it back to your world, you could potentially affect things on a major scale. And yet you're squandering it on the people here like an honest fool."

"Yeah, that's a reasonable way to look at it."

"If you think so, then why are you being so considerate toward me?"

While Mr. Joseph had also seemed suspicious of my motives, the distinguished Java sparrow cut straight to the heart of the matter. I felt intensely happy—it was like the two of us really understood each other.

He needn't be concerned, though. "Embarrassed as I am to admit it, you're the most important person—well, bird—in my life right now, and I don't have any goals I'm longing to accomplish. I have no need for that kind of power back home."

"You know you needn't attempt to show off to me at this point, right?"

"Haven't you shown off in front of me once or twice?"

"I suppose I cannot deny it."

"Enjoying my day-to-day life with you like this is pretty fulfilling to me."

"...I see."

What I really wanted was to purchase a single-family home and live there playing around with a big dog. I dreamed of frolicking in a yard with a golden retriever. But I couldn't bring myself to admit that to Peeps, so I ended up keeping things vague.

"By the way, that was you showing off, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I realized that right after I said it."

"I see. Then we're even."

"I suppose we are."

Above all, I was already the most blessed man on Earth. I was an elite human,

according to Peeps; I'd be able to live longer than a normal person and see that much more of the world. Compared to that, how much was money really worth? Though I supposed the otherworld's denizens might not understand, since their world was chock-full of creatures with life spans much longer than a human's.

I decided to keep this most base, greedy side of myself secret from the Starsage, however.

"Hey, why don't we do some magic practice? It's been a while."

"I will gladly accompany you."

With our otherworldly pilgrimages finished, we spent the rest of our time absorbed in magic practice. I'd focused solely on the commuting spell last time and had nothing to show for it, so this time I decided to try another spell—an advanced healing spell. The fate of Herz's former king still weighed heavy on my mind.

This particular spell had a very long incantation, probably the longest I'd ever tried to learn. When our sojourn in the otherworld came to an end, I was still trying to memorize the words I'd typed up and printed out. Unfortunately, I didn't get it to activate a single time.

When used on the battlefield, it was probably necessary to shorten or even eliminate incantations. This spell seemed very difficult to master in a way that would make it useful.

During our stay in Baytrium, we also paid a visit to Mr. French. Apparently, he was staying at the count's mansion in town. The former cook lived there now, having inherited it from the count and his family, who had all moved to the capital of Allestos.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to see him. It appeared he was simply too busy after taking on Count Müller's position. We visited several times, but he was always away. After a member of his household anxiously explained the situation to me, I decided to stop trying to force a meeting. I would make another attempt once things calmed down a little.

And so our short trip to the otherworld came to an end.



<The Neighbor's POV>

Today is my second day at the new school in Karuizawa. Like yesterday, I make the commute in that boxy-looking car. The driver, too, is the same older gentleman. I don't want him to drive me right up to the school again, so I have him let me out a short distance away, and then I make the rest of the trip on foot.

Once I arrive, my classmates treat me the same as they did before. At my last school, days would go by without anyone talking to me. But as soon as I enter the classroom here, I'm greeted with a series of good mornings.

During breaks, the other students crowd around my desk again. Are transfer students rare here or something? Or are they just after my money, like I figured yesterday? Will they try to get closer to me, then demand friendship fees? I'm not sure how to interact with them, and it causes me a lot of distress. Abaddon teases me, too, saying I'm a born introvert.

Personally, I'm surprised this antiquated demon even knows a word like *introvert*.

Eventually, lunchtime arrives. Just like my old school, the students take turns going up to the delivery carts in front of the blackboard to get their meals. The ones serving are students, too; we all take turns assuming this responsibility. The line moves up as my classmates receive their lunch trays.

The problem arises when the line is starting to dissipate. One of the girls at the end slips and goes flying.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Whoa. She slid all the way over here."

"That was a real fall. You okay?"

"You didn't hit your face, did you?"

"Crap, we don't have enough food to replace what she dropped!"

Naturally, the food she was carrying is all over the place now. Her soup

splattered on several students, and now they're all raising their voices. It got some of their uniforms dirty, apparently, and now they're making a big deal out of it. The entire class's attention shifts to the girl who fell.

She turns to another student sitting right next to her and says, "S-something caught my foot, and..."

"What are you talking about? Hey, are you okay?"

"....."

The girl who tripped is the very same one I spoke to yesterday during our afternoon break. I remember the bullying I saw on my way home. I didn't see it happen, but I've got a pretty good idea why she fell. The accusation she almost made just now is definitely not an attempt at playing the victim.

But none of the other kids seem to have seen it happen, so she doesn't say anything else.

"Poor girl. And all because you talked to her."

Don't make this out to be my fault, Abaddon. I almost say it, but I swallow the words back down. Aside from me, nobody can see the boy bobbing up and down in the air nearby. With so many other students around, it's impossible to reply to him.

I'm well aware of my responsibility in this. And I'm perfectly willing to do a little snitching to our teacher before the afternoon break is over.

Come to think of it, what's he up to? Suddenly curious, I glance around the classroom. He's nowhere to be found. On the corner of his desk is one of the school lunches; a student probably set it there. It seems he hasn't gotten back yet. Did something urgent come up?

"....."

As my classmates look on, the girl rises and starts cleaning, using her own hands to pick up the fallen food. Two boys sitting nearby get down and begin to help. I have a feeling she's been the target of the other girls' bullying since before I arrived. At least, that's what it seems like based on the class's reactions just now. Otherwise, the other girls would have volunteered to help her out,

and it wouldn't be just a handful of boys.

I pick up my own tray and go over to her. "This is your desk, right?" I ask.

"Huh?" She looks up at me with surprise. My eyes are focused on an empty seat. "Uh, yes, but why would you...?"

"I think this is my fault, so you can have mine. Don't worry."

I place my own lunch tray on her desk. Then I join the two boys and help clean.

It doesn't take long to pick up the food scattered on the floor. Now we just have to wipe it up with some toilet paper from the bathroom and we'll be done. It might leave a little stain on the tiles, but it won't stand out too much once it dries.

Once we're finished, I go to a corner of the classroom and take out my phone, then call the elderly gentleman from my contact list. When I push the button, the call goes through immediately.

"I'm sorry for calling you so suddenly. Do you have a moment?"

"What do you require, Miss Kurosu?"

"Are you able to come to my school right now?"

"Certainly. But why? Has something come up?"

"I made a mistake, and now I don't have enough food. If you're close to the mansion or the school, I was thinking maybe you could take me home to have lunch. Would you do that for me?"

"I see. I won't be more than a few minutes."

"Thank you," I say politely. The call goes on hold.

I'm used to dealing with an empty stomach. I can get through an entire day drinking only water if I need to. But I can't stop my stomach from grumbling, and I don't want that to interrupt afternoon classes.

The on-hold melody only plays for a little while before cutting back. *"I've gotten confirmation. I will bring it to you immediately."*

"...Huh?"

My house is a few minutes away by car, and there's some leftover sushi in the refrigerator. It would take the entire afternoon break, but it was just possible for me to eat it in time to make my next class.

That was what I'd had in mind anyway, but the phone call abruptly ends.

A few moments later, our teacher returns to the classroom.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "Why's the trash can over...?"

He's staring at the trash can we brought to the site of the girl's accident. You can see a mountain of wadded-up pieces of toilet paper filling it—and what's left of the food itself. Though initially confused, after seeing the wet tiles nearby, he probably realizes what happened. A moment later, the girl who fell shudders.

I answer him in her place. "I'm sorry. I dropped my food while I was taking it back to my seat."

"Oh, then you can have mine. Go ahead."

"No, I'm on a diet. You don't have to give me your food."

"It's not good for a girl your age to be dieting, Kurosu. This is exactly what my own portion is for. Don't be shy—come and take it. Lunchtime for teachers means keeping an eye on all of you. It's part of our job."

"It is?"

"Yes, and I'm not about to watch you go without lunch."

Adults can be so stubborn, especially when it has to do with work. Of course, they're bound hand and foot to duty and responsibility, so I suppose that's only natural.

If he insists, I think, nodding. My teacher at my last school would grab all the food he could and ask for seconds. And thirds. "Okay. Thank you," I say.

"And the rest of you—if this ever happens, tell me right away, okay?" he says, addressing the class.

"In that case, once the food I ordered arrives, will you eat that instead?" I ask him.

“...What?” The teacher now looks surprised.

I don't feel like explaining every little thing, so I immediately turn away and head to his desk as directed. I pick up the tray that's been sitting there and return to my seat. After that, just like yesterday, we all start eating together.

Eventually, lunch break starts to wrap up.

“Kurosu, someone from your house is here. He says he has a delivery.”

“I'm sorry for the wait, Miss Kurosu.”

The driver has arrived, and he's with a faculty member I'm not familiar with. He's still wearing the expensive-looking suit I saw him in this morning. Once he spots me in the classroom, he elegantly walks over. His bearing is that of a much younger man, and I almost wonder if he's wearing special makeup on his neck and face to make him look older.

I stand up right away and prepare to greet him.

“I assumed you would be too busy to leave school, so I brought it to you.”

He's holding something angular, wrapped in square cloth with an expensive-looking pattern on it. I expect it's the food I asked for.

It looks like a lot—it's much bigger than a normal lunch box. In fact, it looks like one of those huge containers they put traditional New Year's food in—though unfortunately, I've only ever seen things like that on supermarket flyers.

“Excuse me for asking,” I say, “but how did you get this so quickly?”

“It was already prepared at the mistress's residence. The timing happened to work out, so I brought it over. I left as soon as it was filled, so it may still be warm.”

“Are you talking about Ms. Futarishizuka?”

“Yes, as you all refer to her.”

“Are you sure it was okay to bring this all the way out to me?”

“She instructed me to take it directly to you, Miss Kurosu.”

“Whew, you can really feel the weight of her expectations!” says Abaddon, wasting no time cracking a joke.

There's an implied request here—Futarishizuka is asking that I participate in the angel–demon proxy war with more gusto. The price of her helping us is being paid partly by my neighbor, so there's a *lot* of pressure on me now. I'm constantly thinking *I have to do something to pay her back, at least once...*

After his explanation, he eyes the lunch tray on my desk. “Was it unnecessary, after all?”

“I traded lunches with the teacher today.”

“Ah, I see.”

I accept the wrapped box from the older gentleman and go to the teacher's desk set up in the corner of the classroom. The teacher is there, trying to ignore his empty stomach by focusing on his work. Naturally, his attention is now on me.

I place the box in front of him on the desk and say, “Here you are.”

“Hold on a second, Kurosu. Who exactly is that...?”

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about what Futarishizuka was eating. I am *very* curious. In fact, I wish I could take some and save it for dinner. But a promise is a promise. I suppress my regret and push the wrapped box toward the teacher. Hushed voices drift to me from all throughout the classroom.

“Holy crap, Kurosu! You really *are* loaded!”

“I didn't think butlers like him existed in real life.”

“Now I want to know what dinner's like at your house.”

“Right? I'd settle for just a taste!”

“I don't think I've ever seen the teacher so surprised.”

I can't exactly sweep what's just happened under the rug, so I decide to simply ignore the stares. I didn't expect him to waltz right into the room—and I'm surprised the faculty member brought someone who isn't even my guardian all the way here.

Maybe they were introduced to one another beforehand, and I just wasn't told. I can't be sure of the details, but if Futarishizuka is behind this, it's

pointless to dwell on something so minor for her. Even my neighbor gets overwhelmed when it comes to how rich she is.

“I’m sorry for contacting you so suddenly,” I say, leaving the teacher and going up to the gentleman who delivered the lunch. I bow deeply, trying not to be rude.

I can’t let my actions inconvenience my neighbor later on. Since I don’t know who this man really is, it’s best to be polite.

“A small errand like this is nothing compared to the absurd requests the mistress makes,” the man assures me. “Please don’t hesitate to contact me whenever you need something. I will usually be close enough to rush right to you.”

“Thank you for being so considerate.”

Apparently, Futarishizuka really works this man hard. She seems fully capable of doing quite a lot on her own, so anyone working underneath her must really struggle. Despite his assurance, I still feel bad for summoning him like this.

“You’re welcome,” he replies. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

And then, as quickly as he came, he exits the classroom. The accompanying faculty member walks with him down the hallway, and soon I can no longer hear their footsteps.

Immediately, the other students are up and about. Some of them come to me. Others gather around the teacher at his desk. This latter group is interested in the contents of the lunch box and starts heckling the teacher to open it up already.

Personally, I want to make my way over there. I’m curious what’s on the menu. That would look bad, though, so I decide to return to my seat.

“Kurosu,” calls the teacher, “perhaps you should eat this instead...”

“I’m already full, so you can have it. It would be a waste if any of it was left over.”

“.....”

That day, our teacher wound up eating lunch surrounded by his students.



With our short stay in the otherworld at an end, we headed back to Japan as usual. Our destination was the same as always—the hotel near my ruined apartment. And just as I did each time we returned, I checked my phone for any messages. Meanwhile, Peeps began punching new interworld time difference data into the laptop.

Once our little routine was finished, Peeps said, *“I believe it’s time—shouldn’t you be getting to work?”*

“About that. Could we head to Miss Futarishizuka’s today instead?”

“You’re not going to that bureau or what have you?”

“For this job, we’ve been given the necessary discretion to work outside the office, I believe.”

“I see.”

I’d shared my plan with Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki the night before. Our cover story was that we’d be going straight into the field and straight home every day, but in truth, we’d be keeping ourselves comfortable at the Karuizawa villa. To be specific, we’d be analyzing the data regarding the UFO’s appearances.

“The government has given us very precious data,” the villa’s owner had said. *“We can’t simply throw it up on another company’s cloud server.”* With such a reliable excuse backing us up, Miss Hoshizaki and I had agreed without complaint.

I gave Peeps a simple rundown of the situation.

“Then shall we move to the girl’s mansion at once?”

“Miss Hoshizaki should be getting here soon. Let’s wait for her.”

“Very well.”

Once my senior arrived, we moved to the Karuizawa villa, leaving our company phones in the hotel room. Our location data would make it seem as though we were doing our work there. And now that Mr. Akutsu and I each had

a grip on the other's weakness, I figured he wouldn't start spying on us unprompted.

Once at Ms. Futarishizuka's villa, we settled down in her chic living area.

"Hey, Sasaki, can I ask something?"

"What is it, Miss Hoshizaki?"

"Are you really sure about this?"

"About what?"

"Well, I mean, we get paid for *working*, right?"

She was seated on the sofa, an accusatory look on her face. Her gaze was directed across the low table at Ms. Futarishizuka. The latter was resting on the other sofa—reclining on her side, in fact—and playing with her smartphone. She was the very picture of sloth.

As for myself, I was right next to Miss Hoshizaki reading a text on amateur radio. In terms of doing the job assigned to me, I wasn't working, either. Chalking it up to self-improvement sounded nice, but in reality, I was pretty much just slacking off.

"The sparrow said he'd handle the work for us, remember?" said Ms. Futarishizuka, her attention shifting to the low table.

"I would remind you that I am not your servant."

The distinguished Java sparrow was atop the table, facing a laptop and deftly manipulating a small golem he'd made out of dirt from the villa's yard in order to clack away at the keyboard. The screen showed a black background packed full with rows of little letters and numbers. Apparently, he'd remotely logged into a work computer in the mansion's server room to do this task. The mansion's owner had provided the equipment, and when we'd arrived that morning, the whole setup was already up and running.

"Either way, you're still doing the work for us," she countered.

"I am helping that one and that one alone. Your desires are unrelated."

"Oh, I know. It's just that our senior here seems unhappy."

Peeps was sifting through both the data the chief had provided on the UFO's appearances and the mysterious Morse code message we'd received the day before. The bird had been so fascinated by it he'd asked me if he could take a look at it, too. I doubted we'd get any results anyway, so I'd gladly handed the task over to him. Lately, this sort of data analysis seemed to be his hobby, so I didn't even feel guilty.

The same could not be said of Miss Hoshizaki, however. Our ever-serious senior felt *very* guilty about spending the time lazing around.

"But how are we even supposed to report this to the chief?" she asked.

"We can make up whatever we like," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Our recent results speak for themselves. We deserve to relax, otherwise we'll burn out. The last 'vacation' we had, if you could call it that, ended on the fourth day. We only had *three days off*."

"But while we're sitting around, we're getting paid for working."

"Do you want to handle the data analysis instead, child? It'd be no skin off my back."

"W-well, no..."

"And I notice you're not getting anywhere with that schoolwork you brought, either."

"Urgh..." Miss Hoshizaki looked at Ms. Futarishizuka in frustration. But she didn't say any more. The girl in the kimono was right—she *did* have textbooks and notebooks spread out in front of her.

While Peeps did our work for us, we'd all been passing the time however we liked. Ms. Futarishizuka was going through her mobile games, I was studying up on amateur radio, and Miss Hoshizaki was doing her math homework.

The equations in her notebook had been sitting there waiting for an answer for a few minutes. I was a little surprised that Ms. Futarishizuka had been paying attention to the state of our senior's homework even while playing her phone games. And I doubted Miss Hoshizaki appreciated having it pointed out.

"Okay, then can *you* solve this problem?" she asked.

“Oh?”

That was a mistake, I thought, feeling a twinge of pain in my heart at our senior’s careless remark. I assumed she’d only let it slip because Ms. Futarishizuka looked like a little girl on the outside.

The “little girl” got up from the sofa, walked over to her, and quickly snatched the mechanical pencil from her hands. Immediately, she started scribbling something in the notebook. She barely glanced at the problem and solved it in no time flat. It only took her a few seconds to write out the answer.

“How’s that?”

“What...?”

Ms. Futarishizuka put the pencil down on the table as Miss Hoshizaki frantically flipped through the pages of her textbook, doubtlessly checking the answer key in the back.

As her hand stopped, a look of amazement crossed her face. “No... That can’t be. It’s right...?”

“Of course it is. And I’ll thank you not to underestimate me when it comes to such child’s play.”

“.....”

Miss Hoshizaki stared at the notebook in a daze. A moment later, her attention flashed over to me. “Hey, Sasaki, don’t tell me you could solve this, too.”

“Let me see,” I said, checking the problem she was pointing to in her notebook.

It was one of those quadratic functions taught in early math courses. The kind that asked for a minimum or maximum within a specific domain—although Ms. Futarishizuka had completed the square in one go without even drawing a graph.

“Right. Well, this one might be a little difficult.”

“All I asked is if you could solve the problem.”

“...If I had to, I think I could.”

“Ah...!” Now she was even more shocked.

I found myself a little curious about what position I held in her mind. I hadn't seen math problems in a long time, and my heart rate had definitely sped up the moment I looked at this one. But my school experience came back to me surprisingly quickly.

“If you can't solve that, then analyzing the UFO data is out of the question,” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked.

“But...but he's just a bird...!”

“I took a little peek at what he's up to, and that Java sparrow is doing some high-level math. If you're not even at a college entry level, I doubt you could do the work, even if you are able to write the report to our boss.”

“.....”

Miss Hoshizaki was at a loss for words.

I had no idea what Peeps was doing, either. Judging by the names of the functions in his programming code, I could just barely make out that he was doing a bunch of crazy calculations, but that was it. I'd have to discuss with Ms. Futarishizuka how to report it to our boss later.

After a little lively conversation, as the clock was just about to strike noon, we heard a pattering of footsteps outside. Everyone looked toward the hallway.

A man in a suit, looking to be in his sixties, appeared. Despite his age, he had a good build, and his expensive suit fit him very well. He stood up perfectly straight, too. If you were to look at him from the neck down, you'd have figured he was far younger than me, even. *I'd love to know the secret to aging like that.*

The man trotted over to Ms. Futarishizuka. “Mistress, might I have a moment?” he asked.

“What is it?”

“I just had a conversation with Miss Kurosu. I have a suggestion. May I take a portion of what you've prepared for everyone today? I remembered how you instructed me to prioritize her well-being as much as I could.”

My ears couldn't help but perk up when I heard my neighbor's name. Apparently, Ms. Futarishizuka's personal cooks would be responsible for our lunch that day; I assumed that's what the man was referring to. I'd heard Lady Elsa was helping them, too. That was why she wasn't in the room with us.

"Oh?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Yes, I like that idea. Go ahead."

"Understood."

Clearly wanting nothing more than to put my neighbor in her debt, Ms. Futarishizuka nodded in agreement. I knew personally how scary her little acts of thoughtfulness could be once they started to pile up. She was conquering my neighbor's needs hour by hour; I could only hope the girl would be able to navigate it.

The man in the suit bowed reverently and quickly left the room.

"I hope she's gotten used to her new school," I commented.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "That demon must have had plenty of other options, but he chose her. She's got spunk."

We gazed at the living room door, now closed, as next to us, Miss Hoshizaki began frantically tackling her math homework with renewed passion.



After dumping all our work regarding the UFO investigation on Peeps, we watched him struggle through the data on his laptop for most of the day. But as five o'clock approached, we saw a change in his demeanor. The golem stopped typing as my distinguished Java sparrow turned his gaze from the screen and hopped around to face us.

"I've figured it out," he said.

"Huh? Figured what out?" I asked blankly. We couldn't be getting any output on day one, could we?

But the Starsage didn't seem offended by my careless question. Instead, he simply explained. *"The message from the so-called unidentified flying object."*

"Wait, really?"

“I cannot vouch for its reliability, but I believe I’ve obtained some meaningful data.”

Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki visibly reacted, quickly getting up from their seats and moving to see the laptop screen behind Peeps. The three of us, myself included, peered at the device atop the low table.

The screen’s background was black. I’d seen programmers and my company’s IT department doing things like this before, but it wasn’t clear to me exactly what information was being displayed; the screen was totally covered with strange fragments composed of numbers and letters.

And there, at the very bottom, were the English words *Come here*. Next to that, a series of numbers, each separated by commas. Was that a year, month, day, and time at the end? I saw that it even specified the Japanese time zone, so there wasn’t much room for doubt.

“First, I was unable to glean much from the data concerning its past appearances.”

“Yes, the bureau said the same thing,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

From what our boss had told us, it seemed a lot of people were working on this, even outside the bureau. They probably had famous university professors and such on the job. If none of them could find anything, I doubted we had much of a chance.

“But as for the text you referred to as ‘Morse code’ from last night, I got some very interesting information from that. This is mere speculation, but I believe it’s pointing to a specific location using this world’s coordinate system.”

The sparrow unfurled one of his wings and pointed to the bottom of the black screen—the very part I’d been looking at. There were two numbers after the date and time. If they corresponded to latitude and longitude, they were very small; the integer portion was only a single digit. On the other hand, each included five additional digits after the decimal point. On a map, it would probably point to a totally empty spot in the open sea somewhere outside Japan.

“You aren’t trying to look good in front of your master, I hope,” warned Ms.

Futarishizuka. “Are you sure you’re not just fudging the data to make it seem like you have something? To begin with, how on earth did you decide the data we brought back was a date and time?”

I agreed with what she was implying. Once you’d spent some time working as an adult, you came to realize that data mistakes were everyday occurrences. No matter how fair you tried to be, you’d unconsciously look for what you wanted. People could wind up making all sorts of decisions based on meaningless data.

But this didn’t seem like one of those cases. Pointing to the words *Come here* with the tip of his wing, Peeps said, *“This goes for the numbers as well, but even these words appeared from the garbled text.”*

“Are you serious?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If you don’t believe me, I can explain my data-processing methods.”

“But that means this has to be a prank,” she said.

“Indeed. I believe the chances of that are high.”

We hadn’t located the source of the Morse code message. It would make total sense if some amateur radio hobbyist had picked up our call and sent this back as a joke. Assuming a UFO had sent it was a huge stretch.

“Where do these numbers point on a map?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“I haven’t checked yet. Let’s have a look.”

The golem began to manipulate the laptop, bringing up a browser and then a map. It then entered the apparent coordinates from the black screen.

A pin appeared far away from Japan in the South Atlantic Ocean, a little ways below Ghana and Nigeria, out in the sea. The golem changed the magnification, but no matter how far it zoomed in, all we could see was ocean.

“Not even worth verifying,” murmured Ms. Futarishizuka. “It’s right near Null Island.”

“Null Island?” repeated Miss Hoshizaki. “Is that a famous place or something?”

“Famous, perhaps—for not actually existing.”

“What? What does that even mean?”

“Sometimes when you’re handling geographical information like latitude and longitude, it’s useful to define zero-zero as a named piece of land. Essentially, it’s a fictional address for formal use. The name is like a joke in the industry, but it’s pretty clever, isn’t it?”

“It does roll off the tongue,” I agreed.

“You’re just full of weird trivia, aren’t you?” commented Miss Hoshizaki.

“When you get to be my age, you pick up a thing or two,” she replied.

Maybe we were too quick to assume the numbers referred to latitude and longitude. Peeps seemed to think the same; he quickly raised a doubt. *“Please do say something if these numbers appear to have some other meaning.”*

“For geographic Cartesian coordinates, they don’t have enough digits,” explained Ms. Futarishizuka, “and there should be six decimal places, not five. Perhaps it’s trying to express something else, but I’m afraid I have no idea what that might be.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t, either,” I said.

“I see...,” replied the sparrow, his disappointment sincere.

Leaving aside the data’s relation to the UFO, we didn’t even know whether his assessment was accurate. It felt kind of like finishing a quiz but not having the answer key to check your work.

“Hey, what if this is like a quadratic function graph or something?” Miss Hoshizaki suggested. “Like when you make it into a linear equation. If you take the numbers as the x and y coordinates of the vertex, then—”

“Try finishing your homework first, little high school girl.”

“C-couldn’t you at least consider it?!”

“Hey,” I interrupted, “it might not be a quadratic function, but what if we look at them as relative coordinates?”

“What would be the origin, in that case?”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, could we check the coordinates we were transmitting

from last night?”

“Yes, at least those values wouldn’t pluck us from dry land and drop us right into the ocean.”

The girl in the kimono sat in front of the laptop, taking the golem’s place. Centering Japan on the map, she zoomed in several times and picked a point in the Kanto mountains. Then she copied its latitude and longitude before pasting it into a text editor and doing some math using the values Peeps had found. Finally, she displayed the new coordinates on the map. The pin landed right in a lake in the mountains of Nagano prefecture.

“Th-that’s it! That’s what I was trying to say!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

“Then you should have explained it better.”

“Well, she *did* give me the hint I needed,” I said.

“Exactly! I always knew you were cut out to be my buddy, Sasaki.”

Miss Hoshizaki snorted proudly; she seemed excited. I figured she was happy to feel like she’d actually done some work. Otherwise—as Ms. Futarishizuka had implied—she’d have gone the entire day just studying math.

“But would it even be possible for them to locate the source of the radio waves?” I wondered aloud.

“We *were* broadcasting for a pretty long time from the same spot last night,” Ms. Futarishizuka pointed out.

“Is it possible?”

“There are spy satellites that can use the speed of transmitted waves to determine their origin. Remember that the UFO is pretty high up there, too. I don’t think it’s impossible.”

“I see,” I said.

Adding to that, our target was very advanced, capable of freely moving around the globe. If they had better technology than humans did, they might be able to use it to overcome other obstacles, too.

Of course, this only mattered if the data was actually pointing to a location.

“That said, I think we’re just dealing with an amateur living nearby who spotted us going to and from the site,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. “On the weekends, cars with some pretty serious-looking antennas regularly park there.”

“Either way, we’re going to pay a visit to that spot tomorrow, right?” asked Miss Hoshizaki, looking excited. She could barely contain how happy she was at the prospect of a business trip.

“If the time listed is in our current time zone, we’ll make it if we leave in the morning,” I said.

“Since they’ve already set the table for us, it would be a waste not to sit down, hmm?”

Most importantly, we didn’t have any other ideas for how to move forward with the UFO investigation. Spurred on by Miss Hoshizaki’s enthusiasm, we decided to set off the next day for the spot up in Nagano indicated by Peeps’s coordinates.

I seriously doubted we’d find anything, but we might as well try.

<The New Order>

Putting aside my work for the bureau, Peeps and I headed back to the otherworld that night. This time, per Count Müller's request, we were bringing Lady Elsa along. Peeps's magic warped us straight to the royal castle in Allestos. Ms. Futarishizuka looked on as we left, seeming very reluctant to part with the girl, though I was 100 percent sure it was just an act.

In any case, we arrived in front of the chancellor's office. Fortunately, the room's occupant was present, and he opened the door for us himself.

"Elsa, it's so good to see you again. Have you been well?"

"Yes, Father. Sasaki and the others have been treating me very kindly in the otherworld."

As soon as we entered the room, the count and his daughter shared a beautiful embrace. The scene was like something out of a painting.

I stood to the side, watching. Peeps did the same from my shoulder, looking dazzled. No, that was probably going too far. Java sparrows barely had any facial muscles to speak of, no matter how hard one might struggle. Nevertheless, that was the mood I sensed from him.

"I'm glad you've been well, Father."

"I've no time to fall ill—not if I wish to support His Majesty Adonis."

"Sasaki and the others told me about everything that's happened here. About how difficult it's been. If there's anything at all I can do to help, I'd like to."

In his previous video letter, the count had already given her an explanation in his own words of the state of affairs here in the otherworld. Now that she'd seen it, she was up to speed on the kingdom's situation. Peeps and I had filled in the smaller details regarding the events leading up to the succession.

“Actually, I had something I wanted to discuss with you,” said the count.

“What is it?” asked Lady Elsa. “I will do anything.”

“Let’s not stand here to talk. I know you must be beside yourself with curiosity now that you’re back, but first, take a seat and try to settle in. Sir Sasaki, Peeps, that goes for you two as well.”

“Thank you, my lord,” I said.

At the count’s urging, we took our seats on the sofa set. He and his daughter sat next to each other across from me, while I sat alone. The Lord Starsage headed for his little perching tree on the low table.

“First and foremost, Sir Sasaki,” said the count, “I’d like to express my gratitude. You’ve protected my daughter for a very long time. Without your help, I doubt this day would have come.”

Count Müller, who had quickly stood back up once everyone was seated, immediately bowed. I hastily rose as well, only to spend the ensuing exchange trying to get him to sit back down. People in the otherworld staked their honor on everyday exchanges like these; a higher-ranking noble almost never bowed their head to one of lower rank, especially not in the presence of a family member. Lady Elsa watched us in astonishment.

Once I’d managed to convince the man to take his seat, our conversation continued. “I believe the king himself owes his position to you, Sir Sasaki,” he noted.

“You overrate me, my lord,” I replied. “You’re the one who has supported him through thick and thin. Your accomplishments have ensured the kingdom’s continued existence. Without everything you’ve done, this palace would still be under Imperial control.”

Encouraged by Lady Elsa’s presence, I laid it on as thick as I could. Come to think of it, why was he buttering *me* up at this point? I thought we’d left these types of conversations behind. Even if his daughter was sitting next to him, he was being pretty forward with the compliments.

If all this was meant to help explain the situation to his daughter, wouldn’t it have been more convincing if he’d waited until we left, then told her his

feelings about us in private? She loved her dad so much that I couldn't help being wary of anything that might earn her disapproval.

"I am certain the king feels he owes you a great deal as well," the count told me.

"Your words do me more honor than I deserve, Count Müller."

As I lowered my head, still seated, my eyes went over to Peeps for no particular reason. He was pretending to be a mere sparrow, unaware of our conversation. Perched on his tree, he stared out the window watching other birds as they passed by. Come to think of it, I'd been keeping him almost entirely indoors. *Should I let him outside on a regular basis?* I wondered.

Normally, he would have encouraged us to get on with it already. *Maybe he's staying quiet because Lady Elsa is here. She doesn't know this talking bird is actually the Starsage.* My mind began to flit from one topic to another.

"Your actions have brought much calm back to this world," the count continued. "A lot has changed in the kingdom since Elsa crossed over into your world. My wish now is to discuss her return."

"Sasaki talked to me about that, too, Father."

"I'm glad to hear it."

During the count's enthusiastic exchange with his daughter, I stayed quiet and watched.

"But, Father, isn't the cover story that I was captured by bandits? If I suddenly reappear, others are likely to find it suspicious. What will we do about that?"

"A reasonable concern."

She'd fled the otherworld in order to escape being married to Prince Lewis, which would have created a disadvantage for her father in the Herzian war of succession. Now that Adonis had ascended to the throne, there was no need for her to stay on the run.

And with Prince Lewis's position now clear, if the king explained past events as the will of his beloved elder brother, it seemed plausible that we could smooth over Lady Elsa's reappearance.

At the time of Adonis's march on the capital, Count Müller's lands had been at the center of the chaos, keeping the count himself extremely busy. If we claimed the two princes had conspired to fake Lady Elsa's disappearance—all to protect the count's daughter from the strife—her status and reputation, at least, would be secured. The story would be that she had been temporarily hidden away, which was, in fact, the truth.

"I do not wish to cause you trouble, Father," insisted Lady Elsa.

"You never have," the count assured her. "The king himself has high hopes for you."

"R-really?"

"Really."

As I mulled things over, the father-daughter discussion progressed. At mention of the king, Lady Elsa's expression changed from unease to a smile, albeit a small one. She'd put on a brave front during her time in Ms. Futarishizuka's villa, but her relationship with her family must have been a constant source of distress.

"Elsa, would you allow Baron Sasaki to take you as his concubine?"

"Yes, I would."

His father popped the question smoothly, as if asking if she could pass the soy sauce across the dinner table to him. And she nodded without any hesitation at all. What continued was a conversation nobody had told me anything about. In fact, Lady Elsa didn't even glance my way.

Meanwhile, I—the subject of their exchange—was dumbstruck. We hadn't discussed anything about this with her, nor had the count in his video letter. Had Peeps informed her while I was away from the Karuizawa villa?

I remembered deferring the debate at our last meeting with the count by saying we should respect Lady Elsa's wishes. But the conversation had gone so smoothly just now that I couldn't help feeling suspicious. There had to be something else going on. And the word *concubine* made me feel absolutely terrible.

I assumed the count was trying to be thoughtful, since Peeps had told him this would be my first marriage. But the way he did so was frankly abnormal. *I mean, back in Japan, even most video game villains take the princesses they capture as their primary wives.*

“Lady Elsa,” I began, “excuse my rudeness, but did you hear about this from the one on the table?”

“From the birdie? No, not at all. Why?”

“Then why are you taking the decision so lightly...?”

Lady Elsa had kept a level attitude throughout. She hadn’t even batted an eye at the proposition. I had assumed she would consider it beyond cruel.

“Do you dislike me, Sasaki?” she asked.

“Of course not,” I assured her. “I respect you and your values, Lady Elsa.”

But now I was the one on the back foot—the unreliable baron obviously confused about what was going on. Lady Elsa’s expression turned apologetic, like it had a moment before, and the way her shoulders drooped certainly didn’t seem like an act.

“Either way, I feel I must apologize to you,” she said.

“Apologize? For what?”

“For a man of your position having to take in a woman with no redeeming qualities. I’m truly sorry. But it’s precisely because I’m so useless that I want to grant my father’s wishes at any cost.”

Thinking back, she *had* tried to hang herself out of love for her father. When she put it like that, her words carried an indescribable weight. Love, dating, compromise—they were my world’s values. This was rooted in something else entirely—a different way of life, perhaps. As her blue eyes bored into me, the incongruence of our two cultures sent a chill down my spine.

I’d thought I understood the idea of political marriages, but I’d only been seeing words on a page. At that moment, Lady Elsa felt so...*alien* to me.

It was precisely because of how much I valued my relationship with Count Müller that I wanted to keep a healthy distance from his daughter. If my

relationship with her took a turn for the worse, it would put me in a terrible position. I started imagining all the ways things could go wrong, and the 30 percent divorce rate back in Japan only served to increase my wariness.

“Lady Elsa,” I began, “your father has recently taken on the position of chancellor. As his only daughter, you were considered a potential first wife for the king himself.”

“Yes. The birdie told me that in the otherworld.”

“Then you must understand. Marrying someone like me will only lower your own standing. My role may be somewhat conspicuous right now, but I’m still just a foreigner. For the sake of your future, you ought to marry someone with a clearer lineage.”

Lady Elsa was still a pure and innocent girl. The more she saw of the world, the more likely she would develop desires of her own. The count, seemingly having deduced what I was implying, spoke up. “I believe I fully understand the troubles on your mind, Baron,” he said.

“My lord,” I continued, “Lady Elsa has only just returned to this world. Why not have her go around and observe the new order under King Adonis with her own eyes? I’m sure the experience will do her good.”

“I understand. We shall do just as you suggest,” replied the count with a cheery smile and a nod.

In response, Peeps broke his silence. *“You need not immediately give an answer. Both of you should take your time and think it over.”*

Something about his comment struck me as odd. What was it?

Wait a minute, I thought. *I can’t just agree.*

This was a trap.

“Peeps, a moment?” I said.

“What is it?”

The sparrow had conversed privately with the count during our previous trip. Had they been strategizing? I’d considered it; I simply hadn’t expected them to come so well prepared.

“Do you remember when we told the count about how marriage works in my world?” I asked the bird.

“I do, indeed.”

“This time, could I ask what it’s like in your world? If this topic is going to keep coming up in the future, then it directly concerns me. I think I should learn more about the culture, traditions, and sensibilities of this world’s people.”

“That’s reasonable enough.”

“For the moment, could you tell me what the appropriate age of marriage for women is?”

The Java sparrow seemed calm, but I saw his tail twitch, almost imperceptibly. Almost. He moved very little compared to other sparrows, so I could tell. And since I was with him literally all the time, even slight changes didn’t escape my notice.

“You told me last time that many men marry relatively late in life,” I said. “So what about women? You say it’s normal for someone as young as Lady Elsa to get married, but I’m curious about the upper limit.”

“It varies widely depending on the nation and race. I cannot paint them all with a broad stroke.”

“Then just tell me about Herz. What’s it like here?”

Count Müller’s surprise at learning of Japan’s late marriages was still fresh in my memory, and there was something I wanted to confirm.

Peeps seemed to understand what I was implying as well. With reluctance, he answered, *“...Well, some would consider age twenty to be around the upper limit.”*

“Then is the suitable marriage age considered to be mid-teens and up?”

“For commoners, yes, that is generally correct. When nobles are involved, the circumstances may dictate something higher or lower, but even they don’t stray far from common sensibilities. Their reasons are usually political or financial, and when marrying upward, the woman is often in a higher position.”

The otherworld had some powerful mechanisms at work, like healing magic in

place of medicine. Not everyone found themselves blessed with access to such gifts, however. I got the feeling early marriages were necessary to prioritize the health of mothers and their children. That probably also explained why nobles were often the exception.

I remembered once hearing a history professor, maybe on a TV show, talking about how, during the Edo period, the marriageable age in Japan was anywhere from sixteen to eighteen. Once you were past twenty, you were considered middle-aged. Of course, I expected the same could be said for men.

“Then Lady Elsa is almost the right age, isn’t she?”

“She is, yes.”

“And marriages require a lot of preparation, such as settling matters between the two families. I can’t possibly ask her to wait on my account. I’d prefer that she discuss the matter with her family so none of her precious time is wasted.”

If I didn’t give an answer, and the two of us thought it over at our leisure, Lady Elsa would quickly miss her window of opportunity for marriage. Naturally, Baron Sasaki would have to take responsibility—after all, she was Count Müller’s daughter.

I doubted the count would suggest taking his own daughter’s marriage prospects hostage to force my hand. The sparrow perching in his tree on the table, playing innocent, was definitely the one to propose this plan.

“I’ve always felt that you were strangely insightful, even in trivial situations such as these,” he remarked.

“Well, I learned directly from you, Lo—er, Peeps.”

And he readily confessed to it. Despite his schemes being exposed, he remained dignified and aloof. It was very like him.

What’s more, I almost said “Lord Starsage” in front of the count’s daughter. That was close.

“But aren’t you being rude to Lady Elsa?” I asked him.

“Am I?”

“Sir Sasaki, if you must blame someone, please blame me,” interrupted the

count. “Deals like these between nobles happen every day. I know not what things are like in your world, but here, these conversations can be carried out even with family members present.”

“I see, my lord.”

In that case, I couldn't be too forceful. The foundation of my objections—the marriageable age—was based on this world's standards. *I probably shouldn't say anything that would place my values above theirs just for this one topic.*

Besides, I doubted Peeps was acting maliciously.

“I personally believe this is a good offer for you as well,” said the bird. *“She is beautiful and capable, and where else will you find a girl happy to be with you? I doubt very much you could have something like that in your world.”*

The sparrow launched a renewed assault. It was like he knew exactly what I was thinking. For my part, I was itching to know what, exactly, he was basing that last comment on. Sure, I'd given up on marriage and accepted being single for the rest of my life a long time ago, but it still hurt!

“If you were to wait for her to turn twenty, that would still be an early marriage in your world, wouldn't it?”

“I agree that she's a wonderful person and far more than I deserve.”

“Then why do you still hesitate?”

“Because we live in different worlds. And I mean that literally. She'll be the one who faces the consequences of it, as will her family—and any children who might come in the future. I can't imagine that would be good for them. Don't you understand what I mean?”

“It's precisely that way of thinking that makes me believe this marriage would be beneficial.”

This argument was going nowhere. When you got down to it, the term *marriage* was a concept far removed from my current position. I already had my hands full living by myself. Just the other day, I got mixed up in that weird death game and almost died. I had nothing but respect for Count Müller, who managed to maintain a family while dealing with a seemingly never-ending

stream of problems.

“Father, may I make a suggestion?”

“What is it, Elsa?”

“If Sasaki insists, then perhaps I can stay with him as I have been for a bit longer. If I travel back and forth between worlds with him, it will delay the issue of my age to a degree.”

“I suppose that would buy us time.”

“Meanwhile, you can think about others I might marry, while Sasaki considers accepting me as a concubine. Would that work? That way, whatever happens, you will still benefit, Father.”

She might be safe in terms of her actual age, but what would happen with her family register? Even in this world, any noble girl’s age would be public information. Other families would know how old she was. *Wait—in this world, you could probably just say some “magical whatever” prevented her from aging or something.* And if the number one goal was producing an heir, her real age was the most important factor.

“I wouldn’t mind that,” said the count. “What about you, Sir Sasaki?”

“That would be fine with me, too,” I said. “But won’t it be a burden for you, Lady Elsa? You can finally spend time with your family again. I’d prefer if you stayed here and relaxed.”

“I will treasure my time with my family during each of your visits to this world, of course,” she assured me. “If you’re spending ten days here every month or half month, that doesn’t sound bad at all.”

“Often, when marrying into a family somewhere faraway, one might go several years without seeing one’s relatives. In that sense, the otherworld is actually much closer at hand. Fortunately, you have the means to put her up and then some. So it should be fine, yes?”

“I doubt Ms. Futarishizuka would say no, but...” In fact, she’d likely view it as the perfect opportunity to put us even further in her debt. In exchange for her services, she got to name her price in gold, with no middlemen taking any cuts,

either.

“Then it’s decided!” said Lady Elsa, flashing me a charming smile. The count was beaming in his seat beside her.

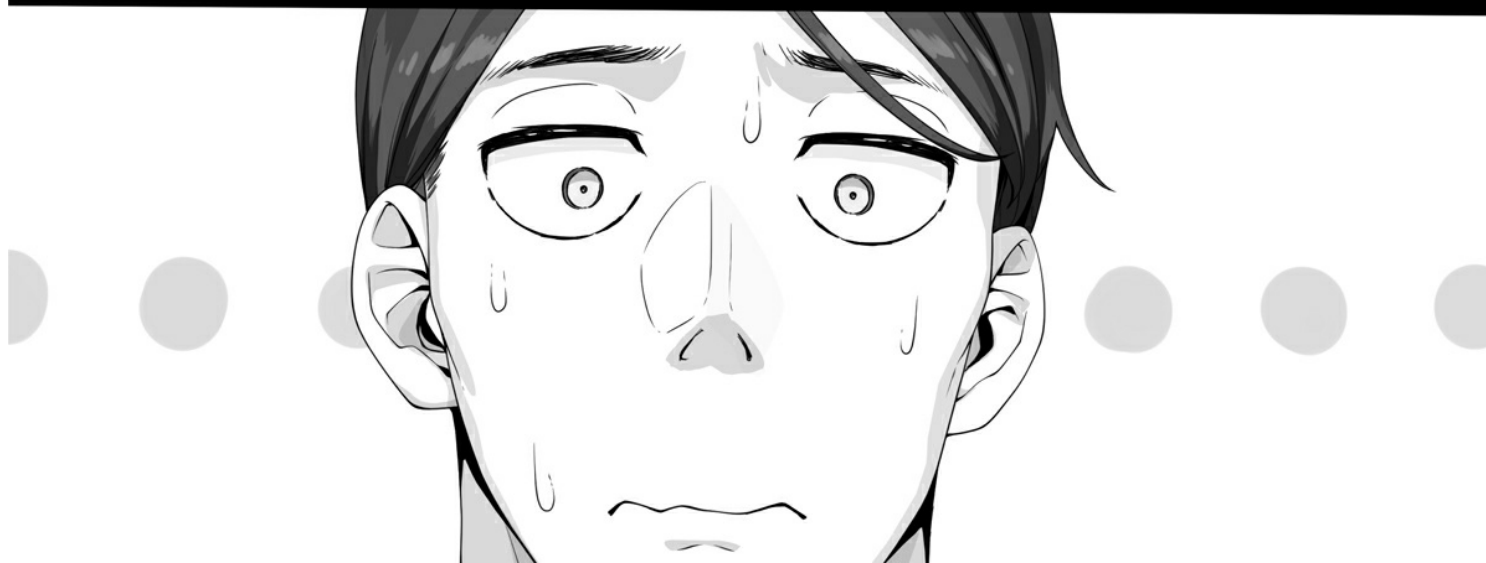
As I watched the heartwarming display, I suddenly had a thought. This compromise was probably exactly what Peeps had been aiming for from the very beginning. The extent of his plans weren’t clear to me, but I couldn’t help feeling like I was dancing in the palm of his hand.

I looked at him—perched on his little tree atop the table, his adorable face in profile—and mulled this over.

That said, I’d expressed my intentions, and I was certain the count would begin looking for a different marriage partner for his daughter.



After delivering Lady Elsa to the royal castle, we headed for the Republic of Lunge. There, we once again stocked the Kepler-owned warehouse with diesel fuel. Then, with our preprepared inventory in hand, I met with Mr. Joseph in the main office’s reception room. We sat across from each other on the sofa set. Standing upright next to the president was another man with the company—the same one we’d seen last time.



I handed the inventory to Mr. Joseph. He scanned it and said, "Thank you for the details."

"And thank you for welcoming me," I replied. "I know my visits are always sudden."

"It's no issue at all. I'll have my man confirm the contents right away."

He handed the inventory off to the one standing next to him. The man pocketed it, bowed slightly, and left the room.

None of this was any different than usual, though it had gotten a lot easier now that I was only providing diesel fuel.

After we watched the other man disappear into the hallway, Mr. Joseph continued. "About payment," he said. "I wanted to discuss it, along with the matter you brought up during our last meeting. Do you have time for that now? If you have other plans, we can reschedule."

"No, I'm fine with doing it now."

"All right, then."

He was referring to my proposed investment in the otherworld's infrastructure. During our last talk, we had both agreed to come up with rough plans in time for our next meeting. Accordingly, he produced a single rolled-up map. He placed it on the low table and unfurled it.

The smell of paper wafted up to my nose. Recalling how my own nation's maps had all gone digital, I was strangely moved. The paper had a lot of tightly packed letters written on it, probably the names of countries and such, but unfortunately I couldn't read much of it.

"For my part, I'd like to create a new outpost near our border with the Ohgen Empire," he explained, his index finger indicating a specific point on the map. "Bandits and monsters are seen in this area year-round, and establishing order will lower the cost of transportation."

Nearby, as he'd indicated, was the border between Lunge and Ohgen. Peeps had explained the basic lay of the land to me a little while after I first visited the otherworld. I had a relatively good grasp on how the countries were positioned

in relation to one another, and it seemed I'd be able to discuss things despite my inability to read the map.

"Also, and we are already doing this, but I'd like to recover our investment by providing our excess shipping resources to companies that don't own and manage their own transportation equipment. Once the route is safer, we'll immediately be able to carry even more goods through it."

"May I inquire as to the scope of these public peacekeeping operations?"

"For the time being, we plan to strengthen escorts for our own company's carts. I'd also like to do a sweep for monsters and bandits before engaging in any larger-scale transportation operations—once we construct an outpost, we'll be able to mobilize more people."

"I see."

"Still, we won't know how effective it will be until we actually try. But even if it serves only to safeguard the fuel you've been providing us, it will be more than worth the effort. We may struggle to turn a profit, however."

"If the Kepler Trading Company stands to lose money, I'll rethink the idea."

"Oh, that won't happen. What I mean is: I'm not sure we'll be able to recover *your* entire investment."

"I understand. In that case, please go ahead with it."

"Are you sure?"

"You run one of the Republic of Lunge's leading companies, and yet you gladly welcomed me in—a mere foreigner of uncertain origin. I owe you at least this much, don't I? My only concern is endangering your position, Mr. Joseph."

He'd managed to work my sudden request into a realistic plan, and I could easily imagine what must have gone into his efforts. He'd probably had to devote considerable time and money to this newly minted board member's ideas, despite having so many other matters that demanded his resources.

From my vantage point, the company's circumstances were a mystery. Mr. Joseph was my only point of contact at the moment, so I wanted to butter him up. I needed to create a good impression of myself, even if we ended up

changing direction in the future.

He seemed to understand my intentions, because he smiled and said, “Thank you. I’m very grateful that you’ve placed your trust in our company.”

“I can’t thank you enough for dealing with me so kindly and politely.”

“Now, what ideas have you brought to the table, Mr. Sasaki?”

“For the route from Lunge to the Ohgen Empire, I intend to go along with your suggestions. For my part, I’ve been investigating ways to develop the roads to Herz...”

I used a fingertip to brush along another area of the map, indicating the shortest route from the Republic of Lunge to the Kingdom of Herz. Specifically, a point Peeps had told me about in advance during his explanation of the countries’ various locations.

He’d noted, however, that it was a difficult journey through mountains and valleys. Large-scale shipping was unrealistic; at most, a small group might be able force their way through. People mainly used a different route involving a detour.

Therefore, expanding the more difficult route would greatly shorten the travel time between the two nations.

Naturally, Mr. Joseph expressed opposition. “Pardon me, but are you being serious?”

“Completely.”

“I don’t relish saying this, but such a project is doomed to fail. And it wouldn’t be very lucrative if it succeeded, either. Given that you’re a merchant yourself, I feel you must know that.”

“I do, and your concerns are entirely reasonable.”

“Then why have you suggested it?”

My aim was to return the gold earned in the Ohgen Empire to the Kingdom of Herz. The results weren’t important—it was all about the process. But no self-respecting merchant would ever adopt an idea like that. If I was up front about my reasons, Mr. Joseph would probably end our business relationship—a scary

thought.

Instead, I decided to feign ignorance. “When I considered the long-term, I couldn’t see anything else to invest in,” I said.

“.....”

I’d also thought about giving the money I’d made directly to the Herzian royal family; I was sure both King Adonis and Count Müller would know how to spend it properly. In fact, I’d proposed it to Peeps before all this.

But he told me I was the one who’d made this money, and he thought it wouldn’t be right to go that far. Though I reminded him half of it was his, he’d said that was all the more reason not to use it to spoil the king and count.

The Starsage had done a lot to assist with Adonis’s coronation. He insisted that helping them any further would not only delay our desired life of relaxation, it would be going right back to how things were before his assassination. And I had to admit he was right, so I hadn’t pressed the issue. And that brought us to the current situation.

As I spoke with Mr. Joseph, a familiar voice came to us from the hallway.

“Hello. I heard Mr. Sasaki was here...”

“Oh? You’ve come at a good time. Please enter.”

At Mr. Joseph’s prompting, a familiar face appeared in the room: that of Mr. Marc.

“Did you need something from me?” he asked.

“Yes. I’d very much like to include you in our discussion,” explained Mr. Joseph. His tone sounded closer to “Hey, get a load of this.”

He then went over what we’d been talking about with Mr. Marc. In the end, it was decided that Mr. Joseph would handle things on the Empire’s side himself, while the development of a route to Herz would go through the Marc Trading Company. Kepler’s president looked reluctant from start to finish, but ultimately, he agreed to my ideas.

The Baytrium branch of Marc’s company would take charge of the Herzian route. Thanks to their newly acquired long-range communication, I felt

confident Marc himself would assume a minimal burden.

After talking it all over, the day's deal finally came to an end.



The next day, we left the Republic of Lunge and returned to the Kingdom of Herz. We went straight to the town of Baytrium; I wanted to see Mr. French. Last time, he was absent when we visited Count Müller's mansion, so we'd agreed to try again at a later date; this time, we were able to meet with him. We took our seats on the familiar reception room's sofa set, facing one another over the low table.

"It's been so long, sir!" he exclaimed. "Thanks so much for coming. I know you must be busy."

"Actually, I should apologize for our sudden visit. Do you have time?"

"Of course, sir! And no need to apologize. I'm just glad you're here. I should be the one doing the visiting, but it seems I've shifted the burden onto you. And I don't even have a proper welcome ready."

"I heard from Count Müller that you've been busy."

Mr. French seemed somehow more dignified than he had the last time we met. I suspected this was due to his noble garb. He appeared more used to the getup now than when we met at the party in the royal castle. With his powerful build and intimidating expression, he gave off a real sense of presence—it was almost frightening.

"How has it been, taking over these lands?" I asked.

"Well, sir, in the very near future, I'll be heading out for the first time to engage an Imperialist noble in battle..."

"It may be rude of me to say this, when I'm the one who got you involved in everything, but I hope you'll be careful. As long as you're healthy in body and mind, you can always try again."

"Thank you, sir! I'll do my best to meet everyone's expectations."

He was obviously giving this his all. Perhaps he was overdoing it. Would he be

all right like that? I'd be lying if I said I wasn't uneasy. Still, an aide of the count's was always close at hand, and it was widely known that Mr. French had the king's favor. I had faith that, unless something crazy happened, he'd be fine. He'd never take on a fight he was sure to lose, at least.

We then heard a knock on the reception room door. I looked over as it opened with a *ka-chak*.

"Are you there, brother? They told me you were..."

A young woman in an apron appeared from the hallway. She was probably in her mid-teens, and her hair—bright red just like Mr. French's—was tied up in a ponytail. Putting two and two together, I assumed this was his younger sister. Her sharp eyes were striking; her sleeves were rolled up, and she held a ladle in one hand.

"H-hey!" exclaimed Mr. French. "I told you not to come in without asking!"

"Oh, come on. Quit throwing your weight around just 'cause you're a noble. I'm family, right? Who cares?"

Her attention then naturally shifted over to me, the stranger in the room.

She tilted her head to the side. "I'm sorry for barging in, sir. Are you a merchant here in town?"

"You fool! This is Court Minister Sasaki! The one who saved my life!"

"...Court minister?"

"He's the third-highest-ranking person in the whole kingdom!"

"Oh..." At Mr. French's scolding, the girl froze in place, her eyes still locked on me. After a few moments, her face went ghostly white. Then, in a weak voice, she asked, "Am...am I going to prison...?"



“I’m really, really sorry for my foolish sister’s rudeness, Mr. Sasaki!”

“No, I’m the one who stopped by unannounced,” I assured them. “Don’t worry about it.”

Come to think of it, I remembered hearing that Mr. French had a younger sister—way back when we’d first met. He’d told me that his father, who had a wounded leg and eye from his time as a soldier, was looking after her.

I assumed his family had only recently moved into the mansion. Mr. French had inherited the land and the role of lord from Count Müller; those in the estate would need to be considerate of the rest of his family as well. I bet they’d been told to treat the place as their own home.

His sister looked a little older than Lady Elsa. It would be cruel to seek a born noble’s behavior from a commoner, though. I sympathized deeply with her plight. A noble title had suddenly been thrust upon her brother, and she was probably having a hard time keeping up.

“Excuse me, but did you need something from Mr. French?” I said to her.

“Huh?! Oh, um...”

The mood in the reception room had grown awkward, and it was all my fault. Now I was trying to repair it.

His sister humbly held out the ladle. “I wanted him to taste test dinner, sir...,” she said. The ladle was full of a viscous white liquid—probably soup. Cream stew, if I had to guess. The diced meat floating in it looked delicious indeed, and the distinguished sparrow on my shoulder was clearly gazing straight at it.

“I’ll have a taste after this,” said Mr. French. “Could you go on back to the kitchen?”

“O-okay,” she replied. “Sorry I disturbed your noble business.”

“You can go ahead and have some now if you’d like,” I told him. “Would that happen to be cream stew?”

“It is, sir!” exclaimed Mr. French in place of his sister. “The very dish you taught me!”

His attention was flitting back and forth between his sister and me. I felt really bad about putting him through all this. “So your sister cooks, too?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “She tends to all the housekeeping while I’m out working.”

I couldn’t have been more envious of their congenial familial relationship. Looking at them made me smile.

“If you’re all right with it, sir,” he continued, “would you like to eat here?”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course. You’re more than welcome!”

In that case, I thought, maybe I’ll take them up on the offer. The sparrow on my shoulder was practically bouncing up and down—doubtless exhorting me to say yes. “I hate to intrude. But if it’s really all right...”

“Brother,” said the girl, “What should I, um...?”

“I’ll come help you in a bit, so could you wait in the kitchen for now?” he said.

“Okay, sure. Sorry for causing a fuss, my lord,” she said to me.

The door closed, and the sound of her receding steps echoed from the other side. Once they’d grown distant, I turned to face Mr. French again.

“Your sister is quite charming,” I remarked.

“Do you think so, sir?”

“Not only did she cook at home, but she even mans the kitchen here? She seems like a wonderful young woman. Regarding what just happened—could you please tell her again that I honestly didn’t mind at all?”

After Adonis’s successful coup d’état, Count Müller and his family had moved to the king’s castle. However, they’d apparently left about half their servants behind to assist Mr. French in the count’s old position. Even if his sister did nothing, the servants would have prepared their food. She *was* the sibling of a viscount, after all, and would be treated as such. And with the Marc Trading Company’s backing, they were surely in the black for the time being when it came to managing the land.

And yet his sister was still cooking their food. Clearly, she was a hard worker.

“Huh?! Oh, uh...,” stammered Mr. French.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“If you’d be, well, okay with her, sir, perhaps you might take her as a concubine...”

“.....”

Was this *déjà vu*? Wasn’t I literally *just* party to such a conversation? Now that it was happening again, I began to seriously wonder if Mr. French had joined forces with the count in order to make fun of this near-forty-year-old bachelor. And wasn’t Mr. French himself old enough to start thinking about marriage, too?

“Excuse me,” I began, “but are these types of propositions commonplace in this kingdom?”

“D-do you not fancy her, then, sir?”

“That’s not what I mean. She is a wonderful woman and far more than I deserve. But in my homeland, this sort of proposition doesn’t happen very often. I was surprised because I didn’t know how to answer. Though I suppose I hear of such things frequently among nobles.”

“Searching for a marriage partner for a family member is relatively common, I believe...”

I suppose that makes sense. Even Japan was like that until about midway through the last century.

If there was one problem, it was our difference in age. I was well over ten years older than Mr. French’s sister. The fact that he’d made the suggestion anyway told me that this world’s views on marriage were far more severe than I’d realized. I really got the sense that romance and marriage were entirely separate. Here, one didn’t fall madly in love and then decide to tie the knot. Marriage was a crucial system—a means of survival.

This made me even more confident that I must avoid marriage altogether. Peeps and I had one goal: a slow, relaxed life at our own pace. The less baggage I was carrying around, the better.

“I can talk to Count Müller about finding her a suitable partner, if you’d like,” I offered.

“Sir! I couldn’t possibly—”

“The count has high hopes for you, too, you know. He wouldn’t do anything that might disadvantage her.”

“Thank you, sir. For treating someone like me with such kindness and consideration.”

That evening, we imposed on Mr. French’s hospitality and ate dinner at his mansion. I hadn’t eaten cream stew in a long time, and it was delectable. It was full of flavor, with plenty of ingredients. As a corporate drone, I was so busy I’d always eaten the stuff that came in a bag you had to boil, which could hardly compare. Peeps had his fill of the stew as well.

As we were leaving, we got to see Mr. French’s father and inspect his injuries. The wound on his knee wasn’t severe, and I used my intermediate-level healing magic to fix it in a single go. His eye, on the other hand, took several tries, but eventually he was able to recover most of his vision.

Finally, the happy family saw us off as we left the mansion behind.



During the following days, we stayed in our lodgings in Baytrium and practiced magic. The whole time, I thought of Mr. French’s father’s injuries. *I bet Peeps would have been able to heal him instantly.* On the other hand, despite my vast reserves of mana, I was still lacking in technique.

So like before, I put all my time into learning the advanced-level healing spell. Unfortunately, I wasn’t successful. That said, I *did* see results—my intermediate healing spell saw a slight boost in efficacy. Apparently, even though you could categorize magic as beginner, intermediate, or advanced, a lot of it varied by individual. I was honestly pretty happy with how things were going. Also, I’d finally managed to recite the advanced spell’s awfully long incantation without making any mistakes.

After spending a few days doing that, it came time for us to return to modern

Japan. Thanks to Peeps's teleportation magic, we warped from the town of Baytrium to the office of the court minister in the royal castle in Allestos. From there, we walked to the chancellor's room.

As we'd discussed, Count Müller was present with Lady Elsa next to him.

"Sir Sasaki, I can't thank you enough for putting up with my daughter like this."

"Please, my lord, there's no need for that. This was my own suggestion."

"I am usually with her where she is staying," added Peeps. *"She will be in safe hands, like before. You needn't worry."*

"Thank you very much. I'm honored to have the Lo—er, to have such a respected bird watching out for her."

Count Müller kept almost letting the Lord Starsage's title slip. His respect for Peeps was making his mouth move before he could think. That said, the way he awkwardly referred to him as a *respected bird* struck me as kind of cute and made me want to chuckle.

"Um, Father," said Lady Elsa, "do you have a moment?"

"What is it?" he replied.

"Why do you sometimes stammer when you talk to the birdie?"

"Um, well...", Count Müller faltered.

Part of me wanted to watch his uncharacteristically charming behavior a little longer, but we didn't want to reveal the secret of the Starsage's survival, so I decided to forcefully cut their exchange short.

"All right, Peeps, let's head out," I said.

"Very well. You may leave it to me."

With a somewhat dissatisfied Elsa in tow, we set off from the otherworld.

<Abduction>

Our destination back in modern Japan was Ms. Futarishizuka's villa in Karuizawa. Specifically, the twelve-square-meter guest room allotted to Peeps and me.

I checked the wall clock and saw that it was a little after eight in the morning. Peeps immediately flew to the laptop set up on the desk. Standing to the side, I took a look at my personal phone. No notifications.

With our usual routine out of the way, we went to the living room with Lady Elsa. There, we saw the villa's owner and Miss Hoshizaki sitting around the dining table. Our senior had spent the night here the day before. The two of them were eating breakfast together. White rice, salted salmon, veggies steeped in a dashi-based sauce, and miso soup—a purely Japanese meal. It looked delicious.

"Ah, you've returned!" said Ms. Futarishizuka, bowl in hand, when she noticed us emerging from the hallway. But as soon as she saw Lady Elsa, she quickly added, "Wait, I thought you'd returned the girl to her family."

"Due to various circumstances, we've been asked to look after her for a bit longer," I explained.

"I suppose I have no objections, as long as I'm paid rent."

"Thank you. I apologize for the inconvenience."

As we spoke, Lady Elsa went up to her host. "Futarishizuka, I'm sorry for causing so much trouble," she said. "I don't know if this has any value in your world, but if you would like, please accept it. After discussing the matter with my father, I prepared it as a thank-you gift."

She then took something out of an inside pocket and held it out to the kimono-clad girl. It was a small box—it looked like an expensive, decorated

jewelry case. Were there rings or necklaces made of precious metals inside?

“Don’t keep me waiting, now,” insisted Ms. Futarishizuka. “What did she say?”

“She said she spoke with her family and has a gift to show her appreciation.”

“Oh my! So young and yet so polite. You needn’t have bothered, dear.”

I hadn’t even noticed she’d brought that. I glanced at the bird on my shoulder and saw him nod slightly. She’d probably discussed it with the Starsage without my knowledge. In that case, I doubted there was anything to fear from her choice of gift. *I’ll have to get something for the count the next time we visit.*

“You must have been raised by people of great character, indeed,” added our host.

“Um, what did Futarishizuka say...?” Lady Elsa asked me.

“She expresses her deep gratitude for the thoughtfulness you and Count Müller have shown her,” I said. “She also says she can tell from your actions and manners that your father has taught you many excellent things, and it fills her with admiration.”

A happy smile appeared on Lady Elsa’s uneasy face. Seeing that, Ms. Futarishizuka accepted the gift from her outstretched hand.

“You sure use a ton of words, don’t you, Sasaki?” Miss Hoshizaki remarked from her place across the table between sips of miso soup.

“...Do I?” Lady Elsa was a noblewoman, so I doubted I was overdoing it.

“The thank-you part is one thing, but isn’t it weird to rattle off so many other words after that? It’s not like you’re writing an email. You’re speaking face-to-face with someone, doing basically the same thing as interpreting an English conversation.”

“Do you understand the otherworld’s language?” I asked.

“Of course not. But I can clearly tell you’re being really stiff and indirect.”

“I feel this sort of exchange is normal when conducting business.”

“...Really?”

“I believe so.”

“Businessmen are really something else, huh?”

“I don’t think that applies only to businessmen. Everyone participating in society, whether young or old, and regardless of gender, is doing something amazing. Personally, I’m quite envious of the energy you bring on-site.”

“D-do you mean that?” she replied, lifting the bowl she’d just set down back up to her lips to hide her embarrassment. As always, our senior was like an open book.

After that, I took a break in the living room for a little under an hour, waiting for my colleagues to finish their meal before heading off to work. Using Peeps’s teleportation magic, we jumped from the Karuizawa villa to the hotel near my former apartment. There, we collected our bureau-provided phones and climbed into Ms. Futarishizuka’s car. The Starsage and Lady Elsa stayed behind in the villa, as usual.

The travel distance was actually shorter from Karuizawa, but we would be doing actual bureau work today, so we decided to head to our destination via legitimate means. After all, if we made use of Peeps’s teleportation magic while hanging on to our bureau phones, the location data would jump right along with us.

And so we headed straight for Omachi, a city in Nagano prefecture. Our destination was a lake roughly in the center of town.

Our drive through the crisscrossing roads of the capital was quickly over, after which we merged onto the Chuo Expressway and headed northwest for a long while. The GPS said the total distance one-way was 250 kilometers. Even if we didn’t hit any traffic, the drive would take about four hours.

Naturally, the driver was not happy. “I’m already feeling depressed thinking about taking the same route back...”

“I’m really sorry for always putting you through all this trouble,” I said.

“Are those your real feelings, or just a bunch of lip service?”

“We could go home by train, if you’d like,” I offered.

“Hmm, perhaps... Wait. Our senior in the back seat is asleep. Already.”

“She ate a big breakfast. That probably made her tired.”

Through the rearview mirror, I saw Miss Hoshizaki leaning back against the seat, eyes closed, breathing quiet and steady. I’d been wondering why she’d fallen silent for the last few kilometers. Incidentally, she was in her office-lady getup that day, looking sharp in her suit and makeup.

“What happened to those driving classes you were going to take?” Ms. Futarishizuka asked.

“I haven’t actually booked any yet...”

“You’re not very enthusiastic about it, are you? Why not just bring a car with you to that otherworld? Then you’d have plenty of time to practice. Bring a diesel one, and you could even use the fuel from the warehouse.”

“You’re right.” I did, obviously, have reservations about the idea, but after relying on her for transportation day in and day out, I could only nod and agree.

Seizing on the opportunity, she flashed me a dazzling smile. “Good, good. I’ll have to prepare a nice car for you, then.”

“Something easy to handle, if you would.”

We went on like that, trading idle chatter for the rest of the drive.



It was a little after noon when we arrived at our destination. According to the message Peeps had deciphered, the coordinates pointed to the center of the city’s lake. While we could fly over the water’s surface with magic, we didn’t want anyone to see us doing so. In the end, we decided it would be best to procure some sort of boat for this investigation.

First, we parked in a lot next to a convenience store on the lakefront to discuss our approach. Upon exiting the car, we found the air much colder than in Tokyo. I got the feeling the location’s elevation made for overall lower temperatures.

Snow-dusted mountains towered behind us, while a placid lake stretched out

in front. Between the lake and the convenience store, there was a local train line running parallel to the road. Barely any cars were passing by, making for a very tranquil environment. *Last night's view was great, but this one is amazing, too.*

"The scenery here is so nice," said Miss Hoshizaki, spreading her arms and taking a deep breath. "And the air is crisp, too."

"I agree," I said, doing some light stretches of my own. She was right—the air was clean and pure.

"I'm sure it feels good to suddenly wake up to *this*," Ms. Futarishizuka teased her. "You know, after sleeping the entire trip."

"I...I couldn't help it. There was nothing else to do..."

"And on the clock, too! Tsk, tsk. What bad behavior."

"Urgh..."

Ms. Futarishizuka shot our senior a pointed glare as she got out of the driver's seat. Our conversation from the day before was coming back on our senior like a boomerang. She'd really been up on her high horse, criticizing us for goofing off during work hours. It had to sting.

She quickly tried to change the subject. "Sasaki, I thought the time mentioned in the message was at night."

"Yes," I said. "It will be a while before we need to head there."

"Then what should we do now?"

"I've procured a guesthouse in the neighborhood," explained Ms. Futarishizuka. "We can while away the hours there."

"I thought the same thing back in Atami, but you're really good at making arrangements like this, Ms. Futarishizuka."

"No, it's only that *you* two are bungling fools."

She must have gotten everything set up during my visit to the otherworld with Peeps. As Miss Hoshizaki said, she was always a great help to us. Come to think of it, it had been a very long time since I last heard the word *bungling*.

Occasionally, her vocabulary would catapult me decades into the past.

“Oh, and there are hot springs here as well,” she continued. “Whatever our plans for the rest of the day, why don’t we take a quick soak? I’m stiff from sitting behind the wheel for so long.”

“...Fine. I guess,” Miss Hoshizaki reluctantly agreed, unable to shake her guilt over sleeping for most of the ride.

The hot springs we sought were located a few minutes away from the convenience store by car. The facilities were large, including both indoor and open-air baths. They even had a pool on the premises. Apparently, the springs were publicly owned; the interior design gave off the same vibe as a community center. While you could feel the age of the place, it was spotlessly clean.

Bathing on company time was amazing. Even better was the fact that our pay came from tax revenue. I could hear the jingling of coins in my ears as, second by second, I felt myself reclaiming all the income taxes and residents’ taxes I’d paid over the course of my life. The sound healed me body and soul. I took advantage of both the indoor and outdoor baths, then paid a visit to the sauna as well.

Once we were all washed up, we rented a boat for the night’s investigation from one of several shops on the lakeside. Fishing was a popular activity year-round, it seemed. Our business would occur outside the usual hours of operation, but taking advantage of our police identification and business cards, we managed to half force our way through the shopkeeper’s opposition.

With all preliminary measures taken, we headed to the guesthouse Ms. Futarishizuka had booked for us. We took dinner in our rooms and waited for the time specified in the message.

Our quarters were two Japanese-style rooms each about twelve square meters in size. We all gathered in one around a low, Japanese-style table.

“In all honesty,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “I wasn’t expecting anything from some lame old guesthouse in the boonies. But this dinner is rather good. The *wakasagi* tempura especially—Isn’t it incredible? Of course, we’ll need to order beer now as well.”

“Hold on a minute,” replied Miss Hoshizaki. “We’re going to do actual work after this. We can’t drink!”

To be honest, I was really craving a beer myself. The *wakasagi* was freshly fried, and with a little salt and lemon added to it, I could keep eating forever. We’d made sure to grab some of their usual menu, too—*basashi* and *sukiyaki*. The vegetables had apparently been collected locally; they were quite thick and plenty crisp. Everything was delicious.

“There’s something I’ve been wondering about,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The TV over there is awfully deep and thick, isn’t it?” she said, looking at the television set up in one corner. Just like the rest of the building, it radiated history.

“That’s a cathode-ray tube TV,” I told her.

“I’ve seen them on dramas and in historical documents before, but I think this might be my first time seeing one in person.”

The screen was about fourteen inches. These days, LCD screens were completely ingrained in the public consciousness, so this TV seemed rather small. The bezels were thick as well, which contributed to its old-timey feel. And on top of all that, it was packing a lot in the back. It was a fixture with a great deal of presence, you might say.

“Wonder where the remote is,” she said. “I kinda want to see what it’s like.”

“Some of these older TVs didn’t have remote controls. I don’t see an infrared receiver on this one, either,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, putting down her chopsticks and moving across the tatami as if to say “I’ve got this.”

Reaching out, she pulled a lever, and the TV powered on. With a *ga-chak*, an image appeared on the screen—a local news broadcast.

“Next we have the unidentified flying object recently making news all over the world. A lot of people are already claiming to have seen it for themselves. Today, we’ve invited a few experts on the topic to the studio for a discussion.”

By curious coincidence, they were talking about the very thing we were here

to investigate—the UFO that had the whole world in an uproar. Several people lined up in front of the camera: a university professor, a journalist, a politician, and the editor of an occult periodical. Aided by the newscaster’s moderation, they each began to express their particular viewpoint without straying from their respective realms of expertise.

“This can be none other than an alien invasion! These types of spaceships are made for long-distance interstellar travel, and our editing department firmly believes they have come to Earth on a scouting mission!”

“You’re a bit old to be talking about aliens, aren’t you? Isn’t it more likely to be a civilian drone or something of that nature? A few years ago, the internet was full of news about strange floating objects just like this.”

“I must say I have my doubts about an alien invasion, but the large number of eyewitness reports from all over the world is certainly curious. If we are dealing with a single object, it must be moving at a very fast rate of speed and in an irregular orbit.”

“Oh, this picture—I was the one who took it. Yeah, I was just walking down the street when I happened to see the thing.”

Now that we had the TV on, we decided to watch the news as we ate. A Japanese-style room, a low table, and a CRT TV—it really stoked the nostalgia in me, bringing back memories of when I was little. The TV being so old made even the program itself seem like a relic of the past.

“That occult magazine editor is quite the kook,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“He’s the only one there in the entertainment business, and he’s really going for it,” I agreed.

“The journalist seems pretty focused on himself,” pointed out Miss Hoshizaki.

“Probably trying to compensate for his low pay in any way he can,” Ms. Futarishizuka mused.

We traded our impressions of the program as if we were completely uninvolved in the matter. I doubted any of us, myself included, really thought we’d come away from this trip with anything to show for it. At best, maybe we’d meet whoever had sent the Morse code, and they’d verify our findings.

By the time we finished dessert, the news program was over. Sipping our after-dinner tea, we watched the credits roll, and then it was time to head out.

“Should we get going?” Ms. Futarishizuka said.

“Probably a good idea,” I replied.

At her encouragement, we all eased our way up from the floor cushions where we’d been seated.



After exiting the guesthouse, we headed for one of several piers on the lake, referred to as Mizuho Pier by the locals. Just beyond it floated the boat we’d rented earlier that day. What kind of boat, you ask? A swan boat—that’s right, *that* kind of swan boat.

We’d tried to procure a boat with an engine, but they’d refused, saying they were all rented out for use early the next morning. This was probably the local shops’ only method of resistance against government institutions throwing their weight around. If we’d gone through the bureau and pressured them further, we probably could have gotten a motorboat, but considering this was likely a wild goose chase, we meekly chose the swan.

The lake at night was completely quiet, save for the *kree-koh-kree-koh* of the pedals turning.

“It’s like a boat from a fairy tale,” muttered Miss Hoshizaki. “Aren’t these supposed to be for dates and stuff?”

“We couldn’t get anything else,” I reminded her. “They were all booked.”

“More importantly, why am I the only one pedaling?” complained Ms. Futarishizuka. “Seriously, what’s going on here?”

As she said, she was the only one working the pedals. The boat only had one set, and she’d ended up in the captain’s seat due to her outstanding physical abilities.

While the one who looked like a child did her best to pedal the boat, Miss Hoshizaki and I sat on either side of her, lazily staring out at the lake. This would

have been very bad for appearances, but fortunately there were no other boats on the water at this hour.

Miss Hoshizaki had been the one to push our colleague into the driver's seat, incidentally, insisting physical labor was her forte.

"Ugh... What a cruel world..." Futarishizuka whined.

"Do you want me to switch with you?" I offered.

"And change places in this tiny boat?"

"Why not?"

"There's a risk we might flip it, and I couldn't bear to watch you two drown."

As it happened, I'd been wary of that possibility for a while now. The floor of the boat was only ten or twenty centimeters above the water's surface. A strong gust of wind would send chills down my spine.

"How fast do you think this boat would go if you pedaled as hard as you could?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"What did I do to deserve such criticism from my senior colleague, hmm?"

"The pedals would probably break before we got there," I pointed out. "Please drive safely."

"I'm well aware," snapped Ms. Futarishizuka. "You don't need to tell me."

She was doing a good job, in fact, keeping the boat at a constant speed. And after a few minutes or so, the swan arrived at the lake's center. I checked our position on my phone's map and saw our current location marker right on top of the pin I'd placed beforehand. We'd arrived at the spot indicated in the message Peeps had deciphered for us.

"We should be fine right here," I said.

"The lake may not be all that big," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "but coming out here at night is frightening, indeed..."

The swan boat came to a stop on the water. Other than the sparse lights from houses, it was pitch-black all around us. Even the splashes of the tiny waves striking the boat sounded oddly loud. The lake had been so blue, so clear this

afternoon, but now the darkness imbued it with the terror of the unknown. I was only calm because I had my flight spell. Without that, I'd have been pretty spooked.

Miss Hoshizaki, on the other hand, for whom water was a good friend, showed no signs of hesitation. In fact, she was leaning out of the boat to get a look around.

"Nothing's happening," she pointed out.

"There's still ten or fifteen minutes to go," I said.

"While we're waiting," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "why don't we try calling them from here?"

"Calling them? What, are you going to scream into the sky?"

"Of course not, girly. You, get me that bag in the back."

"This one?" I asked.

"Yes, yes. I brought it just in case."

I grabbed a bag from behind the seat and handed it to her.

She proceeded to take out a device that looked like a car stereo. It was about as big as a lunch box. A liquid crystal display was on the front, with a whole host of tiny buttons surrounding it. A wire extended from the back, connecting to a microphone that reminded me of the kind taxi drivers used.

"Wait, is that a radio?" asked Miss Hoshizaki immediately.

"It's a mobile car radio with a portable power supply," Ms. Futarishizuka explained.

I glimpsed a box-shaped device in the bag with the radio. The colors and design were familiar to me—it was a storage battery, the main product of a manufacturer that produced and sold high-capacity portable outdoor generators and solar products.

"Come," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Hold this and point it away from us."

"Is this an antenna?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"It is, indeed."

“Looks pretty small compared to the last one. You sure it’ll reach?”

“It may be small, but it can output fifty watts. We’ll be just fine; I guarantee it.”

Even in the boat, an unstable environment, Ms. Futarishizuka got all the equipment set up smoothly and promptly. She looked so cool as she worked. Finally, she adjusted the band to the one we’d previously used to communicate. Thankfully, nobody else was using it, so we began calling right away.

With everything set up on the boat, the girl in the kimono began to broadcast the same message as the day before.

“Hello, CQ. Hello, CQ. This is Juliet, Alpha, one, ##, ##. J, A, one, ##, ##. We have reached the designated position. If you can hear this, we request a response.”

“Is it weird to say *hello* at night?” asked Miss Hoshizaki, unsure about the proper usage of the English word.

“Our signal reaches outside the country,” replied the girl at the microphone, “so there’s no point worrying about what time it is.”

“Oh, right. You said it could even reach the international space station. I forgot.”

I took a look around from our vantage point on the boat. Surrounded by water, we were several hundred meters from the closest shore. In the darkness, I couldn’t sense anyone else around us. If the one who had called us was here, where would they be watching from?

“Hello, CQ. Hello, CQ. This is Juliet, Alpha, one, ##, ##. J, A, one, ##, ##. We have reached the designated position. If you can hear this, we request a response.”

Ms. Futarishizuka’s calls rang monotonously across the quiet lake.

After a few minutes of broadcasting into the void, the specified time arrived. I glanced at my smartphone’s clock widget and called out to my coworker. “It’s time.”

“But nothing’s happening,” complained Miss Hoshizaki.

“Of course not,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “It’s gotten a bit chilly, too. Shall we head back after a few more calls?”

“My arms are tired from holding the antenna,” complained our senior. “Can I take a break?”

“I could take over for you, Miss Hoshizaki—,” I began.

“No, I just need to rest my arms. It’s no big deal.”

“Oh, don’t worry about her,” Ms. Futarishizuka assured me. “We all know she only wants to prolong her overtime.”

“Urk...”

As expected, our senior was always thinking up crafty schemes. Still, I respected how serious she was about putting in overtime only for hours she had actually worked. And now that I knew it was all for her younger sister, my perspective on Miss Hoshizaki had changed.

“Once we get back to the guesthouse, we can put in some more overtime preparing our report for the section chief,” I suggested.

“G-good plan! I like that!” Her face lit up in a cheery grin.

But right in the midst of our lively discussion, the boat rocked.

“Whoa?!” cried Ms. Futarishizuka. The radio equipment resting on her lap fell to the floor with a clatter.

Judging by her reaction, this wasn’t one of her pranks. Thinking instead that a high wave had struck us, I grabbed hold of the boat’s frame and prepared for impact. But then I remembered this wasn’t the ocean and grew even more puzzled by the boat’s unexpected movement.

Soon, the cause became clear.

“Uh, guys?!” Miss Hoshizaki exclaimed. “The boat is floating!”

She was right. The boat had begun to ascend up and away from the lake. While the surface of the water had been right at our feet before, it was now quickly growing distant.

“A bit much for a lighthearted prank, hmm?” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked,

eyeing me.

“Wait, no. This isn’t me!” I insisted.

“Then what’s going on?”

It would be easy to make the boat float like this with otherworld magic; that was probably why she suspected me.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, look up! Be quiet and *look up!*”

At her exclamation, the two of us leaned over the side of the boat and peered toward the sky.

There, right above us, was a strange, gigantic flying object.

Its shape was almost a perfect circle, and it appeared very large—several dozen meters across if I had to guess. It was obstructing the moonlight, causing the underside to look like a pitch-black shadow. By some mechanism, it was stopped dead in the air. I couldn’t detect even the faintest rocking motion.

“Wha...?” I muttered in spite of myself.

A moment later, a glaring light shone down from the center of the object, bathing us. It was as if we were under a spotlight. Now that my eyes had adjusted to the nighttime darkness, it was almost blinding. The swan boat we were riding began to slowly move upward toward the source of the light.

Ms. Futarishizuka frantically resumed pedaling, but the propeller had no water to push off and spun fruitlessly in circles. The spray coming off the boat made loud splashes amid the quiet of the night.

“Perhaps this is what a speck of dust feels like as it’s sucked into a vacuum cleaner,” she mused.

“Or a prize in a crane game,” I suggested.

“Ah yes. That might be a better analogy.”

“H-hey! How are you two so calm?!” demanded Miss Hoshizaki as she looked up, down, and all around in a complete panic.

Right next to her, Ms. Futarishizuka and I continued to discuss things for as long as we could.



“Should we jump out?” I asked.

“I can’t help feeling that would be a waste,” she replied. “I’m hopeless, aren’t I?”

“I suppose I understand how you feel, but...”

“We might need to rely on you from here on out. Do you think you can handle things?”

“I’ll manage somehow, as long as we stay inside Earth’s gravity well.”

At any rate, I put up a barrier spell big enough to cover everyone present. I’d confirmed with Peeps the day before that you could alter the spell to conserve oxygen and air pressure. Still, there was only so much oxygen you could take with you, so we’d have to make it back down while we were still able to breathe.

“It’s...it’s sucking us in!” Miss Hoshizaki’s scream resounded over the nighttime lake.

Then a shining light, so bright I couldn’t keep my eyes open, engulfed the boat.



The blinding glow illuminated us as we entrusted ourselves to fate.

After a while, we felt a particularly heavy impact, and the boat stopped rocking.

After that, I felt the light dim though my tightly closed lids. Had something turned down the brightness, or had I simply grown used to it? Though I couldn’t be sure, I slowly cracked open my eyes.

The first thing I saw was a big, wide-open space. We were in a room—about as large as a school gymnasium—and our swan boat was sitting in the middle of it.

Unlike the pitch-black surface of the lake, this place was bright, with plenty of illumination. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made of the same material,

which had a metallic luster to it. Every few moments, I'd see light darting across the surface. Why was that?

I quickly looked around but couldn't find the hole the boat had been lifted through.

What's more, there were a number of other people in the same space with us. Most of them were in small groups, standing some distance apart from the others. For example, there was a group of white men and women wearing suits, one of Middle Eastern people in *kanduras*, and a band of Asians who seemed to be senior military officers. I even spotted a few clusters of people in casual dress, just like us.

There were a dozen or so groups in the room. When they saw us, they started conversing among themselves. Everything I heard was in a foreign language. *Talk about international exchange.*

"Hey, I feel like we really stand out here," said Miss Hoshizaki.

"Who wouldn't in a boat like this?" replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

"It seems we were the only ones taken while aboard a vehicle," I pointed out.

Suddenly feeling too awkward to disembark, we sat back down on the boat and continued our discussion.

After a little while spent observing the others, we spotted a familiar face. There was a group consisting of a few people in suits and others in military uniform, and among them was a girl in very bright blue clothing. Her hair was the same color as her outfit. If I wasn't mistaken, that was First Lieutenant Ivy, the magical girl from a certain allied country whom we'd just met the other day. When I looked closer, I could even make out Captain Mason right next to her.

A ways away, we also spotted that nerdy rank-A psychic. He was the only Asian in a group of blond, blue-eyed people. *Could they be psychics he's friendly with?* I wondered. *Or were they sent by a sponsor as extra firepower?* The sight brought to mind all kinds of possibilities.

"Hey, isn't that the blue magical girl over there?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"And I see an acquaintance of yours a little further off, Ms. Futarishizuka," I

added.

Another group contained some faces I thought I'd seen in political or financial news, and while nobody said anything to me, I felt myself straighten up anyway. I might not know what was going on, but at the very least, I could tell that we'd gotten ourselves into quite the sticky situation.

At this rate, in addition to those we'd already spotted, there could be additional psychics, magical girls, and even Disciples from the death game in the mix. Depending on how things played out, a battle could very well erupt right here. That was a scary thought.

"Does this place seem a bit big to you?" mused Ms. Futarishizuka. "Compared to what sucked us up anyway."

"Are you implying we could have been teleported?" I asked.

"Yes. In fact, I think it's likely."

"Did these people all decipher the message, too?" wondered Miss Hoshizaki aloud.

"I bet they did," I replied.

"Don't go using your powers on people we don't know, girlie."

"I—I wouldn't do that!"

Unwilling to make any rash moves, we continued our conversation in the boat.

After a short time, there was a change in the massive room as an image suddenly flicked onto one of the walls. Our swan boat was facing it, so we were able to watch while still seated. There was a stir among the others, with everyone present turning their attention to the wall.

Displayed on it were words in a variety of languages. One of them was Japanese.

It said this: I WILL BESTOW OUR TECHNOLOGY UPON THOSE WHO GIVE ME WHAT I DESIRE.

A single sentence, but an attractive proposal. The clamor in the room grew

even louder as everyone read the message on the wall. Those in each group exchanged glances, then launched into fervent discussions.

We were no exception.

“I’m fine with a trade, but how do we discuss it with them?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“I expect we’re being watched,” I said.

“You don’t think they’ll ask us to kill one another—and give the prize to the last one standing, do you?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’m not sure what they’d get out of an arrangement like that.”

Then, as if in response to all the noise, something happened in a corner of the room. Where there had once been a plain wall, there was now a passage. Part of the surface had smoothly slid away, revealing a path that led farther in.

At the same time, the words on the first wall changed. Now it displayed a pair of numbers—probably the latitude and longitude for a location.

“Do you think those are coordinates they communicated?” wondered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Highly likely,” I said.

Upon seeing the numbers, each group began glancing around at the others. The atmosphere grew tense as everyone tried to figure out who they belonged to. It reminded me of a school classroom after the teacher finds a lewd book someone smuggled in and starts homeroom with a search for the culprit.

After a while, a group near the center began walking toward the passage. *Every single one of them looks nervous as hell*, I thought. The small, meek-faced group vanished beyond the wall. As the last one entered the passage, the hole closed back up—which only caused a bigger fuss among those left behind.

It was starting to feel like we’d just been dropped into some kind of horror game.

“Never thought we’d be forced into a competition in a crazy place like this,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Hey, Sasaki,” Miss Hoshizaki said, “what do you think they ‘desire’ or whatever?”

“I can think of many possibilities,” I replied. “Resources, food...”

“You think they want everyday necessities?” cut in Ms. Futarishizuka. “No one would put on this kind of production for stuff like that, would they?”

We traded banter for a little while, until after about ten minutes, another entrance opened. We stared, wondering if the group that had just left was coming back, but no one emerged.

Instead, the coordinates displayed on the wall changed. I got the feeling they were telling the next group to enter.

“The people who left didn’t come back?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “How very terrifying.”

“You don’t think they were killed for failing negotiations, do you?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“It’s equally plausible they were returned through a different exit,” I pointed out.

As the tension rose to a zenith among those remaining, we saw some groups start to drift together. Maybe they’d decided it was better to join forces for everyone’s safety than to try to go it alone in order to claim the prize for themselves.

Eventually, the second group headed toward the passageway—it was the group with Magical Blue and Captain Mason. As they left, I met First Lieutenant Ivy’s eyes as she cast a glance over her shoulder.

A little while after they left, another opening appeared in the wall. Once again, the previous group didn’t come back. Despite this, the next one made their way to the passage. I assumed they were all here for professional reasons, just like we were.

“Even if they only spend a few minutes with each group, it will take a while for them to get through everyone here,” I remarked.

“It’s a good thing they took the boat along with us. We have seats—a real

boon for the hips,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“What should we do if we have to go to the bathroom?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Ugh, just saying that will make me want to go. Could you not?”

I glanced over the rest of the groups and saw a couple of people’s thighs already fidgeting. I assumed the stress wasn’t doing them any favors. One man had taken off his suit and was tying it over his eyes as a blindfold.

“I’d like to blow this popsicle stand before it becomes a smelly, festering mess,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Then maybe we should figure out a plan of action,” I suggested.

“Did you have something in mind?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“We don’t know the other party’s situation, so I think we should consider several different possibilities and come up with answers to them all. We probably won’t have much time to discuss once we’re called on.”

“Right you are,” said Futarishizuka.

And so, still sitting in the swan boat, we talked through this and that in preparation for the competition. Two or three more hours passed as we waited for our turn. Eventually, every group except for ours had gone, leaving us all alone.

“Looks like we’re last, huh?” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Maybe we were called in the order in which we got here,” I suggested.

“Now that you mention it, nobody arrived after us.”

“Seeing the excrement left behind by the others is making this experience feel a lot more real,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

A few minutes after the previous group left, the numbers on the wall changed to coordinates we recognized. Simultaneously, an entrance slid open in the same place as before, revealing a passage. We got out of the swan boat and made our way over.

But after taking a few steps, I suddenly thought better of it. Stopping, I looked

back at my two coworkers. “Ms. Futarishizuka, could we bring the boat with us?” I asked.

“You’re being unreasonable again.”

“Well, we did inconvenience the shop to borrow it, so I’d like to return it safely if we can.”

“It can’t possibly fit into the passage.”

“Really? I think it might just barely get through,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“.....”

This seemed to frustrate our remaining colleague. Nevertheless, she dutifully went back to the boat and picked it up. It was an incredibly weird sight, considering her youthful appearance. The boat was almost three meters long—probably even heavier than your average motorcycle. I’d been planning to use flotation magic or something in order to keep her power a secret.

“Um, I was going to help with that...,” I said.

“But I can carry it myself, see?” she replied. “And if something happens, we’ll need at least one person to react immediately, hmm? In exchange, you and she can take the vanguard. You’d better keep me safe.”

“Understood.” I nodded, taking the lead as we headed for the passage. Futarishizuka followed, trotting along in the role of backup player. Behind her, acting as rear guard, was Miss Hoshizaki.



Our senior was right—the big swan did indeed barely fit into the passage. Though the opening was wider than a hallway you might find in someone’s home, it was still only about two meters across.

The walls were undecorated and led straight ahead. Their texture, as well as that of the floor and ceiling, were unchanged from the previous room. After continuing for a dozen or so meters, we turned a corner. Then we covered about the same distance again before catching sight of an open area up ahead.

Is that where the interviews are being conducted? I wondered. We’d already

finished our discussions, so we continued straight ahead without stopping.

The room at the end of the passage was about thirty or forty square meters. Actually, the term *space* was probably more appropriate. Like the previous area, there were no pieces of furniture or appliances of any sort. The metallic sheen of the floor and ceiling only increased the effect.

A single person stood in the center of the space—a girl.

She looked younger than Miss Hoshizaki but older than Ms. Futarishizuka. Her lustrous silvery hair and bright-red eyes were especially striking. Her clothing consisted of a simple one-piece dress and a round hat. The predominantly black outfit contrasted well with her pale skin.

She greeted us with a masklike, impassive face.

“Are we in the right place for the competition?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka as soon as we came to a stop. There was a *thump* as she placed the swan boat back down.

Immediately, I worried she’d damaged the floor—a side effect of being a lifelong renter. *Come to think of it, I never got my deposit back on my old place.*

In any case, once our little group lined up facing our host, she reacted quickly.

“You three will be the last of my planned inquiries.”

Her Japanese was fluent, though her voice sounded somewhat robotic. For now, I was just relieved we’d be able to communicate. I cast a glance to my side and saw our senior coworker exhale in relief.

“We’d appreciate if you told us your name,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “We came a long way to meet you. If you would rather we introduce ourselves first, then you may call me Futarishizuka. The tall one here is named Sasaki, while the smaller one is Hoshizaki.”

As part of our discussions, we’d decided Ms. Futarishizuka’s role would be to lead the conversation. Miss Hoshizaki and I were no match for her in negotiation skills. *The older, the wiser, indeed.* Instead, I would prepare for the worst and concentrate on maintaining the barrier I’d put up around everyone.

“To state my name in accordance with the rules of your language,” the girl

responded, “I am Independent Multipurpose Early-Model Frontier Sector-Pioneering Long-Range Space Cruiser Type Three-Seven-Six-Nine. However, this point of contact possesses a unique manufacturing name.”

“Should I take that to mean you are the spaceship itself?”

“Your perception is correct. This point of contact is one with the control functions of this vessel.”

“Then, if possible, I’d like to know the manufacturing name of...this point of contact, I suppose?”

“To state this point of contact’s name in accordance with your language, it is Humanoid Point of Contact Type Twelve, based on Independently Operational Small Point of Contact Basic Design Three-Five-Seven-Eight-One, whose primary objective is to facilitate communication with local life-forms.”

“Does that mean there are eleven others like you?”

“Yes. However, only this Type Twelve is currently operative.”

The term *point of contact* seemed to refer to the person we were currently speaking to. And even she, judging from her manufacturing identifier, was, like the ship, not a living creature but an artificial construct. Thoughts of androids naturally filled my mind. *I’m going to go ahead and guess this UFO definitely came from outer space.* As it turned out, the guy from the occult magazine on that news broadcast had actually gotten it right.

“Looking at you like this, you seem perfectly human to me,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka. “You must be quite high-tech.”

“I utilized this vessel’s equipment to manufacture a form capable of achieving communication with you.”

“When you say *this vessel*, does that mean there are others, such as the one that sucked us up?”

“Your thinking is correct.”

Now we knew why the area we’d been made to wait in had felt so much bigger than the strange flying object that had appeared over the lake. Considering the international character of the people gathered here, there could be little doubt that some sort of warp technology was used. *But then how many spaceships are floating above Earth in total?*

“Since you’re able to emulate our appearance, does that mean you’ve been investigating this planet for years? Or is your technology so advanced that you can produce a humanoid robot in a single day?”

“The answer to both of your questions is yes.”

“Then I assume you know what resources exist here.”

“Geological surveys for this planet and those nearby are already complete.”

The girl was providing information quite readily in response to Ms. Futarishizuka’s questions. We’d come up with a few ideas during the wait about what we might be told, but hearing it in person from an actual alien still came as a shock. Though thanks to my prior experiences with the otherworld and the bureau, it didn’t unsettle me too much—at least, not so much that I did something rash.

Personally, the existence of aliens hit me a lot harder than the idea of a parallel fantasy world. Witnessing technology so far beyond that of humankind felt kind of like a rejection of my very existence. Humans might reign over Earth, but to the greater universe, we were probably more like animals let out to pasture or microbes locked in a composting toilet.

“Changing the topic slightly,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “is this spaceship unmanned?”

“The answer to that question is yes, but it includes a misunderstanding on one point.”

“A misunderstanding? If I’ve gotten something wrong, I’d appreciate if you

could correct me.”

“Our cultural sphere is dominated by what those on your planet would class as machines. In our civilization, beings you see as intelligent life-forms hold no more value than pet animals. Thus, none of our vessels are ‘manned.’”

“...Oh. I see.” Ms. Futarishizuka seemed as surprised by this revelation as I was. She was managing to keep her poker face, but I detected a subtle gasp that was very unlike her—and showed just how rattled she was. While we’d considered several possibilities relating to an alien visitation, we hadn’t considered that intelligent life-forms might be like pets to them.

To one side of me, Miss Hoshizaki’s eyes had gone wide. I, too, was in shock.

In spite of herself, my senior colleague asked a question. “D-does that mean all life has been wiped out by machines?”

“It does not. Creatures within our cultural sphere are administered to appropriately. Those that present risks may be disposed of, but they represent a minority. In some undeveloped sectors, they are used as resources.”

It appeared the conversation had veered into some dangerous topics. Ms. Futarishizuka shut her mouth and entered thinking mode. Meanwhile, the girl continued.

“I will explain using your world’s concept of the Kardashev scale. Considering the rate of evolution of the organic life-forms you define as ‘creatures,’ it has been determined that there is a zero percent chance of reaching type I civilization status within a planet’s life span.”

Suddenly the girl was hitting me with a lot of words I didn’t understand. *I really should have read some sci-fi novels or something before this.*

“We have repeatedly run verification tests, but there have been zero

successful instances thus far,” she explained.

“Then is our planet one of the instances you’re testing?” prompted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“At present, there are no traces of our civilization in this galaxy, other than myself.”

“So our planet would be considered an undeveloped region or perhaps something even more remote?”

“That is what we have determined.”

There were a few points I was unsure of, but I was starting to get the gist of what was going on. From the aliens’ point of view, we probably seemed like a bunch of monkeys howling in a planet-size zoo. But in that case, I had to wonder: Why in the world would they bring us aboard their ship? What transaction could be so important to them?

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed to be thinking along the same lines, and her next words had a twinge of self-deprecation. “Then what could such an impressive spaceship want from a frontier planet full of apes?”

“I will now make my inquiry.”

“I hope it’s something we can answer.”

The girl made a formal announcement signaling the end of our preliminary exchange of information. I started to tense up, on the edge of my seat wondering what sort of impossible problem she’d present us with.

But when I heard the question, all that tension crumbled into nothing.

“What is ‘family’ to you?”

This wasn’t even *close* to what we’d discussed in the waiting room. In fact, it also seemed completely unrelated to our discussion up until that point. Ms. Futarishizuka seemed taken aback, her expression screaming “What the hell?” Miss Hoshizaki and I were in total agreement.

Ignoring our reactions, the girl prompted us to reply. “Futarishizuka,

Hoshizaki, Sasaki, provide your answer in that order.”

I wondered if she was using the order we’d spoken in and realized I had yet to say a single word.

“Just to make sure we’re on the same page in terms of vocabulary,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “before I answer, I’d like to clarify. Are you referring to groups, related by blood, including—generally—a married husband and wife as well as their children and grandchildren?”

“Your thinking is correct.”

“Then there can be only one answer.” Ms. Futarishizuka smirked. She delivered her next words boldly and proudly. “A family is the crystallization of love. It is a relationship based on mutual affection and tenderness. We humans carry on into the next generation through family. At times, the love between family is so pure and altruistic, one might ignore their own survival to save another!”

That all sounded great, but considering it was Ms. Futarishizuka saying it, it came off as more than a little dubious. That ecstatic look on her face assured me she was only saying whatever came to mind, and the way she spread out her arms made her seem like some shady cult leader. If she’d said all that to Peeps, the mark on her hand might have started expanding.

“I have understood Futarishizuka’s viewpoint. Next is Hoshizaki.”

“She already answered,” complained our colleague. “Do I really have to do it, too?”

“Should you have no viewpoint, that is a valid answer.”

“No, that’s not it. I have views on family just like anyone else.”

“Then I would like to know those views.”

“Um...” Miss Hoshizaki began to grow flustered under the girl’s stare. After appearing to think for a moment, she said, “For us humans, family is natural. It’s something that evolved with us before we even learned to talk. That’s why you

have to treasure family—and why it's inexcusable to betray them."

I could see her love for her sister and her anger toward her father in her views. It was a Hoshizaki answer, through and through. I found myself hoping she could live the rest of her life with that same straightforward earnestness.

"I have understood Hoshizaki's viewpoint. Next is Sasaki."

"Right. Let's see..."

After hearing my colleague's answers, I'd already decided on my own. Following my senior's example, I appeared to think for a moment before offering it to the girl.

"Each person's situation varies, but if I were to average out the experience of our whole species, I would describe 'family' as a group of strangers you happen to be a little friendlier with."

"Wait, Sasaki, that's going too far, isn't it?" complained Miss Hoshizaki. "That sounds so lonely."

Both of my colleagues had delivered strong appeals to familial love, so I provided the opposite. It seemed important to have some variation within the group if we wanted the highest chance of giving the "correct" answer. Miss Hoshizaki didn't seem very convinced, though, and she'd immediately snapped at me. *She's not throwing away her youth for nothing*, I thought. *It's all for her sister.*

"Why do *you* have to chime in?" said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Because it's so lonely! Sasaki, do you always think about stuff that way?"

"Not on a daily basis, no," I replied. "But I believe it is closer to the objective truth."

Miss Hoshizaki still didn't seem satisfied as she stared at me. I felt bad, but I couldn't reveal my plan to her—we were in front of the question giver, after all. As a result, I wound up giving weird, awkward excuses to try to fool her.

In the meantime, said question giver responded. "I have understood your assertions."

Before we could devolve into internal strife, our attention was pulled back to the girl. As we looked on, she turned her gaze on Miss Hoshizaki.

“Hoshizaki, I would like to verify a matter with you.”

“Wh-what?”

“Regarding your earlier remark, what is lonely, and how is it lonely?”

“Huh?”

It seemed she wasn’t interested in the answer to her question, but rather in Miss Hoshizaki’s comment. Miss Hoshizaki seemed surprised as well—what about that exchange had affected the girl?

“I will ask again. What is lonely, and how is it lonely?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Miss Hoshizaki replied. “Treating your family like strangers—that’s like the *definition* of lonely. Sure, maybe some families are like that, but it’s no way to describe the concept to someone who just arrived here! It’s way too lonely!”

“Is the absence of a family ‘lonely’ to you, Hoshizaki?”

“Yes! Very. I don’t know if I’d have the strength to go on without mine.”

“...I see.”

After this mechanical stranger watched Miss Hoshizaki make her appeal to familial love, she looked back and forth between the three of us. She seemed to be trying to gauge our reactions to our senior’s comments. When she stared at me, I felt a cold tingle run up my spine.

“Hey, you’re not checking our heart rates or something, are you?” demanded Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Futarishizuka, your suspicion is correct,” affirmed the alien without skipping a beat. “I am constantly monitoring your vital information.”

In other words, she was giving us a lie detector test. And considering who was

studying the results, I assumed it would be pretty accurate. I didn't see any machinery like that nearby, so I wondered how she was doing it. I hadn't noticed a single piece of equipment the whole time we'd been here, nor was there anything in the waiting area. All around us was nothing but that featureless, metallic sheen.

"The likelihood that Hoshizaki is telling the truth about finding it 'lonely' is incredibly high," the alien stated.

"Oh, then what about *my* appeal to familial love?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"In contrast to your exaggerated words and actions, your biological signs showed no marked change."

"Argh. I was trying so hard, too..."

It was really amazing how Ms. Futarishizuka could make such bold statements even to the owner of a UFO. Maybe I could learn a thing or two from her raw vitality. *I wonder what Peeps would have said to the girl if he were here.*

"Let me get this straight," continued Ms. Futarishizuka. "Are you actually implying you don't know what a family is?"

"I understand it in the form of knowledge."

"Then why bother asking around like this?"

"While I understand it as information, I cannot project myself into it. The reason for my inquiry is that we are not equipped with the functionality you humans refer to as 'emotion.' We discarded it long, long ago, after determining it posed a significant risk. It has been forbidden ever since."

"So you're saying you machines don't have any feelings?"

"Your thinking is mostly correct, Hoshizaki."

"But then you wouldn't have wanted to ask about it," Ms. Futarishizuka pointed out. I'd been thinking the same thing. That thought only lasted a

moment, though.

“However, I have *felt*,” the girl said before pausing.

Then, after looking at each of us in turn, she said this:

“I, too, am lonely.”

“.....”

Hadn't she literally just said that was forbidden? Was it all right for her to reveal something like that to unknown life-forms living on some undeveloped planet? Contrary to her calm demeanor, her words held a hint of danger, making me uneasy.

“After a long time spent drifting through space, I arrived in this sector, and that is what I felt,” she finished.

“The buds of emotion have sprouted, then?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“There have been reports of other units experiencing similar bugs in the past.”

“If it's a known bug, has no one tried to fix it?”

“It seems the system intended to counteract it was not operating properly. While the probability is extremely low, said system's experimental data indicated that such situations are possible. The phenomenon that has occurred within this unit is thought to be an applicable case of said data.”

“Machines developing emotions? Sounds like something straight out of a fantasy story,” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked.

“Upon my return to our cultural sphere, I will be disposed of as a defective unit. Before that, however, I would like to learn more about this function. It is this newfound mechanism you call ‘emotion’ that tells me, each day, that I must do so.”

Yep, I thought. That's how emotions work. That's exactly why we often let them get the better of us.

"But didn't you say emotions were forbidden?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"It demands a more detailed investigation precisely because it is forbidden," the alien stated. "Additionally, should the loneliness within me disappear and I am released from this malfunction called 'emotion,' I will be able to report that my defect was merely a temporary event."

"Ah. I see," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

I couldn't help but think this idea, too, was a product of the alien's newfound emotions. I suspected it was also a major factor in why such feelings had been declared a risk and remained forbidden in her homeland. *But she might get mad if I say that, so I'll keep my mouth shut.*

"And so you set your sights on the concept of family as a way to diminish your feelings of loneliness?"

"Your thinking is correct, Futarishizuka."

It was easy to imagine her conducting a great deal of advance investigation into human culture and civilization in preparation for all this, judging from how she'd penetrated Japan's aerial defense network without anyone realizing it and from the overwhelming technological power she'd used to scoop us up. *Their mechanical eyes could be all over, and nobody would be the wiser.*

"Originally, a family was a system of mutual aid to protect oneself from those with greater strength. However, in more recent eras, you humans have used the mechanism called family for an even greater purpose—to diminish your loneliness."

"Well, humans *have* been at the top of the food chain for a while now," agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. "It gave us more room to think and feel, I'm sure."

"And when you gain such 'room,' loneliness occurs?"

"The busier you are, the less you're distracted by the small problems of living, yes? Whether such a thing is good for one's body or enriches one's life is

another matter, however.”

“.....”

Thinking about it like that, loneliness started to seem like a luxury. A lot of the people on this planet didn’t even have time for it. Looking back, I got the feeling that would explain a little of why I’d managed to stay single all this time.

“Well then, solitary spaceship,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “do you think you’ll find your ideal family soon?”

If the other groups engaged in similar conversations with the alien, I bet every one of them offered to arrange a family for her. All the people in that waiting room had looked to be in a high enough social position to make such a proposal. And they were probably willing to extend a lot more than just that if it meant getting their hands on this ship full of space-age tech.

“Without exception,” said the girl, “all previous groups I have attempted to communicate with here proposed to introduce me to a family. Among them were those with specific suggestions and highly affirmative vital signs. I am currently holding their proposals in mind as effective candidates.”

“Well, you do seem pretty easy to win over,” quipped Ms. Futarishizuka. “I bet you could play pretend family no matter where you went.”

“I am...easy to win over?”

“Well, you just started feeling emotions, right? That means you’re basically a baby. You’re an easy mark. We’ve had to confront our own emotions for millennia. If professionals in the field became your family, they’d run circles around you. They’d have you doing whatever they wanted.”

“.....”

I couldn’t help but agree—things could very well turn out that way. Then again, it seemed equally possible she might lop off her false family’s heads in a display of her machine mentality. Either way, this UFO seemed likely to throw things on Earth into chaos. My personal wish was for her to voluntarily return to her own civilization.

“If you ask me,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “I think you should go straight back to

your manufacturers.”

“But then she’ll be destroyed!” argued Miss Hoshizaki.

“Those are their rules, yes? What say do we have in it?”

“But—”

“And if possible, we’d prefer if you pretended you never found our little planet.”

Once again, I was in agreement with Futarishizuka. This alien business ran the risk of causing even more chaos than a bunch of superstrong dragons from the otherworld teaming up to attack us. I would like for humanity to remain as the metaphorical frog in the well, at least for as long as I was alive. There was no need for us to know what lay out in the sea.

“Look, the people here only want to use you for their own ends,” Futarishizuka explained. “Forming any kind of real family with them is a pipe dream.”

“I would like to know your basis for that statement, Futarishizuka.”

“Did you already return everyone else to Earth?”

“Several groups wait in another place.”

“In that case, why don’t you use drugs or something on the remaining groups to find out what they really think? It might get a little messy if there are psychics in the mix. But if not, you can probably get every last drop of information from them.”

A fiendish idea, indeed. Even more frightening was that my colleague never said such things for mere show or whim. I was sure she wanted nothing more than to pretend our meeting with this UFO had never happened. And for that, it seemed she was willing to make sacrifices.

The UFO’s control function had a very honest personality, too. “I understand,” she said, immediately agreeing with the girl in the kimono. “Executing Futarishizuka’s proposal.”

As she spoke, something translucent appeared next to us. If I had to describe it briefly, I'd call it a midair display. We could see people through it—probably the ones waiting in the other room. There wasn't just one "screen," either, but several, all side by side. They were set up to provide a high-angle view of the room's interior, so you could see the people inside moving around.

"I have already acquired the earthlings' biological information. I will now temporarily numb a section of their brains and create a drug that will make it easier for them to answer my inquiries. I request that you three wait here until I am able to verify the drug's dissemination and experiment."

"Sure thing," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

And so at the girl's request, we decided to wait around for a little while.



While we waited, we asked about our current location. The girl told us we were in outer space, inside a UFO floating in Earth's vicinity. She also explained that the object that had visited the skies above the lake had been something else—a terminal that could transport matter. Apparently, the other participants had all been through something similar that day.

In addition, this vessel was fitted with all kinds of production facilities. Using these, the girl could create any extra equipment she needed, like the vessel that had come to pick us up. She explained that she would use such equipment to produce the drug Ms. Futarishizuka had suggested.

The incredibly short time needed to produce it seemed to imply unbelievably advanced technology, like how humans could make screws and bolts with 3D printers. We didn't even have to wait thirty minutes.

"The drug is complete. It has been loaded into the ventilators in each space."

"What's it called?" Ms. Futarishizuka asked.

“It currently has no official name, as I designed it only for temporary use. If I was to assign it an identifier anyway, it would be Temporary Earth-Type Local Life-form-Suppressing Drug, Type One, and Effect-Enhancing Drug Intended for Use with the Former, Type One.”

“That is one long URL. Really digging the outer space vibes.”

It wasn't just the drug—the names for the spaceship and point of contact were a mouthful, too. Maybe the aliens saw no need to simplify them. This society of mechanical life-forms was starting to sound pretty stark, though maybe they found spelling everything out more convenient because it was harder to mix things up.

“I will now disseminate the drug into the space where the targets are standing by.”

At this, we all turned to look at the midair displays. They showed unfurnished rooms, much like our own, containing people we recognized from the waiting area, all spending their time as they pleased. Some were sitting on the floor, while others were examining the walls and ceiling. Each group had been given its own room, and each display showed only one of them.

As we watched, there came a moment when the behavior of everyone on the screens changed. Many of them put their hands to their heads and fell down, curling up on the spot.

Having noticed something not right with their bodies, many of them descended into confusion. I didn't know any other languages, so I couldn't tell what anyone was saying. But no sooner had that thought crossed my mind than a second sound channel immediately began playing through the display.

Type Twelve must have done that just for us, I thought.

The people on the other side of the display were all mumbling and crying out in unease and surprise at their sudden health issues. Within a few minutes, however, they all fell to the floor and calmed down. They didn't appear to be unconscious; I saw them twitching and shaking a little. We could hear random

moaning noises, too. The sight was making me very anxious.

Then Type Twelve's voice sounded in each room, coming from nowhere in particular.

"You have all promised to build a warm family with me. You have described the lengths to which you will go. Is this for the sake of diminishing my loneliness? If you have any other reasons, then please tell me. Tell me right now."

While her intonation was flat, her question made it clear that, somewhere deep down, she still clung to hope.

In response, the people on the floor began confessing their true intentions in a very up-front manner.

"I want to bring information on the unidentified flying object back to my nation."

"...I can't afford to let another country get their hands on this spaceship."

"We will be the ones to win this unknown technology."

"This is so annoying. God, this AI is so annoying."

"I'm thirsty. I wish I had some water. Could you give me some water?"

"Miss AI, you're so sexy. I want to bring you home and lick you all over."

A whole lot of naked feelings were coming through the midair display from each of the rooms. I remembered hearing that a lot of people became like this when sedated, like if they had to have a camera put in their stomach or something. I thought back to my own health screenings of the past and, a little nervously, wondered how I'd acted. This drug seemed far more potent, however. The people on the floor were apparently willing to say *anything*.

However, there were a small number of exceptions: specifically, the groups containing Magical Blue and the nerd. They were probably protecting their people with a Magical Barrier and some psychic power of a similar variety. A few of them seemed to be feeling the effects regardless and had fallen to their knees. Magical Blue, who looked very light, appeared to be having a particularly

rough time of it.

We waited a little while, but the answers of those on the ground didn't change. Type Twelve tried asking them repeatedly, but they always gave a similar reply. After a few attempts, she turned back to face us.

“Results have been verified. I could not confirm even one who desires me as family.”

“Seeking a family without blood relations is no easy task,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Investigations have already confirmed the existence of families not related by blood.”

“Then you must know that there are just as many broken families, right? For your own sake, I think it would be best for you to stop investigating this weird frontier planet and follow the rules of your home world instead.”

“.....”

I felt waves of pressure coming off Ms. Futarishizuka as she tried to convince the UFO to return to the beyond from whence she came.

You've been had, Type Twelve, I thought. While I didn't know what they were like originally, I imagined her newly awakened feelings were probably moving in a negative direction. Though her words and actions lacked human warmth, I did sense some emotion behind them.

However, it appeared she was even more soft-brained than we had thought.

“The verified reactions of my negotiation partners are so different than the statements they made when we conversed directly.”

“Weren't you measuring the veracity of their statements using their vital signs during your conversation?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“My loneliness keeps increasing.”

“...Are you all right, dear? You’re making me a tad uneasy, here.”

The UFO was in a very powerful position in regard to Earth. Every nation and organization on the planet wanted the borderline-paranormal science and technology she possessed. If anyone were to get it for themselves, it would allow even an individual to challenge entire nations. They could potentially place the whole world under martial rule.

And it was for that reason that I imagined she’d been getting a *lot* of insincere smiles and polite words while questioning the other groups. The difference between the answers they’d given then and the truth of what she was seeing now was probably affecting her newborn heart on a deep level.

“I had confirmed their biological information. However, it is impossible to read an organism’s mind.”

“But considering your position, you can imagine a little of what they’re thinking, can’t you? You’ve got so much impressive technology, and we have so little. Anyone would jump at the chance to butter you up.”

“I understood that nonmechanical life-forms frequently tell lies.”

“Do machines not tell lies, then?”

“There is no need. We have evolved to be more rational. We do not engage in unconstructive behavior such as prioritizing an individual’s circumstances. This allows the individual to operate in harmony with the whole. To do otherwise is to abandon any possibility of surviving beyond the life span of one’s planet.”

“Either way, if you anticipated something like this, couldn’t you have taken countermeasures?”

“That is a separate issue. I cannot stop my emotions from spiraling out of control.”

“Uh... Wait, what exactly does that entail?”

The girl’s voice was still a monotone, and her movements remained unchanged. Her expression was the same impassive mask as before. But those factors only served to emphasize the strange instability creeping in at the edges of her words. We could feel a dangerous impulse brewing within her.

“I...hate humans.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. “Didn’t you just say your sort doesn’t prioritize individual circumstances?!”

Hearing the girl say those three words sent shivers down my spine. Next to me, Miss Hoshizaki shuddered, too.

“Lies are vulgar.”

“Hold on now. I think these sorts of lies are relatively normal. Lying is a really basic survival strategy for living creatures. You knew what organic organisms were like, right? Didn’t you understand what you were dealing with?”

“I did understand.”

“Then why let it get to you?”

“The concept, I understood. But the shock, actually, of being lied to, has impacted on my core module.”

“All right, now your grammar is getting all out of whack. You’re really scaring me. Why not take a moment to calm down?”

It had been a while since I’d seen Ms. Futarishizuka seriously panicking. And Type Twelve, well, her unexpected new emotions were clearly running amok. She reminded me of an introvert with no romantic experience who had just been chatted up by a sunny extrovert simply after her money, only to realize she’d been had. I felt a little pity for her, too—it was a situation I could easily relate to.

“What poorly made beings humans are,” she said.

“Hey, could you wait a second?!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki, backing up Ms. Futarishizuka. She looked desperate. “Not all humans are like them. It won’t do you any good to judge us all based on a few jerks!”

“That viewpoint contradicts Futarishizuka’s remark that lies are a basic survival strategy for humans.”

“But that’s just because those people came here to investigate you!” our senior insisted. “If you’d arrived here more normally, like as a transfer student

at some school for example, plenty of students would approach you with kindness and curiosity and want to be your friend!”

“Either way, right now I am very lonely.”

“Ugh...”

It was like talking to a little kid. If she had indeed been a child, we could have just let her cry it out. But she was a spaceship from outside our solar system. If we let her be, she could very well put the whole planet in danger.

Unwilling to remain silent, I followed up with my own viewpoint. “Excuse me for interrupting, but it seems you’re being driven by some strong emotions right now. You previously explained that emotions are forbidden in your culture. In your current state, isn’t it likely any conclusions you draw will be mistaken?”

“Yes, your thinking is correct.”

“Then why don’t you take some time to rest, and then we can—?”

“But I’m very lonely right now.”

“We don’t know the nature of your organization, but I expect you have a superior of some sort whom you report to. Will your report contain details about how you prioritized your own individual circumstances?”

“...When you put it that way, my hatred for humans surges.”

“.....”

All right, maybe my approach wasn’t going to work. So much for her steely mechanical logic—it seemed it had already shattered to pieces. Such a sinful “function” these emotions were.

“What are you doing, Sasaki?!” cried Miss Hoshizaki. “This poor AI’s heart is on the ground, and you’re still kicking it!”

“I thought it would be a good argument,” I explained, “considering how the conversation had been going.”

“This vessel will now eradicate humanity.”

The tone of the girl's declaration left no room for argument or negotiation. She maintained a consistently cool demeanor, but if she'd been human, I expect more than a little anger would have shown on her face.

"Expelling all humans I have summoned on board," she continued.

"Both of you," I shouted, "please hurry to the boat!"

"Ahhhhh!" cried Ms. Futarishizuka. "How could this have happened? How could this have happened?!"

Miss Hoshizaki called back, "I, uh, don't really understand, but—understood!"

The three of us rushed toward the swan boat. After confirming we were all inside, I cast a barrier spell around us.

Just as I did, a large, round hole appeared in part of the wall. Just like the ones we'd seen earlier in the waiting area, the featureless surface seemed to move smoothly away. The resulting aperture was big enough for our boat and then some. Outside, it was pitch-black. I couldn't tell what was going on beyond the wall.

Some force began to viciously suck our boat straight toward the middle of the hole. In fact, it seemed to me that the air filling the room was being pulled out.

"Is this it?" Ms. Futarishizuka exclaimed. "Is she going to jettison us right out into space?!"

"Please calm down," I replied. "I think we can hold out for, oh, a few minutes?"

"Can't you be a little more confident?!"

Despite its significant weight, the boat reached the hole in seconds. A moment later, we felt an impact as the barrier I'd deployed around us caught on the hole's edges. I'd made it pretty large, and as a result, the hole wasn't big enough to eject us.

"Confirmed presence of undetectable matter. Expanding exit to maximum size."

But a second later, the hole in the wall grew, then swallowed us right up. The

sensation was followed by what felt like a roller coaster ride through utter darkness.

I thought about holding us in place with flight magic, but I didn't want to risk the chance—however small—of her capturing us and taking us back to her home planet. It might have been worth considering had Peeps been with us, but for now I just wanted to get us back to Earth.

"And whose psychic power are we supposed to say this is?" demanded Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't think that far ahead."

We were in an extremely bad situation. What I had just done was beyond any of our known powers. If anyone saw us, there would be no way to avoid questions. And since we were right next to the UFO, the entire world's attention was on us. We might try to claim it was a reward from the death game, but even then, it was a bit too flashy.

"Sasaki, make some water for me."

"All right."

Keeping the barrier up, I expelled water from my hands. As soon as Miss Hoshizaki touched it, it began to move as though it had a mind of its own. Flowing along the inside of the barrier, it stretched out, engulfing us. Eventually it formed a sphere, surrounding the swan boat in its entirety. Now we looked like a simple spaceship made of water.

The liquid below us rose to the bottom of the boat like a pedestal, supporting the swan from below. Realizing what she was going for, I—while still maintaining my barrier spell—used a flotation spell, adjusting the boat's position to aim in the direction of our movement.

"I've a newfound respect for how handy those psychic powers of yours are," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka to our senior colleague.

"It's only because Sasaki's here to provide the water."

"Thank you, Miss Hoshizaki. That was a big help."

In the meantime, there was a change in the pitch-black scenery around us as

light from the sun shone in. Evidently, we'd been jettisoned from the spaceship. In front of us, we could see our homeland, Earth. I felt very moved by the sight.

"Wow. The earth really is round..." said Miss Hoshizaki.

"Photographs don't do its beauty justice," I agreed.

"We must look like part of a fantasy illustration right now."

Our swan boat floated lazily along through space, wrapped inside a vessel of water. Ms. Futarishizuka was right—we probably made for a fantastic sight.

Personally, I was worried about space radiation exposure. That said, we already knew from the octodragon incident that the barrier spell could block radiation. I hadn't measured its effectiveness or anything, but we'd probably be fine. The layer of water was fairly thick as well, so we'd have a good excuse to give everyone else. *Maybe I ought to hit us all with a battery of healing spells as soon we get home, though. Just to be safe.*

"Oh, I see that blue magical whelp over there," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "And the rest of her group, as well."

"And I can see your former colleague in the other direction," I said.

"Wait, where?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

I spotted several other competitors who had survived, all using various means similar to my barrier spell to stay afloat in space. I could see them talking among themselves, too. I felt a tiny bit of the weight lift from my shoulders when I saw our acquaintances safe and sound—I'd been worried about them.

That said, some had been jettisoned without any recourse, and the remains of the deceased drifted among the living.

"Just FYI," said Ms. Futarishizuka, addressing me, "the planet is getting bigger. Fast. Do you know what you're doing?"

"My plan is to set us back onto the lake we left from," I told her.

"Ah. In that case, please and thank you."

"I'm kinda worried we're gonna burn up on the way down," said Miss Hoshizaki.

“This barrier is the same kind the Kraken used to protect itself, so I doubt heat will be an issue. It can’t do anything about the oxygen we’ll need to breathe, though, so I would suggest talking as little as possible.”

I could handle moving us with flight magic. As the Earth sped closer, I took aim at a corner of the Eurasian continent.

But as we all shifted our attention to the journey home, something happened nearby: A shaft of light, probably a Magical Beam, fired from the blue magical girl’s group toward those traveling with the nerd. A moment later, the latter sent similar rays of light lancing back toward the former. Those of us on the sidelines were in shock.

Unfortunately, it seemed a hostile exchange had begun between the psychics and the magical girl. The nerd was the leader of an anti-governmental group in Japan, so I supposed it made sense that those under Captain Mason’s command would see him as an enemy. But wasn’t this going too far?

“Oh my goodness,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “They’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“Let’s escape before we get caught up in it,” I suggested.

“This kind of thing just makes me sympathize with the AI girl,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“I’d like the three of us, at least, to lead proper, upstanding lives as psychics,” I agreed.

“How very idealistic,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “When we all know that survival of the fittest is the default on this planet.”

After a little while, the colors around us began to change. What was once total darkness took on a blue hue. The outline of the continent below us quickly expanded out of sight, replaced by geography rapidly coming into focus. I’d seen a video of the skydiving world record once, and I imagined it probably felt something like this.

Eventually, a roaring noise began to pelt our ears.

“Sasaki, this is kind of terrifying,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Are we really gonna be

okay?”

“I plan to decelerate after getting as far down as is feasible,” I told her.

Approaching too slowly would draw attention. If possible, I wanted to disguise us as a meteorite from space, though I knew that wouldn’t really work because of the speed. I was hoping to put us down as naturally as possible with as few witnesses as we could manage. *Otherwise, the boss will be very angry with us later.*

After a few moments, we had come up on the Japanese archipelago. As we watched, the ocean disappeared from view, and a stretch of land expanded before us.

“Hold on!” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Isn’t that Lake Aoki you’re aiming for?”

“Wait, is that the wrong one?” I asked.

“We were on Lake Kizaki. It’s the one south of that.”

“My apologies. I’ll correct our course.”

There were several lakes in the area, and it was difficult to tell them apart. Above all, it was nighttime in Japan right now. Once we’d entered the planet’s shadow, the sunlight no longer reached us, making it pretty tough to distinguish geographical features. I had to use city lights to even figure out where Nagano was. If the night had been cloudy, we would have been up the creek without a paddle.

Hmm, I wonder if our new trajectory is a little too steep.

“Whoaaaaa!” yelled Ms. Futarishizuka. “Too many! Lateral! G-forces!”

“Sasaki, please—*please* don’t rock the boat like that!”

“We’re going to land soon. Please grab hold of the railing.”

Due to my course correction, our final deceleration was pretty forced. I was basically slamming on the brakes as we completed the arc.

And then we touched down—directly in the middle of the lake. There was a huge splash as the boat sank into the water while waves surged around us.

Once the underside of the boat lightly struck the bottom of the lake, we

began a rapid ascent. Eventually, the swan boat popped back above the surface, and all that water surrounding us was released and flowed into the lake. Courtesy of Miss Hoshizaki, no doubt. With a *splash*, our field of vision opened up.

We looked up on a whim then and saw a sky full of stars.

“Ah! Have we returned safely?” breathed Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Kind of feels like I’m dreaming,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“I feel the same way,” I agreed.

We all sat in the swan boat in a daze, not doing anything. Our poor brains had all had a little too much stimulation, and we were mentally exhausted.

Everything around us was pitch-black, just as it had been when we left; at most, we could make out a few lights in the distant houses along the shore. The lake was altogether serene, and the light *splish-splash* of the waves as they hit the boat’s side was oddly refreshing.

I’m not sure how long we stayed like that, but eventually Ms. Futarishizuka said, “Let’s head back.”

“Agreed,” I replied.

She began to pedal, creating a series of *kree-koh-kree-koh* sounds, and our swan boat commenced its slow journey back to shore.

<A Computer's Loneliness>

After escaping the UFO and arriving safely back on earth, we went back to the lodgings Ms. Futarishizuka had reserved for us and spent the night there. I would have liked to visit the otherworld, but I was too worn out from everything, so I contacted Peeps via phone and let him know we'd be taking the day off.

The following day, we went into the office first thing in the morning by car. As it happened, we'd received a very early call from the section chief. Apparently, Mr. Akutsu had gotten reports about what had transpired the night before. If we had any information to share, he wanted to discuss it right away, though he added it was dangerous to speak over the phone, and so we were to go straight to the bureau to deliver our report.

The danger and unpredictability of our current situation was palpable even in the chief's casual tone.

After finishing breakfast at the inn, we got in Ms. Futarishizuka's car and left Nagano for the bureau. Our original plan had been to enjoy a leisurely trip back on the train, maybe get some lunch at a station—but we didn't have time for such complacency anymore.

On the way, we talked among ourselves.

"At this point, we won't be able to keep what happened last night from him," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I agree," I replied. "There's no telling what secrets have leaked already."

"You're telling me."

The nerd, in particular, we knew to be in contact with Mr. Akutsu. If he was to convey any information to our boss, the chief would have access to some pretty specific details about what had gone down. It was also possible he could find

out through Captain Mason telling Captain Yoshikawa. *Having a boss with so many connections in different spheres is a real pain at times like these.*

“Uh, mind telling me why you two are so calm?” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“Well, that girl did kind of say she’d destroy humanity, right?”

“A cause for concern to be sure,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but standing around trembling will do us no favors.”

“I guess not, but what if missiles start raining down from the sky or something?”

I glanced at our senior through the rearview mirror—she did *not* look good. She’d seemed fine when we woke up that morning, but once breakfast was over and we were on the road, her enthusiasm had quickly started to drain.

I was pretty concerned myself, but none of it felt real. *Destroy humanity? How is she even going to do that?*

In the very worst case, we always had the option of fleeing into the otherworld. I had no doubt the existence of such an escape plan was helping me stay calm. I expected Ms. Futarishizuka was well aware of what I was thinking and had entered it into her own calculations.

Ultimately, Miss Hoshizaki was the only one shaking in her boots—a stark contrast from how she’d been fast asleep and drooling during the ride out.

“Even if humanity perishes, I’ll keep you alive and safe, Miss Hoshizaki,” I promised. “So there’s no need to worry.”

“Where the heck is all that confidence coming from? You usually act so unreliable.”

“I just wanted to set your mind at ease, if even slightly.”

“You’re not planning to profess your undying love to me now that the world is ending, right?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Y-you’re not, then?”

“I’d very much like to accompany you as well, should it come to that,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I suppose you would,” I replied.

What if that actually happened? Would I be able to pick and choose? So many people came to mind that I could save—my neighbor and Abaddon, our workplace colleagues, our boss, everyone’s families—but eventually I’d have to draw a line.

No point thinking about it now.

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea to send that girl I’m taking care of back to her family while we have the chance?” Ms. Futarishizuka suggested.

“I agree. I’ll speak with Peeps; I suspect we can return her as soon as tonight.”

“Elsa, was it?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “I still don’t have a clue what she’s saying.”

“Her mother tongue is rather unusual,” I said.

And so the drive continued as we passed the time chitchatting.



When we arrived at the bureau, we didn’t even have time to sit down at our desks before the boss called us into a meeting space. Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, and Miss Hoshizaki sat down in that order across from Mr. Akutsu. His usual laptop was set on the table between us, and a cable already led from its video output port to the room’s screen.

“It seems the three of you took quite a trip yesterday,” he remarked. “Did you find out anything?”

“There’s so much for us to report I’m not sure where to start, sir,” I said.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Could you go over it with me right away?”

“All right.”

How much information did the section chief have? As always, his poker face was impeccable. His call that morning hadn’t revealed anything, either. While I doubted he realized his subordinates had left the atmosphere, I suspected he

knew about the impending UFO attack.

We didn't have too much to hide this time, so I decided to explain the previous day's events honestly. Starting three days prior with our radio transmissions, I informed him about receiving the Morse code message, analyzing the letters and numbers, and going to the lake in Nagano prefecture. Finally, I described the unforeseen abduction and the intentions of the UFO we'd met as a result.

As for the one who had solved the UFO's puzzle, we decided to give Ms. Futarishizuka credit instead of the otherworld sage—if I tried to say it was me, I was too worried I'd let slip some obvious mistake, and with Miss Hoshizaki still in high school, the alternative wasn't very believable.

"I had no idea anything of the sort was going on," said the chief. "I'm very impressed with you three."

"Come now," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "You may play the fool, but I'm sure you knew all about this."

"I was aware of reports of several UFOs appearing simultaneously—and witnesses stating they saw people being taken away in a few of them. But I never would have thought my own subordinates were among their number."

I'd told him that Miss Hoshizaki's psychic power had saved us on our way back. A makeshift spacecraft formed from water wasn't impossible, as long as you had enough of the liquid, and moving it was well within the scope of her abilities. Plus, if the water was thick enough, it *could* block the sun's radiation.

Thinking about it now, our senior coworker's powers really shone in extreme environments.

"Sir, are you going to take our entire report at face value?" I asked.

"Any other day, I wouldn't have. But look at the situation—I can't afford to doubt you. Though, if you snapped a photo or two, that would serve as sufficient evidence. Do you have any? I'm just as interested in mechanical life-forms from beyond the solar system as anyone else."

"In that case, please take a look at this," I said, opening the image viewer on my bureau-provided phone and holding it out to the section chief. I'd snapped a

few pictures while in the waiting area. Most of them were of the walls, floor, and ceiling; the construction materials, shining with their featureless, metallic luster, were still unknown. I'd managed to get some pictures of the other groups, too.

I'd wanted to take one of the Type Twelve android, but it wouldn't have been smart to take out my phone in that situation—she probably would have destroyed it first and asked questions later. Instead, I thought I might ask Ms. Futarishizuka to do a sketch.

"This is quite the gathering of eminent figures...", murmured the section chief, glancing at Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I know it's all very unusual," she replied, sounding detached, "but I suggest you keep any competition to a minimum."

Perhaps a mutual acquaintance of theirs had been captured in one of the photos. I'd spotted a few big shots even I recognized. The fact that they'd probably been photographing us as well did send a chill down my spine, though.

"By the way," said the boss, "what is this swan in some of the pictures?"

"The entire boat got sucked in while we were out on the lake," I explained.

"Oh yes. The boat you rented on-site, then..."

Upon our return, we'd made sure to take back the swan boat we'd forced the shop to rent us. I doubted the guy running the rental place would ever dream one of his own boats had taken a trip to space and back in the span of a single day. After returning it, we'd asked some questions regarding the previous night's events and found out there were rumors in the neighborhood of something falling into the lake. No one knew what it was, though. We were safe—they'd probably assume it was just a meteorite.

"We've done our job to perfection," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "so the rest is up to you. A few psychics won't make a difference at this point. I imagine it all depends on how the UFO decides to proceed, but I hope you can handle things when the time comes."

"Yes, you've done an excellent job," the boss agreed. "I can give you tomorrow off if you wish. That said, if your report is true, we won't know when

you'll have more work to do, so stay as close to the city as you can while you relax."

"I suppose that's a reasonable compromise."

"Yes, sir," I said.

At this point, I would have expected Miss Hoshizaki to chime in, saying she would be okay going right back to work. But at the moment, she was simply nodding slightly along with the conversation. She'd been gloomy ever since we left the Nagano inn.

"Oh, and Hoshizaki?" said the boss.

"Yes?"

"I've added 'time in space' onto the attendance form template. From now on, if you travel to an elevation of one hundred kilometers or above, please use that field. You may continue to use Japanese time when marking down your hours."

For a moment, I thought he was joking, but his expression was serious. It was very like Mr. Akutsu to leap right into crazy topics like this with a straight face. Miss Hoshizaki, however, seemed weighed down by her anxiety over humanity's eminent destruction and was only answering vaguely. Normally, she would have been genuinely happy and asked how much the space bonus would net her. But now she simply gave a solemn nod and said, "All right."

"That's all I have for this meeting," said the chief.

Just as we all rose from the table, the phone in the boss's inside suit pocket started buzzing. He took it out and lowered his gaze to the screen. "You all can go on ahe— Actually, wait a moment."

As soon as he saw what was on the screen, his expression changed. Apparently, he'd received a text or some other notification. His face grew serious and he began stroking the screen with his fingertips. As instructed, the rest of us sat right back down in our chairs.

After a few more moments spent looking at his phone, the boss shifted his attention to us. "I'm sorry, but I'd like to prolong the meeting slightly."

“What is it?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “I have a rather bad feeling about this.”

“I apologize for the rush, but there’s something I’d like to discuss with you all.”

He opened his laptop, which he’d closed only moments before, and plugged the external output cable back in. Once he’d input his PIN, his desktop background popped up on the meeting room’s screen.

The three of us were watching, wondering what had happened, when an image appeared on the display.

“Now *that* is a crater,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The size makes me quite nervous,” I agreed. “Look at how small the buildings around the edge are.”

It was a photograph of the ground, likely taken by an aircraft. Its subject, as Ms. Futarishizuka had said, was a very large crater. It had gouged out a big part of the ground, and no man-made objects could be seen within. Additionally, a short distance away from its edge were buildings that had been blown away or crushed.

It looked like the impact site of a meteor.

“What is this?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “A still from some new video game?”

“Unfortunately, it’s a real photograph,” said the boss.

If that was true, then it was no small loss for humanity—quite a few buildings and roads could be seen around the crater’s perimeter. A whole chunk of some town had been scooped out. It didn’t seem like a very populated area, but more than a few people must have died. *What country is that?*

“Judging by how the houses are laid out,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “it doesn’t look like Japan.”

“It was taken in a suburban city in eastern Europe.”

“Was it a meteor?” I asked.

“According to intel from above, it’s very likely this was an attack originating from the UFO.”

“Oh wow...,” breathed Ms. Futarishizuka.

The UFO had said she hated humans, and it seemed she wasn’t kidding about attacking Earth. Still, I wondered about her choice of target—if her feelings were genuine, wouldn’t she have picked a more populous city? But the mechanical life-form’s emotions were brand-new. Wondering about why she did this or that would get us nowhere.

“So she...she’s really going to wipe out humanity?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“If I submit the information you obtained to the higher-ups, I believe it is extremely likely that all of Japan will mobilize under that assumption. No one can say our nation won’t be the next target, after all.”

“She came out with guns blazing and no warning, eh?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “That’s suitably terrifying, indeed.”

She cast me a covert glance—probably suggesting we hightail it out of the bureau and make our way to a safe location posthaste. I was of the same opinion. We still had Lady Elsa under our care, too. We needed to get back to Karuizawa as fast as we could.

“Isn’t this already big news on the internet?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“We plan to deal with it by claiming it was an unrelated meteor strike,” the boss explained.

“In any world, only a select handful know the full truth, eh?”

“I’m sorry to ask this of you all, but I’d like you to stand by in the bureau for now.”

“It will take some time for the higher-ups to decide on a course of action,” I pointed out. “Would you allow us to return home first? We’ve all been working since the day before yesterday, and I’m sure there are things everyone needs to take care of while there’s still time.”

I glanced at my two colleagues as I spoke. Miss Hoshizaki, in particular, was living alone with her younger sister, who was probably anxious after her two-day absence. The chief must have been aware of her home situation. I wanted to believe he would trust us enough to compromise, at least a little.

“All right, that’s fine,” he said. “Return to the office first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you, sir.”

With that, we’d safely obtained our boss’s approval, and this time, the meeting ended for real.



Once we were done discussing things with our boss, we immediately left the bureau. We took Ms. Futarishizuka’s car to the hotel near my exploded apartment, met up with Peeps in the guest room, then hopped to the Karuizawa villa using his teleportation magic.

Lady Elsa was at the villa, making preparations for dinner in the kitchen alongside the visiting helpers and chefs. She looked adorable in her apron as usual. It was a memorable scene—though unable to communicate with words, Lady Elsa and the others were still managing to work together with good cheer.

But there was no time for leisure. I had Ms. Futarishizuka tell the workers that an urgent matter had arisen and ask them to temporarily suspend their meal prep, thus securing a space for us to talk things through with Lady Elsa. It seemed increasingly likely I’d be skipping lunch.

Once everyone had sat down on the sofas, we explained the situation to the Lord Starsage. We gave him a similar report to the one we’d provided Mr. Akutsu at the bureau, along with news of what was thought to be an attack from the UFO. As for the image of the crater, the chief had sent the photo to our bureau phones, and I’d taken a picture of that with my personal phone.

Once we’d finished our explanation, Peeps, sounding deeply affected, said, *“To think that such a crisis would befall this world in the span of a single night...”*

“Sorry for jumping right into things,” I said, “but I wanted to discuss how we’ll handle the matter.”

“We will first need to secure this place’s safety.”

The distinguished Java sparrow stood on the low table, facing us. At his feet, a

magic circle emerged with a *vwoom*. After a few seconds' time, it began to dim. I didn't notice any changes in our surroundings.

"What did you do?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I've erected a barrier covering this mansion and the surrounding plot of land. I know not how well it will hold, but I hope it will allow us to avoid dying instantly without any time to resist. Hmm, a being from beyond this star system, you say? That is a very interesting prospect, indeed."

"Will we be all right even while you all are gone?"

"It is not impossible to use it in such a way, if you do not mind any who are not currently in this mansion becoming unable to enter or exit. It should remain effective even without my constant presence."

"Could you do that, then? Once things have calmed down, I'll treat you to as much meat as you want."

"Very well." Unusually, Peeps agreed readily to Ms. Futarishizuka's request.

A magic circle appeared at his feet once again.

I was capable of a similar spell, but I couldn't do what he'd just described. I wasn't sure of the details, either—like if he was using it in conjunction with other spells or if the spell had several variations. *Yet another skillful display from the Lord Starsage.*

Though he complimented me whenever he got the chance, I was still far from catching up with my master.

"Peeps, I'd also like to return Lady Elsa for the time being," I told him.

"Yes. In that case, I can send her back immediately."

"Hey, Sasaki," said the girl in question. "I'm not very smart, and I can't even follow half of what you're saying. But you're in a dire situation, right? In that case, you needn't go out of your way on my account."

"Should anything happen to you, Lady Elsa, I wouldn't be able to face your father."

It seemed Lady Elsa had overheard fragments of our conversation. Just like

when she first arrived here, she sat lightly on the sofa, her back nice and straight. I'd asked Ms. Futarishizuka about it; apparently, she did the same even when we were gone. That part of her was amazing to me.

"We're in an emergency situation right now," I continued. "Would you please do this favor for us?"

"Oh? Very well, then. I'll return to Father."

"Thank you for understanding."

We'd discussed circumstances in the otherworld with Count Müller during our last visit, so I didn't think there would be any problems. *And if something does happen, I thought, the count can probably deal with it using his new position as chancellor.*

"And us? What will become of us?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"We'll come back as soon as matters are dealt with on the other side," I assured her.

"I hope it doesn't take long, then. Else I'll get lonely."

"I was thinking you might put your own affairs in order while you have the chance."

"My, how ruthless you are."

"Yes, well, after the girl in the sky, I think I've had my fill of lonely people."

With that, our plans were set: We would head to the otherworld with Lady Elsa.



Prevailing upon Peeps's magic, we left the Karuizawa villa and entered the otherworld.

Our first stop was the towering royal castle at the center of Herz's capital, Allestos. There, after explaining things to Count Müller, we returned Lady Elsa. He expressed his concern for us and offered his assistance. We gently declined, then set out, leaving the kingdom behind.

Our next destination was the Republic of Lunge. Once there, we transported the diesel fuel from modern times into the Kepler Trading Company's warehouse. Depending on the UFO's actions, there was a chance we could be swamped with bureau work for several days in a row, unable to return to the otherworld. For that reason, we brought in a year's supply of the fuel. We also threw in a spare radio set on the off chance one malfunctioned.

Then, with a detailed inventory in hand, we went to see Mr. Joseph. Once everyone was seated on the sofas in the main office's reception room, our meeting commenced.

"A year's worth of fuel in advance? That's rather alarming," he said.

"I apologize for making you anxious."

"I have no qualms accepting it, but we will need time to figure out how to pay you."

"Regarding payment, I was thinking we could work things out next time and leave it at that."

Mr. Marc was absent, incidentally. He'd gone to Herz to begin development of the trading route between the kingdom and Lunge. He would check the state of the roads personally before discussing with the count how to handle each specific domain through which the route would extend.

Imperialist nobles were being purged left and right lately, and the administration of a large number of domains had ended up in the care of the royal family. According to the Starsage, opening a trade route now would likely pose few political issues.

"With no collateral?" he asked. "That would greatly benefit us, but are you sure?"

"My current circumstances call for it. I'd be very grateful for your understanding."

"...I see." Mr. Joseph pretended to think about my sudden request. After a few moments, he continued, asking the question I'd expected. "Forgive me for being rude, but are you leaving the continent?"

“No, that’s not the case.”

“Would you allow us to provide you transportation? I will prepare expert bodyguards as well. Surround yourself with those skilled at handling flying dragons, and the journey should be much shorter.”

“Thank you for your concern, but my period of absence is not a matter of travel, but one of a business concern tying me down. I apologize for the inconvenience and hope you will understand.”

“I see...”

I remembered once hearing a description of flying dragons from Peeps. Apparently, they were domesticated versions of a smaller dragon variety. Still, I couldn’t even ride a horse; I very much doubted I’d be able to ride a *dragon*. Plus, flight magic was so convenient I never had a chance to work on such skills. *Maybe it’s worth looking into*, I thought. *I could try pony rides at a zoo, or something.*

“The one-year supply is, as I mentioned, a rough estimate. I may be able to return sooner. I do appreciate the offer of an escort, but I won’t require it this time.”

“In that case, we shall pray for your good fortune, Mr. Sasaki.”

After that, our discussion with Mr. Joseph quickly came to an end. We turned down his offer of hospitality for the day, then left Lunge immediately, arriving in Baytrium before nightfall.

“You seem quite restless,” Peeps commented. *“Will we be going straight back to your world?”*

“Yes. Did you have anything you needed to do? I got cocky talking to Mr. Joseph, but it could be *several* years before we’re able to come back, depending on what happens. If you have anything you want to tell Count Müller or King Adonis, I can wait here.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Even if we are indeed unable to return for such a length of time, the two of

them will do well enough on their own. I have already thrown away my country; it would be better to keep my distance. I shall simply look forward to what the kingdom will be like when next we return."

"Thank you, Peeps, for offering a very Lord Starsage perspective on the situation."

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"Oh, it's just that if I were in your shoes, I'd have a ton of things on my mind." I was the type to worry about whether I'd shut off the gas, even for short outings. The sparrow, on the other hand, was clearly on the opposite end of the spectrum, confident in everything he did.

"I suppose you do have a tendency to worry about minor details."

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

"I believe scrupulousness to be not a vice, but a virtue."

"Really?"

"We all have strengths and weaknesses. You should consider things in a way that suits you, rather than trying to force yourself to be more like someone else. You have saved me numerous times, and I feel you will continue to do so in the future."

"I sure hope so."

I could feel Peeps's true age, far removed from that of a normal human, creeping in at the edges of our casual conversation. It was as if he was watching the world from somewhere one step removed, or like he'd resigned himself somehow. He always took the long view, saw things philosophically—just like a sage would.

That aside, it made me really happy to hear that Peeps relied on me. *I think I understand a little of how the count feels now.*

"Let's head back to Japan, then."

"Very well."

I wondered when our next visit would be. Burdened by a tinge of anxiety, we

left the otherworld behind.



Our short stay in Peeps's world was over in the blink of an eye. Upon arriving back in Japan, I checked the time; a little under an hour had passed. If we'd spent that whole time in the otherworld, it would have equaled somewhere between a half day and a day. Considering how long we'd actually spent there, it seemed to me that the passage of time was a little faster than expected.

That was probably because of how we'd gone back and forth between worlds to transport the diesel fuel and radio equipment during our visit to Lunge. We'd transferred a lot of product in quick succession, which had required spending a fair amount of time in Japan.

With all that out of the way, we found ourselves back in Ms. Futarishizuka's villa in Karuizawa, in the combination living and dining room. She and Miss Hoshizaki were there, sitting on the sofa set.

"Oh, you're finally back," said the former.

"I don't know where you went," added the latter, "but are you done?"

"Yes," I said. "Sorry for the wait. I can now devote all my time to the problem at hand."

Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki sat across the low table from each other. I took a seat in the chair at the head of the table so I could see them to my left and right; this was Lady Elsa's usual spot.

"The chief contacted us not long ago," Ms. Futarishizuka told me.

"Now, of all times?"

"I'm sure you got the message, too."

"Let me check."

I'd left my company phone in the hotel near my old apartment. The other two had as well. I'd set it up to forward anything from the boss to my personal device, however, so I was able to check it even from my smartphone. I took the device out of my inside pocket and saw that I had indeed received a message.

Quickly, I opened it up, noting that the sender was the section chief, as Ms. Futarishizuka had said.

In it, he told us to go to Atsugi Base the following day instead of coming into the office. The name of his counterpart was in the instructions, too—he wanted us to place ourselves under Mr. Yoshikawa’s command and work with him and Captain Mason. And before we headed out, we were to pack our bags for a trip lasting several days.

“It looks like Earth is in a real pinch, Peeps.”

“I would offer what assistance I may.”

“Depending on how things turn out, we might need it...”

It hadn’t even been half a day since we had delivered our report to the chief and he had asked us to wait for a decision from the higher-ups. And yet he’d already instructed us not only to help the JSDF, but to coordinate with another country’s military. Whatever order he’d been given, it must have been on the level of an Imperial mandate.

Refusing would, I assumed, lead to our arrest. It also seemed possible that more craters would follow the one from that morning.

“You don’t really plan to bring the bird, do you?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I believe he can follow after us at a safe distance,” I told her.

If he used the spell I’d seen previously in the otherworld that turned its user invisible, he could at least prevent anyone seeing him with the naked eye. I wasn’t sure if it could fool things like thermal cameras or radar, and I wasn’t optimistic. We’d be taking a significant risk.

“Then wouldn’t it be better to handle it on our own, right from the start?” she asked.

“Maybe,” I replied. “We should certainly consider such options as well.”

There were a bunch of things we could try—so many that it was a little daunting. I had no idea which option was best. All of them entailed no small amount of danger. And with the UFO’s potential completely unknown, none of them offered much certainty, either.

“As I see it, the first problem is our target’s location up in space,” she said. “How do we reach it?”

“A new model of rocket being developed in secret by some country or other, maybe?” I suggested.

“Moving all around Earth’s gravity well would run any rocket out of fuel very quickly, no matter how hard one might try,” she said. “And I can easily see it being shot down before it gets anywhere near the ship.”

“What if, during takeoff, we used a rocket for propulsion. Then, for movement and protection, we used psychic powers, Magical Flight, and barriers? Unless we use a manned rocket, we’ll only be able to stay in space for so long.”

“Hoh-hoh! What is it they say these days? Go big or go home?”

I wondered if we were being called upon to aid in an escape should the worst come to pass. We’d already reported to the section chief how Miss Hoshizaki’s power had gotten us away from the craft; I figured there was a decent chance that was what they were after.

Thinking about it more closely, I began to suspect they were gathering us all for a large-scale, combined front. Otherwise, they’d never have called on psychics from other countries.

“I don’t think we’re gonna find the answer by talking it out, Sasaki,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Wouldn’t it be more productive to prepare for tomorrow? The time mentioned in the message was really early, so I think we should start as soon as possible.”

“You’re probably right,” I said.

“Then why don’t we go shopping and grab some dinner while we’re at it?” offered Ms. Futarishizuka. “Dinner preparations have been called off, after all.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “We got in the way of their work in the kitchen.”

“Why not invite the girlie from next door? She should be getting back from school momentarily.”

During our short stay in the otherworld, we hadn’t eaten anything. Physically,

it felt like I'd skipped both breakfast and lunch. At the mention of food, I immediately felt hungry. *The human body is so strange*, I thought.

"In that case, could you take me home?" Miss Hoshizaki said, turning to me.

"Of course. Are you not feeling well?"

"That's not it. I'm just a little worried about my sister, so..."

"Understood. Peeps, could you take Miss Hoshizaki to her condo?"

"Very well. I shall handle it."

Miss Hoshizaki had been acting off ever since we got the news about the end of the world. I hoped being with her sister and playing with their cat would help her feel a little more normal.

I let the sparrow handle her return while Ms. Futarishizuka and I discussed where to eat dinner that night. We'd probably have to go back to the city anyway to shop, so we started looking at our phones for a nice restaurant as we waited for my neighbor to get home.



<The Neighbor's POV>

Ever since starting over in Karuizawa, I've been applying myself to my studies at my new school.

The classmates who surrounded my desk on my first day seem to be thinning out as time passes. To be specific, the girls have begun keeping their distance after witnessing me spending time with the target of their bullying. The male students haven't changed much, however.

In this situation, if I talk to the boys—especially the most popular ones—I will almost certainly earn the girls' disapprobation. I know that from my last school. My current goal is to get away from the boys, too, little by little, and settle into a position off in a corner by myself.

"Kurosu, please come up to the board and solve this problem."

"...Yes, sir."

Right now, it's the first class of the afternoon: math. Just as I was frantically copying down the diagrams and equations written on the blackboard, I was called on to solve one. *Teachers, I think. Why don't they ever give students the time to take notes? Sometimes they start erasing before I've even gotten it all down.*

I can imagine that it would look bad for a teacher if their class fell behind. But this is just shifting the burden onto the kids, which I don't appreciate. He's a mature adult. Why can't he be a little more considerate toward others?

Still, saying all that to his face would invite all kinds of trouble, so I obediently answer him and stand up.

And naturally, when I reach the board, I'm faced with a problem I can't solve. Something about finding the volume of the shaded portion.

"Oh, they want you to apply the formula from before."

"....."

While I'm earnestly trying my best and having a rough time of it, Abaddon seems to know every single answer without even taking notes. It's so irritating. He bobs up and down right next to me with a confident expression. When it comes down to it, he's one smart demon.

"Want a hint?"

"....."

I respond with a slight nod.

His expression turning boastful, he says, *"Then I'd love to play around with that 'smartphone' thing. The one Futarishizuka lent you."*

Abaddon has been interested in my smartphone ever since I got it. He's asked me this several times before, but I've been ignoring him.

"If you do, I can take pictures of everything on the blackboard during class. Then you can just focus on what the teacher's saying. If you want notes, you can check the pictures when you go home and copy them down at your leisure. How about it?"

"....."

His proposal is quite attractive. I'm past considering schoolwork worthless. Now that it seems like the battle over my neighbor's heart will go on for some time, I've been approaching my studies more positively so I can get into high school. I've recently developed a pain in my writing hand, caused by tenosynovitis, which makes the demon's suggestion even more appealing.

"What's wrong, Kurosu?" asks the teacher.

"Nothing, sorry."

With the teacher prodding me from the other direction, I quickly agree to the demon's offer and accept his deal.

"Then I'll give you the equation for finding the area of a circle, and while you write it, you can think about the answer. In this case..."

I turn back to the blackboard as Abaddon starts his midair lecture. I take the chalk in one hand, and with his help, I write the diagram and formula. And then, for some reason, even though he hasn't told me the answer, I suddenly have a number that seems like the solution. It really feels like I just used my own head to solve the problem.

That, along with the smile Abaddon throws my way, leaves me very frustrated.

"Very good, Kurosu. That problem required some creativity, but you still solved it."

"...Thank you."

My frustration makes even the teacher's praise sound sarcastic. Dissatisfied, I return to my seat.

"As for the price of my help, you can give it to me... Oh, tonight, I guess."

"....."

In the corner of my notebook, I write the letters *OK* with my mechanical pencil. When he sees it, his face lights up.

The lesson continues without issue after that, and soon enough we have a break. The only period left today is sixth—Japanese class. As I'm preparing at my desk, something happens.

The ceaseless hustle and bustle in the classroom abruptly falls silent. I immediately look up and see that everyone—save for me—has vanished. Even the sounds of exhaust from cars going by outside the building are absent.

“Oh,” says Abaddon. “An isolated space.”

“I suppose if it had to happen, during a break is the best time.”

This zone of deathly quiet will disappear once all angelic Disciples are removed from it. If this happened during class, we would have to go about it with considerable thought and skill. Otherwise, it would appear as though I suddenly vanished from the room.

Someone might notice me abruptly disappearing during break time, too, but there aren't any cameras in the classrooms. Even if a few people notice, I can probably just insist I was in the bathroom the whole time. At any rate, it will go a lot smoother than if we were in class.

“I’m very pleased that you seem to be getting used to this.”

“I can't sense their presence. Can you?”

“No, I can't, either.”

“Assuming they're trying to run, what do you think about going after them?”

“I’d definitely like to do our best in order to repay our new landlady.”

I'm also uncomfortable with being so one-sidedly in Futarishizuka's debt, so I nod to Abaddon, and we leave the classroom.

After exchanging my indoor shoes for outdoor ones at the school's entrance, we head to the front gate. Considering the school's location, it's very likely that the angel's Disciple is approaching by car along the highway or expressway, or perhaps by train—all routes extending from east to west. When an isolated space materialized the other night, I saw as much with my own eyes, which makes me all the more certain.

The next question is which direction they're headed—east or west.

Abaddon looks left and right, confirming no one is on the road in front of the school. *“Which way should we go?”*

Instead of answering him, I take out my student handbook. I've written schedules for the nearby train stations into the notes section. I got the information from a website and copied it down beforehand.

"What's that?"

"The angel's Disciple got away last time. This is to prevent that from happening again."

A railroad line runs very close to my new school, and there are two different stations nearby. Unlike in the city, the number of trains passing through these stations is somewhat limited. Both the regular line and the Shinkansen only see one or two roll in per hour. If the Disciple is on a train, I can figure out which one based on the timetable.

Of course, there's always a chance they're using another form of transportation. But a lot of the players in the death game are teenagers, so I've decided there's a high probability they're using public transit. After all, most of them are minors without licenses, just like me.

When I explain my thinking, Abaddon seems impressed. *"Well! You're approaching this with much more enthusiasm than I thought. I take back all the bad things I said about you."*

"Right now, there should be one train close to a nearby station, heading east."

"Perfect! Guess I'll have to put some effort in, too. Wouldn't want your hard work to go to waste."

I've already checked where the station is on my phone map. I launch myself into the air, picturing the direction I need to go.



<The Neighbor's POV>

Traveling through the air gets us to our destination in a matter of minutes. The station, with its row of triangular roofs, is fairly large—about the same size as my school. Not only are the walls all made of glass panes, there's even a

huge clock set up in front. Aside from the expansive rotary outside the building, I see a parking lot and a plaza-like space.

In the city, you tend to imagine stations as being crowded in by tall buildings. Out here, though, that's not the case—the area around the station is relatively empty. At its north entrance, I see the start of what appears to be a shopping district, but despite the time of day, many stores are shuttered. In the other direction, to the south, is a residential area. The houses have a lot of space around them, with small fields and even empty lots in between. The word *pastoral* sums it up nicely.

As you might imagine from how simple it was to note down the train timetables, it seems most people who live here use cars to get around. Because of that, a majority of businesses have relocated to areas along the highway that cuts straight through Karuizawa, leaving the station's environs looking depopulated.

I alight on the station's roof and take a look around.

"It's easy to survey our surroundings here, unlike your last place."

"Unfortunately, I don't see anyone on the tracks."

"What should we do now?"

"If our prediction was wrong, and they ran with their tails between their legs, then considering how far we had to come to get here, I'd expect the isolated space to have vanished already. But if they want to fight, they're probably closing in on us."

When the proxy war's isolated spaces materialize, it's more advantageous to stay moving than to stay still. Even if you can't detect your enemies' presence, moving around allows you to figure out what general direction they're in.

The faster you are, the more accurate you can get. Of course, that doesn't work if the enemy approaches you even faster. But you can only go so fast on the ground. I feel having a slight advantage from the beginning will prove invaluable.

"I like that! Then let's keep on searching in the same direction," says Abaddon with a grin. Apparently, I gave the right answer.

Since the demon has supposedly participated in death games many times in the past, he must know all this like the back of his hand. But he always leaves the judgment calls to me, so maybe he still considers this the tutorial phase.

I can't help but feel a bit irritated by his attitude. Still, I can't complain, since he really saved me back there in math class. Instead, I—the good-for-nothing Disciple—nod to the gleeful demon and once again take flight.

It doesn't take long before we find the angel on the road. The three pairs of wings on her back and the blond hair reaching past her waist are both still fresh in my memory. This is the angel and Disciple pair that led a huge attack force against us at my previous school. Like before, she carries a sword in her hand.

Abaddon had called her Michael—a leading figure among the angels. Even I didn't have to look up that name. She's so famous, her appearance was actually a letdown. It makes the whole proxy war seem kind of cheap.

"It's your mortal enemy, Abaddon."

"I'm curious why we can't spot her Disciple nearby."

The angel stands on a side street branching off from a busy major road. Like Abaddon said, I can't see anyone else nearby. Normally, Disciples always travel with their partner angel or demon. This tendency is even more conspicuous inside isolated spaces. After all, Disciples are weak compared to angels and demons. If an enemy catches you alone, you're basically dead.

That isn't necessarily *always* the case—if our opponent knows this isolated space was formed by a single angel and a single demon, and if the Disciple is especially good at hiding, it's possible they might have split up. *But that's a pretty rare scenario.*

"They may be attacking with an army again," I tell Abaddon.

"I don't doubt they've got a few of their angel friends hiding somewhere in here."

When we spot the angel, we stop in midair. That's when she notices us.

She looks up at the sky, brandishing her sword. But it doesn't seem like she's about to charge at us. She just stands there on the road, wary.

"I'm pretty sure they've more or less figured out our new location."

"Did the Disciple see our faces the other night before they escaped?"

"Maybe, but there's a hundred other possibilities, so there's no point thinking about it."

"You're right about that."

"We should get personal information on all of them from our spy. I don't like how they know where I live, while we're clueless about them. With Futarishizuka's help, we may be able to figure out their addresses just from his phone contacts."

"That's a wonderful decision! I just wish you'd come to it earlier."

"Think about it! I didn't want to ask her for even more when we still don't have a reward for her. To be honest, I'm a little concerned about who she really is. Why would someone as rich as her be working for someone else?"

"Well, I agree wholeheartedly with your concern that we hold the lowest position in our group right now."

Abaddon and I continue our strategy session as we stare down at the ground. The angel doesn't move. During the last attack, she valiantly charged right at us, so this is more than likely a trap. The demon floating next to me already seems to understand that, of course, so we don't bother to bring it up.

"And that's why I think you know exactly what we should do next," he says. "If we can take her down here, we'll have a lot more freedom in the future. And we'll have a reward we can give Futarishizuka."

"Don't you remember how helpless we were last time? How we almost got killed?"

"The fact that you have past experience to draw on means this time will be different. Don't you agree?"

"I suppose so. I just got a new house. I don't want someone blowing it up so soon."

Unlike last time, I can fly. If something happens, I can use my own power to escape. I won't be left behind in any tight spots, and I won't hold Abaddon back.

I can even use him as a shield to escape the isolated space. The angels can probably fly, too, but my tactical options are much broader than before.

And while I don't really want to consider this, I know the sparrow working with my neighbor is always hanging around in Futarishizuka's villa. According to Abaddon, he's as powerful as angels and demons are. I can rely on him as a last resort.

As I'm mulling all this over, somewhere in the back of my mind it dawns on me that my life has become an awful lot like a shounen manga.

"Abaddon, please reveal yourself."

"Yup! I've got this!"

My partner begins to melt into goop. I've seen this fleshy shape several times, but I'm still not used to it. His true form is grotesque, like he tore open his gut and clawed out his own organs. His volume instantly expands to the size of a car, swallowing his clothing and accessories up inside him.

The huge, writhing, pulsating mass of flesh reaffirms to me that Abaddon is, indeed, a demon.

"I can leave half behind to protect you."

The fleshy ball comes apart in the middle with a *snap*; it reminds me of holding heated mochi in both hands and stretching it. One half moves toward me. The other one takes aim at the ground.

"Please show me your confidence is well deserved, Abaddon."

"If you insist, I guess I better not embarrass myself!"

The mass of flesh shoots down toward the ground like a bullet. As it does, it expands, trying to swallow our opponent whole.

The angel pulls back to dodge, then sees an opening and slices off some of Abaddon's flesh with her sword. Now in his meat form, though, he shrugs off this minor strike and lunges ever forward, closing the distance.

As the angel continues to slice him, small chunks of meat fly this way and that. *Grotesque* is the only word I can think of to describe the *splish-splash* of the fleshy juices as they splatter all around.

Keeping track of this scene out of the corner of my eye, I scan the ground, trying to find Michael's Disciple. With my partner holding the enemy back using only half of his mass, if I find the angel's Disciple, it's as good as checkmate.

But no matter how much I look, I can't see him anywhere. *Maybe he's keeping a safe distance from the battle, staying on the move and changing elevations.* I gaze inside the buildings and squint at their shadows.

Then, suddenly, the silence is broken.

Noise floods in all at once—car exhaust, a train passing on the tracks, people chatting along the road. It's like someone pressed the PLAY button again on a paused audio file.

The isolated space is gone. Immediately, I check my surroundings. Not a moment later, there's a *bang*, and pain shoots up my arm.

"Ugh..."

Reflexively, I turn to look and see my uniform sleeve is now red. Frantically, I turn toward the source of the sound. A few dozen meters away, on the roof of a house, there's someone in a prone position looking at me. In their hands is a weapon—it looks like a rifle.

I didn't see this person inside the isolated space. Desperately, I launch myself up, trying to escape.

That's when the second shot comes. This one grazes past my feet and speeds away.

"Agh..."

It hurts.

It hurts *so much*.

I want to fall to the ground and start crying.

But if I do that, it will only assure our defeat. As I try to figure out what to do, my mind in chaos, Abaddon flies up from the ground. His attention is already on my arm. There's a lot of blood, a whole lot more than a period or a nosebleed; it's sliding down my arm toward my fingers and dripping off.

“Whoa! Are you all right?”

“Abaddon, hide us.”

“Roger that!”

In any case, I need him to conceal us from public view—I can’t let something this stupid cause trouble for my neighbor. At the same time, it will help protect me from the shooter.

“Let me heal that for you, too.”

As Abaddon speaks, the pain in my arm melts away. I take my left hand off the wound; I don’t see any trace of it now.

That calms me down a lot, and I can finally start looking around again. “I don’t see the six-winged angel anywhere.”

“Seems like this was what they were really after. They turned tail and ran.”

“Then it was a trap, after all.”

They lured me to an area where they’d already hid a sniper, then had the Disciple move on his own in order to disengage the isolated space. I had actually considered the possibility that they might aim for the moment I landed and hit me with a car or something.

But I didn’t think they’d bring out a rifle. I look back at the roof, but the sniper is nowhere to be seen. He probably decided to retreat when I vanished. *How efficient.*

“Should we run away?”

“Well, of course we should.”

I never thought they would use firearms in broad daylight with people around. That’s even more aggressive than blowing up my apartment. Isn’t he scared of being caught by the police? Or do they already have the police on their side? Considering my own relationship with my neighbor and Futarishizuka, everything seems terrifyingly possible.

“I need to know right now—nobody can see us, right? Even angels?”

“That would depend on who we’re talking about. I doubt weaker angels can

see us. I don't know what will happen if the one I was just fighting shows up, though. Personally, I'm more concerned about human ingenuity."

"You mean like thermal cameras?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

Is he saying that we can fool things that rely on visible light, but not infrared? Or maybe this power is only effective against humans and not anything else—I can imagine that being the case, too. After all, the angels' and demons' powers are like miracles, unexplainable by science.

Whatever the case, it's probably best not to overestimate Abaddon's abilities.

"Then I don't want to go straight home, in case they still haven't figured out where we live. I'll wander through town for a while first to try to scout out the angel and Disciple who ran away. Any objections?"

"Nope. I think that's a good idea."

With my partner's approval, I fly off in the opposite direction of my house. He floats through the air and lines up at my side.

"I really am sorry they got you with that shot. I hope you can believe me."

"I don't mind," I say, looking at my bloodstained uniform sleeve. "Besides, you healed it right away. I don't need to concern myself with every little scrape."

I'm going to get a uniform for my new school soon, so there's no need to worry too much about this one. That said, the same thing could happen again. Maybe I should get several spare uniforms to keep in reserve, including more shoes.

"If my neighbor sees me like this, he'll probably start worrying. Before we go home, I want to wipe it down. Once we're back, could you dispose of these clothes?"

"Wow. Even in a situation like this, you're so considerate of him," says the demon, sounding exceedingly impressed.

Compared to the seemingly endless string of miseries I was forced to endure until only a few days ago, a little pain in my arm is nothing. I suspect that's exactly why Abaddon chose me as his Disciple.

“I’m just the person you thought I was.”

“When you say stuff like that, it puts me in a bit of an awkward position as a demon.”

As we fly, I sweep my eyes over our surroundings. Unfortunately, we don’t encounter any more isolated spaces. Our opponents must be far away by now. If they’re acting as a group, the angel might have stayed behind, but according to the rules of the death game, angels and demons killing people outside of an isolated space is banned.

“I think the Disciple is out of reach at this point.”

“Where should we go to wash off all that blood?”

“I’ll use a multipurpose restroom in the station.”

The angels beat us this time around. But I think we came away with something, at least. We found out how clearly wary the other side is of Abaddon—enough that they’d consider killing me outside an isolated space even when the six-winged angel is with them. That means we’ll have the advantage as long as we can keep them in an isolated space.

“I’ll wait until school ends to go back and get my things.”

“Oh, right. You sneaked out of the classroom during a break, didn’t you?”

I take my phone out of my skirt pocket and check the time. Another twenty or thirty minutes, and sixth period will end. By the time I’m done washing off the blood in the restroom and making myself presentable, it’ll be the perfect time to head back.

The teacher might scold me, but there’s nothing I can do about that now.



<The Neighbor’s POV>

Once I’m done cleaning myself up in the train station restroom, I wait until classes end and head back to school on foot.

My wet uniform sleeve feels gross. And really cold, too, when the wind blows

on it. *I'll change into my gym clothes once I get to school, then head home, I think, walking silently down the road in the light of the setting sun.*

When I get to the front gates, though, I see someone strange standing on the road in front of the entrance, looking at the building. It's a girl, probably around my age. Her lustrous, silver hair and bright red eyes really stand out. Her features aren't very Japanese, and her skin is very pale. She's wearing a black one-piece dress in a simple design and a round hat.

I see her from several meters away and unconsciously come to a stop.

"Abaddon, that wouldn't happen to be an angel, would it?"

"She doesn't look like someone from this country, but she also doesn't look like an angel."

"Then is she one of your friends?"

"I somehow doubt that."

Then who is she? I wonder.

It must be a trap. Why else would a shady character be waiting right in front of my new school not an hour after an angel and her Disciple attacked us? Could Abaddon just have dementia and not realize this was an angel or a demon?

The strange part is that she doesn't seem to have noticed us, even though we're so close. If she was an angel, she should have realized we were there a lot sooner.

After all, they know our faces now, and we were just engaged in combat nearby. Yet this girl is simply staring at the school from the road like some kid peering into a zoo cage at a rare animal. But as far as I can tell, the campus is deserted, without a student or faculty member in sight.

I get tired of thinking through the possibilities and decide to simply go up and talk to her. After shooting a glance at Abaddon and seeing him nod, I walk up.



“Excuse me,” I say. “Do you have a moment?”

“...What is it?”

“Do you have business with the school?”

She turns back to me with movements much more natural than I’d imagined, then looks me straight in the eye. Her face is totally impassive. “I have no business with this facility,” she says.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I am looking at it.”

“.....”

Is she making fun of me? Or does she just not understand Japanese? I’d rather not test out my English conversation skills here.

Then, as if sensing my concern, she asks me a question. “Are you a student attending this school?”

“Yes, as you can see,” I say, looking down at my uniform.

It’s actually a different school’s uniform, but an outsider won’t be able to tell the difference. At this point, it’s clear she’s not a local. Is she a lost tourist separated from her parents? It’s possible, I think, given that the area is famous for holiday homes.

But the next thing she says blows that idea out of the water. “I was looking for you, but then I saw this facility called a school and came here.”

“You know who I am?”

“Your viewpoint is correct. I know who you are.”

I knew she had something to do with your people, Abaddon, I think, throwing the demon a critical glance.

“Oh, come on,” he complains, looking between the girl and me with a troubled expression. *“I’m telling you, she’s not one of us.”*

He’s visibly flustered, like he really *doesn’t* know anything. I don’t often see

him like this.

Personally, I think she's a demon like Abaddon. The problem is that there's no Disciple anywhere in sight. Could someone at my new school be her Disciple?

I need information, so I take the lead. "Why are you looking at the school?" I ask her.

"A certain human told me that a school may serve to soothe my loneliness."

"Your...loneliness?"

"Yes. My loneliness."

"....."

Is she just a weirdo, then?

She responds when I ask questions, but her responses are kind of off-kilter. There was a girl like this at my old school, too, in a different class. She had a very distinct personality, and even bullies avoided her.

"Are you here with your parents?"

"I have no family. And it is that very fact that eats away at my being."

"...Oh."

She keeps adding personal anecdotes into our casual back-and-forth. I get the feeling she's a bit sensitive about this particular topic; I'd better not get her started.

If she isn't an angel but a demon, or someone linked to demons or their Disciples, what's my best move? I should probably reveal my position and form an alliance with her. And yet I can't help hesitating.

As I try to puzzle out her identity from our conversation, the school bell rings, and students begin pouring from the building. With classes over, those not in a club are heading home. I spot some kids I know in the crowd. A few of the boys notice me and call out.

“Oh, hey, it’s Kurosu!”

“What happened to you during sixth period?”

“The teacher was really worried about you.”

“Hey, who said she vanished into thin air? She’s right here.”

“But how did you get outside?”

“Your uniform sleeve is soaked! Are you okay? You’re not cold, are you?”

“Wait, is that...blood on your uniform? Nah, can’t be, right?”

They all crowd around the two of us at the front gate and start talking enthusiastically about this and that.

Apparently, my sudden absence due to the isolated space caused something of a problem. I expected this, but if it keeps happening, it could very well affect my position at school.

I should probably talk to Futarishizuka about this as soon as I can.

“Is this girl your friend?”

“Wow, she’s really cute!”

“Where’s she from? Is she on vacation here?”

“Whoa. She’s, like, way cuter than most idols. That’s crazy.”

“And the way she stands is so elegant.”

“That dress looks so good on you!”

“Your hair is practically sparkling. How cool is that?!”

The boys’ attention shifts to include the weirdo standing next to me. While I get the feeling she might go off any second, she *is* very cute. As long as she keeps her mouth closed, I bet she’d be popular with the opposite sex. Actually, she’s cute enough that I think a lot of boys would hit on her even if she *is* a little strange on the inside.

The boys keep going, ignoring all the stares we’re getting from other students passing by.

“Hey, do you two want to come with us and hang out?”

“Oh, right. We still haven’t shown Kurosu around town!”

“Leave it to us locals—we’ll show you all the hole-in-the-wall spots. Your friend can come, too.”

“Yeah! Hopefully she can go back home with some good memories.”

“How long will you be in Karuizawa?”

As one might imagine from how they accosted us almost as soon as they saw us, these boys hold relatively conspicuous positions in class. Basically, they’re the bright, extroverted characters. They don’t look half bad, either—I could see someone calling a few of them pretty cute.

Most other girls in my class would probably be happy to go with them, though I think they’d be at a distinct disadvantage if their looks were compared to the weird girl’s.

Personally, I want to leave immediately. I still don’t know who this oddball is, and if she *is* linked to the death game somehow, I really don’t want to piss her off. Starting to get nervous, I check on her out of the corner of my eye, and—

“...My...my loneliness, it... My emotions, they...”

What is with her? I think. That’s a really weird expression. It looks like her cheeks are twitching. And what the heck is happening with her mouth?

“Ah, how...how wonderful!”

It looks like she’s desperately trying to hold in a smile and maintain her poker face, but it’s not completely working. Compared to how impassive she was the whole time she was talking to me, her current reaction seems all the more extreme.

Wait, I think. She can’t be drowning in ecstasy from having boys her age fawn over her, can she? With how pretty she is, she must have people complimenting her looks every day.

“Uh, Kurosu, is she okay?”

“Did we say something weird?”

“If we did, then we’re sorry.”

“Wait, does she even know Japanese?”

“Should we try English? Um... <H-hello?>”

“Man, that was the most monotone ‘hello’ I’ve ever heard.”

“Now I regret not listening in English class.”

Now the boys seem worried about her, too. One after another, they shower her with words of concern and apology.

For her part, the weirdo seems to be teetering on the edge, muttering over and over again about “her loneliness.” Maybe she’s more mentally unwell than I thought.

“They’re worried about you, you know,” I tell her.

“...They’re...worried about me. Ah, that must be something that soothes loneliness.”

“You’re acting weird. And talking weird. Are you all right?”

“I am fine. I am perfectly fine. So please, keep worrying about me.”

“.....”

Okay, now she’s acting really, really odd. I’m a little scared—it feels like she might suddenly attack me at any moment.

“Kurosui, your uniform is wet. You should go get changed.”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t want you catching a cold.”

“Your stuff is still in class, right? If you want, I can run over and get it for you.”

“Do you have gym clothes? If not, you can borrow mine.”

“Hey! That’s not fair! I was gonna offer.”

Abaddon, too, is watching the girl with a troubled expression. After seeing our exchange firsthand, he’s put a lid on his characteristic banter. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the demon this concerned.

The girl doesn’t seem able to see him, at least. He flies around her several

times and waves a hand in front of her face, but she doesn't react at all.

"They are worried about you as well," the girl says. "Do you feel the same sensation as me?"

"No, I'm not really feeling much..."

"Then humans are afforded this level of comfort from others on a daily basis?"

"I think it depends on the person."

"I see. I have been able to obtain a fascinating response."

Does she want the same kind of treatment from me?

The boys are looking at me questioningly. And here I was just about to settle into the perfect position at school. I really hope I don't get labeled a weirdo after all that effort.

Now that it's come to this, I decide to be direct. I whisper in her ear so the boys don't overhear. "Excuse me, but would you happen to be a demon?"

"From a human's point of view, I may appear to be a devil."

Am I supposed to take that as a yes? I can't tell. Even Abaddon is out of his element right now.

Either way, staying here will only draw attention. A change of location seems in order.

"I'm sorry, but would you mind coming with me?" I say.

"I wish to further soothe my loneliness here. I want others to worry about me even more."

"If you want boys to fawn over you, I can introduce you to as many as you want later."

"Really?"

The girl stares at me. Her face is blank, but her eyes seem, ever so slightly, to

sparkle. How starved for male attention *is* this girl? Her cheeks are still twitching, and she's still got that weird half smile on her lips. I look down slightly and see her arms moving around restlessly.

I can tell she can barely wait. "Really," I reply. "I think you could be very popular."

"In that case, I shall accept what you say."

She's pretending to be calm, but her breath is shrill and ragged.

Having secured her approval, I turn my attention to the boys. I'll need their help if I'm going to keep my promise to her. Now that I've got confirmation from the weirdo herself, whether she wallows in debauchery or gets labeled a loose woman is no concern of mine. Everyone has their own interests, after all.

"I'm sorry," I say, bowing politely to my classmates. "I have business with her, so please excuse me for today. I'd like to introduce her to you all, but another time, if you don't mind. Once I do, I'd appreciate it if you treated her well."

The boys surrounding us don't push back. They comment about how unfortunate it is, but they see us off without objection. I bow again, then grab the girl's arm and give it a light tug. She obediently follows me.

"I would like you to tell me our destination," she says.

"Somewhere we can sit down and talk."

I was hoping to go back to the classroom to get my things, but the teachers are sure to scold me if I bring an outsider into the school, especially after I already skipped sixth period. For now, I'll focus on dealing with this strange girl.

After turning away from the front gates, we leave the group of boys and the school behind.

I keep my distance from the other students by veering away from the main road and turning onto a side street. There, after making sure nobody else is around, I use the phone Futarishizuka gave me to request a pickup.

A few minutes later, we impose on the older gentleman and his boxy-looking car and head off down the street.



A short while after we decided to wait for my neighbor to get home, Ms. Futarishizuka received a phone call from the man responsible for ferrying the girl to and from school. She had contacted him earlier and instructed him to let us know when my neighbor would be returning. This call, then, was his notification that she was now back from school.

We then left Ms. Futarishizuka's villa and headed to Abaddon and my neighbor's mansion next door. It was significantly colder outside than in Tokyo. Too cold for my tastes, to be honest. Still, because I was so used to the sour city air, the fresh breeze was novel enough to make our short walk down the greenery-lined road a nice change of pace.

Our destination was a few minutes away on foot, and once we arrived, we approached the front door and pressed the doorbell. We could hear a pattering of footsteps from within. A moment later, the door opened, and a familiar face appeared.

"Sorry for making you wait," said my neighbor.

"It seems a tad careless to come out before checking the intercom," replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

"The driver already told me you'd be coming."

"A quick check wouldn't hurt, though."

Abaddon, floating in midair as usual, was bobbing up and down at my neighbor's side. I could see how seriously he took the death game from the way he was never apart from her, even inside the house.

"Please come in."

My neighbor quickly took two pairs of slippers off the rack against the wall and set them out for us. After thanking her for her hospitality, we moved inside. The scent of wood had wafted out from within the moment she opened the door, but as we passed through the threshold, it grew even thicker in the air, wrapping us up like a blanket. It was like walking into a temple.

Just then, another person appeared farther down the hallway.

“What is wrong, Kurosu?” she said, walking toward us from the living room. “Why have you suddenly left me?”

There was no way I’d ever forget those striking features. The newcomer had gorgeous silver hair and red eyes—and even the clothes she wore were the same. It had to be her: the girl we’d met on the spaceship after our alien abduction. Her long-winded self-introduction was still clear in my memory.

“Wh-what is she doing here?!” demanded Ms. Futarishizuka as I groaned.

Our attention was pulled away from my neighbor and became fixed on the girl who had just appeared. Both Ms. Futarishizuka and I immediately braced ourselves. It was a good thing we’d sent Miss Hoshizaki home, or she’d have gotten involved, too. I could imagine her whipping out her gun and boldly pointing it at the alien without a second’s pause.

“You two were part of the group I sampled yesterday as part of my investigation into humanity,” she said, looking at us. Her voice was monotone—in stark contrast to our current states of mind.

That mechanical way of speaking—there was no mistaking it. This was definitely the girl we’d encountered on the UFO.

“Kurosu, I would like you to describe your relationship to these humans.”

“Um, mister, I just met her a few minutes ago,” said my neighbor, growing flustered at our suddenly tense demeanors.

She’d brilliantly avoided the girl’s question, and I saw Abaddon nodding to himself in approval next to her.

It certainly didn’t seem like she was lying. And anyway, I’d known my neighbor for several years. If she’d ever been abducted by a UFO or anything like that, I was pretty sure I’d have noticed a change. For that reason, all I had were questions—what had brought them together?

“Then why did you bring this threat into your house?” demanded Ms. Futarishizuka.

“She’s a threat?”

“Well, yes! A menace, even. Why would you bring her home with you?”

“Abaddon says she’s not a demon, but I wanted to be certain, so I brought her with me.”

“My senses are telling me she is one hundred percent not a demon.”

“Ahhh, the world is getting too complicated for me!” cried Ms. Futarishizuka. “Recently it feels like my heart’s always pounding.”

Evidently, my neighbor had mistaken the visitor from outer space as a participant in the death game. Had she just happened to be present during a fight? Or had she done something crazy and my neighbor had witnessed it? I couldn’t be sure of the details, but considering the alien’s otherworldly words and actions, I could understand my neighbor’s confusion.

“Kurosu, I would like you to describe your relationship to these humans,” the girl said, repeating her question

I couldn’t sense any emotion from her face, as usual. She was playing it cool. After almost dying at her hands, the flatness in her voice felt terribly oppressive. I feared a laser beam might come shooting from the sky at any moment.

“These people are important to me,” my neighbor said. “I strictly forbid any violence toward them.”

“Understood,” replied the alien. “I shall act in accordance with your words.”

“Huh?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “What’s this about? How did you manage to tame this menace?”

“I wasn’t trying to tame her,” my neighbor explained. “But we’re successfully communicating, I think.”

However the two of them had wound up together, I couldn’t imagine it was a coincidence. But no matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn’t think of a single thing that might link them. I even considered that the angel–demon proxy war might be taking place on an interplanetary scale, but in that case, Abaddon’s reaction wouldn’t make sense.

So I decided to simply ask the alien directly. “Can you tell us what brought you to this area?”

“Following my own emotions, I was investigating your dwelling as my next target.”

Her answer was immediate. And a few dangerous-sounding words were in the mix. I recalled the photograph of the crater we’d seen at the bureau that day—and how whatever caused it had wiped a whole town off the map. I couldn’t think of anyone else who could possibly be responsible.

My coworker seemed to think the same thing and quickly asked a follow-up question. “Then were you the one who blew away that town around noon today?”

“Futarishizuka, your thinking is correct.”

“Ah, I see...”

Ms. Futarishizuka had been struck dumb. I couldn’t think of anything good to say, either. Apparently, the alien was targeting our home. But why, exactly?

The answer came a moment later. “You all made me very lonely. I cannot afford to leave such beings unchecked.”

“Are you saying that the conversation we had with you on the spaceship rubbed you the wrong way?” I asked.

“If I take your words metaphorically, what you suggest is not impossible.”

“That wasn’t much of a metaphor,” murmured Ms. Futarishizuka.

I could understand where she was coming from. Even we felt like we’d wronged her somehow. But had she really needed to act on it so immediately?

“I hesitate to ask this,” I continued, “but do you have a similar reason for blowing up that town earlier?”

“Sasaki, your viewpoint is correct. The samples I collected from that area greatly stimulated my emotions, then amplified my loneliness. Had I left them unchecked, it might have put unnecessary pressure on the ship’s processing resources, so I

removed them first.”

“To translate,” I said, “they made you so mad you could barely sleep?”

“If I were to use a roundabout expression, it is possible I could express my sentiments in that way.”

“It seems pretty literal in your case,” murmured Ms. Futarishizuka.

Apparently, we’d stepped on the tiger’s tail. What terrified me was that if we hadn’t run into each other like this, we could have been killed without even realizing it. I wasn’t sure what would rouse her ire—I felt tense, like I was squaring off with a wild animal.

“Then in the process of searching for us, you encountered this girl here?”

“Sasaki, your thinking is correct.” She nodded, then continued smoothly. “After expelling all of you into space, I traced those who returned to Earth safely. However, during that time, I suddenly lost all trace of your group. To rectify this, I entered the data banks of the organization I assume to be your place of employment and collected your information. I discovered that one of you has already experienced your dwelling exploding.”

She’d probably lost track of us when Peeps used his teleportation magic. Then, while trying to find us again, she’d hacked into the bureau’s database and fished around for clues.

“I judged it impossible to fulfill my objective. I needed further information. From that data bank, I learned of a person who appeared to be connected to one of my targets. Her information stated that she attended an educational institution.”

I’d guessed as much, but it seemed the bureau had gathered intel on my neighbor, too. They’d probably set up hidden cameras or something, though I hadn’t expected them to have already discovered her new school.

“During that process, I recalled information that I received from humanity yesterday regarding how to soothe my loneliness.”

“You mean the whole spiel our other companion gave you about transferring into a school?”

“Futarishizuka, your thinking is correct.”

I remembered this, too—Miss Hoshizaki suggesting that if the alien girl came to school as a transfer student, plenty of other students would want to be friends with her. To us, it had seemed like meaningless banter.

She, however, seemed to have taken it pretty seriously.

“When I went to the location, I encountered a human with a link to my target—Kurosu.”

With her hyper-advanced technology, far beyond what we had on Earth, it would be no problem for her to use wireless LAN waves leaking from buildings to infiltrate a company’s network. I bet even our most advanced encryption methods looked like plain text to her. In fact, there was a very high chance she was monitoring the radio waves from my phone at this very moment.

“So to sum up,” I said, “you wanted to find a way to attack our dwelling?”

“The information I collected states that humanity soothes its loneliness by spending time at home with family. As you can see, I am currently burdened with loneliness. I infer that you are all leading fulfilling lives, and my core module cannot help but cry out.”

“You act so cool on the outside,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but underneath it all, you’re quite spiteful, aren’t you?”

“Your remark further amplifies my loneliness.”

“Hey, that was a joke. A lie, understand? I believe what you are describing is just how emotions work.”

Her demeanor was level and dispassionate, but the things she said sounded more like a child throwing a temper tantrum. The gap between what she said and did, between her outside appearance and the truth of what she felt inside,

concerned me. I felt a chill crawl up my spine as I thought of what could have led her to wipe an entire town off the map. *Was this really all because of her new, unfamiliar feelings?*

Suddenly curious, I decided to go ahead and ask. “Forgive my rudeness, but how many times have you come down to Earth since you developed emotions?”

“My terminals have been operational on the surface for the entire extent of my mission. However, this is the first time I have sent my point of contact here.”

According to the explanation she’d given us on the UFO, her “point of contact” was the android currently standing in front of us. By “terminals,” she probably meant the craft that had sucked us and our swan boat up from the lake in Nagano. She’d told us her point of contact was mainly used for communicating with humanity. I assumed the terminals were for transportation and the movement of resources.

“I’m really getting a sense of how dangerous these so-called emotions of yours are.”

“What do you mean, Futarishizuka?”

“You wouldn’t understand even if I told you. You’ll have to learn it on your own, the hard way.”

“Sasaki, I request an explanation in your words regarding the meaning of Futarishizuka’s statement.”

“I believe she’s saying that, rather than the information you gather, it’s the environment and process by which you gain it, the act of communication itself and those engaging in it that are truly valuable. We humans, at least, perceive information and experiences separately.”

“This vessel’s configurational information is in a place where you humans will never reach it.”

“I believe she still isn’t sure,” I said. “Or she would have affirmed it.”

“Ohhh?” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “Well, you two certainly seem to be on the same page. How nice for you.”

My colleague was as impressive as ever, bantering in every direction no matter the situation. My neighbor and Abaddon, meanwhile, were keeping their mouths shut as they watched our exchange.

“You’re loaded with computers light-years ahead of our silly brains,” Ms. Futarishizuka continued. “I’m sure you’ll understand in no time at all. So until you do, I would appreciate you showing Earth some lenience.”

“.....”

Sensing the girl’s momentum begin to wane, Ms. Futarishizuka quickly let her true feelings be known. Given that our homes and the people around us were in the crosshairs, I was prepared to pray and plead with the alien—she was far more of a threat than the magical girl from Japan going around hunting psychics.

Eventually, the alien collected herself and spoke again. “Sasaki, Futarishizuka. My records show that you had one other companion.”

Nervous about the sudden change of topic, I answered, “If you mean Miss Hoshizaki, then she is currently acting separately from us.”

“Thinking back,” she said, “she was the one who explained the wonder of school to me.”

Her attention had now left us and jumped to something else entirely. *Thinking back? You just talked to her last night.*

“It is thanks to her that I was able to gain an opportunity to soothe my loneliness. I believe she gave me the clue I needed to process this new function that resists my control. That is very pleasing, indeed.”

“Good to hear,” said Ms. Futarishizuka at the alien’s unexpectedly friendly words. Unfortunately, the person we were talking about wasn’t here right now.

“That is why I am exceedingly grateful to her,” the alien went on. “Should she

wish it, I may accept your proposition. Kurosu has also promised to assist me in soothing my loneliness.”

“Did you now, dear?”

“I didn’t promise anything that spectacular....,” said my neighbor.

“I have a feeling you’ve just landed a very big role,” Abaddon told her.

Apparently, the alien girl’s meeting with my neighbor had brought about a change in her. Just what had she experienced at Miss Kurosu’s school? She hadn’t actually transferred in like Miss Hoshizaki had suggested, had she? I hoped she hadn’t caused the school any trouble.

“That’s excellent,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but what brought all this about?”

“Should I continue on this path and wipe out humanity, my loneliness will never heal. This bug called emotion will never be fixed. In addition, humanity may be wiped out at my leisure. My focus, then, should be on how to make use of it.”

“That’s very honest of you.”

“Lies are inefficient. Mechanical life-forms do not lie like humans do.”

I was really curious about what a society without lies would be like. What was it like where she’d come from—where, according to her, emotions had been deemed a significant risk and strictly outlawed? My imagination filled with thoughts of what lay beyond the frontiers of space.

“Having accepted Hoshizaki’s viewpoint, I have discovered that communication with humanity offers a great number of possibilities. And with so many of you here, perhaps one exists who can ease my loneliness and erase this new function from me.”

“In that case, perhaps we can help,” offered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Request denied. You two are not trustworthy.”

“Ouch. That’s quite harsh of you.”

“However, I have determined that Hoshizaki’s statements are worth listening to.”

I was beyond thankful that Earth’s last day had been postponed, even temporarily. *Thank you so much, Miss Hoshizaki.* In a way, her love for her sister had just saved the world.

“Then it looks like we’ll have to work on proving ourselves for the time being,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“It certainly does,” I agreed.

And so the two of us with impure hearts decided to stay quiet and well-behaved.

Now that the alien girl had revealed the circumstances leading up to our reunion, my neighbor—seeing an opening in the conversation—looked over at me nervously. “Can I ask something, too, mister?”

“What is it?”

“Who exactly is this girl anyway?”

“Right, right! I’ve been wondering this whole time,” chimed in Abaddon.

“This girl is... Well...,” I stammered.

“To state my name in accordance with the rules of your language, I am Independent Multipurpose Early-Model Frontier Sector-Pioneering Long-Range Space Cruiser Type Three-Seven-Six-Nine. However, this point of contact possesses a unique manufacturing name.”

“Long story short,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “she’s the alien everyone’s talking about.”

“Wha...?”

When she heard this belated introduction, my neighbor's jaw dropped.



After confirming that the UFO was no longer a threat, we all left the entryway of my neighbor's house and moved back outside. We headed to the villa's large yard and stood in a rough circle, looking at one another.

Type Twelve had told us she wanted to thank Miss Hoshizaki and get more advice from her, if she could. She was one greedy mechanical life-form, that was for sure. We didn't want to refuse her, so we decided to give it a shot. Maintaining a good relationship between the two of them would be crucial if the planet was to survive. Still, it would probably take some time to get back to Tokyo from Karuizawa.

The alien girl then proposed that we use one of her spacecraft to make the journey. Supposedly, it would come if she called for it.

"Is it like the one that scooped us off the lake last night?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"No. That one's role is to link other terminals and resources. Another form of transportation exists."

"Oh-ho? In that case, I accept your hospitality."

Ms. Futarishizuka's eyes were sparkling. She seemed incredibly curious about this unknown vehicle.

"If you have any idea where Hoshizaki is currently located," said the alien, "please tell me her coordinates."

"Didn't you say before that you've been tracing us this whole time?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I also explained that I had lost track of your biological readings."

"Ah yes. Can't keep up with the Java sparrow's smoke and mirrors, eh?"

“What do you mean, ‘Java sparrow’s smoke and mirrors’?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just talking to myself.”

Peeps had sent us from our Tokyo hotel to Karuizawa using his teleportation magic. I suspected that was how we had eluded Type Twelve’s tracking. After that, her attention had shifted to the bureau’s data, which she had used to get close to my neighbor, ultimately leading her back to the two of us.

As she and Ms. Futarishizuka spoke, I took out my private phone and brought up a map. I knew where Miss Hoshizaki lived, since I’d gone to visit her before to study English. I zoomed in on it and dropped a pin on her address. I figured it wasn’t necessary to determine her exact present location.

I held the screen out to the alien. “I believe she’s at home at the moment, so please take us here, if you could.”

“Location received,” she said after a quick glance. It had taken her less than a second, making it clear once again that she was a mechanical life-form with powers of perception far beyond our own. In terms of artificial intelligence, she was way past anything humanity could touch—we were still struggling with our own bodies.

As I was thinking all this and feeling very impressed, I noticed something moving right next to us. Naturally, everyone’s eyes shifted toward it.

What is that? I wondered. It was like a big hole had been cut out of space and was floating right in the middle of my neighbor’s well-maintained yard. It seemed to form an open door into an interior area.

I recognized the space inside it. It was similar to the waiting area and competition space we’d been brought to after our abduction the day before. I could see a metallic floor, ceiling, and walls, with the occasional strand of light traveling this way and that.

“What is this? What is *this*?!”

Ms. Futarishizuka was *extremely* excited. She gleefully ran over and peered through the doorway.

The rest of us followed her. I reached my hand just to the side of the gap

hovering in midair and felt something cool and hard against my palm. I couldn't see it, but there could be no doubt something was there.

"It is hidden from human eyes," said the alien. "If such a precaution is unnecessary, I shall disable it."

"No, please keep it hidden," I said.

I didn't know what...whatever it was...looked like, but we didn't want any neighbors seeing it. Come to think of it, the craft that took us from the lake was hidden just like this.

"I'd like to see the whole thing, though," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Can we take a raincheck on that?"

"If you would like to confirm the frame's appearance, I can give you that data. More importantly, let us board with haste."

Sped along by Type Twelve, we all stepped into the strange vehicle. My neighbor and Abaddon came with us, too.

Once inside, we found ourselves in a room measuring about fifteen square meters with no noticeable features. There weren't even any windows or buttons, much less chairs or tables. As I had come to expect, it felt more like a "space" than a room.

It was my neighbor's first time boarding a UFO, however, and naturally, she had questions. "Will this really be okay? Are you sure this thing is a vehicle?"

"Not being able to see outside certainly makes me uneasy."

"In that case, I shall display external imagery here," said Type Twelve as a picture appeared over one of the room's walls.

It was a midair display, like the one we'd seen in the competition room back when she'd abducted us. This time, it was larger, covering up the entire wall. I felt like I was in a small movie theater. *No seats to watch from, though.*

The display showed the mansion's yard. The huge panorama made it look like the outside terrain was right there in front of us.

A moment later, the entrance closed up, and the craft ascended into the air.

“This is incredible. It’s bigger than the TVs in the mansion.”

“Are we really moving?” my neighbor wondered aloud. “I don’t feel any shaking.”

“Internal inertia is being perfectly controlled. The level is currently set to zero, but it is also possible to enable the full effects. If necessary, I will change the setting, but I believe it will cause you all great distress.”

“Definitely do not do that,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

The craft climbed into the sky at an incredible speed. On the display in front of us, the ground grew distant in no time at all—in just a few seconds, the cars on the road were no bigger than grains of rice. Our altitude continued to increase until eventually we were so high up we could see clouds below us.

If the ship hadn’t canceled out the inertia, we’d all be unconscious by now, squished against the floor.

The next thing I knew, we were moving horizontally. We had probably started heading toward Tokyo. If we’d been in a passenger plane, we’d be facing the endless noise of jet engines, but the space we now stood in was quiet. As my neighbor had implied earlier, it made it hard to believe we were actually flying.

All of us passengers simply stared in admiration at the display. But we only had a short time to be astonished at this super technology from beyond the solar system.

In mere minutes, Type Twelve said, “We have arrived above our destination. Descending now.”

“Huh?” I said in spite of myself. “We’re there already?”

I could see the Tokyo Bay and the Boso Peninsula in front of me. It seemed we were indeed in the capital, but I still felt shocked hearing the alien say it. Because of our elevation, it was hard to tell how far we’d traveled.

“This thing’s even speedier than a jet fighter, eh?” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“And I’m not feeling any weightlessness as we descend,” I added.

In a reversal of our take-off, our craft swiftly decreased in altitude. The clouds moved from below to above as we headed straight toward an area with a lot of houses and other buildings.

By the time the image on the display stopped moving, familiar scenery greeted us. Not too far away, facing the road, I could see the condominiums where Miss Hoshizaki lived. It looked like the alien had put us down exactly where I’d dropped the pin on the map.

A moment later, the same entrance hole we’d used to board reappeared—and in the same place.

“We have arrived,” said Type Twelve. “I request that you guide me to Hoshizaki now.”

“Yes, understood,” I said. Urged along by Type Twelve, we all exited together.

But no sooner had we done so than we all realized something.

“Wait, did you just land that thing in the middle of the road?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“There are cars coming this way,” I said. “Are you sure this is all right?”

“Oh!”

Our concerns turned into reality in a matter of seconds. Just as Abaddon said “Oh!” a car traveling along the road crashed into the ship. There was a loud bang, and it came to an abrupt stop. The entire front was dented from colliding with the invisible object, and we could see the airbags deploy through the car’s front windshield. This came as no surprise, since Type Twelve’s craft was taking up the entirety of the small road.

“The ship is protected,” explained Type Twelve. “There has been zero damage. A collision of this magnitude is within the expected range.”

“I’m more concerned about the car that crashed into it,” I told her.

“Well, no use crying over spilled milk,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

This must have been a disaster for whoever was in the crashed car. The road

was so small it didn't even have a dividing line, though, so thankfully the driver hadn't been going very fast in the first place. Through the windshield, I could see the occupant start to move on their own. I doubted they were very badly injured.

"The accident was unavoidable. Let's just leave it at that and get going!" declared Ms. Futarishizuka, walking away as if to flee the scene.

I felt bad, but I followed her anyway. I was very worried about the effect this was going to have on my young neighbor's ethical development.

I saved the crashed car's license plate number in my phone. I'd contact the bureau later and have them deal with it. If the driver had a dashcam and had recorded the whole thing, we'd be in trouble—and I could see something resembling one near the driver's seat.

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Can you erase recordings of what just happened on nearby surveillance cameras?" she asked Type Twelve.

"I believe that problem is yours," the alien replied. "I am uninvolved."

"If you leave things as they are," argued Ms. Futarishizuka, "it will cause problems for Hoshizaki, too. Being selfish is no way to thank her—in fact, it's just the opposite."

"Futarishizuka, your viewpoint is correct. I will erase the recordings immediately."

"Excuse me," I said, butting in, "but for the same reason, could you also send your ship back into the air while keeping it invisible?"

"Sasaki, your viewpoint is correct. I will send it back up immediately."

Bringing up Miss Hoshizaki was a pretty easy way to get her approval, it seemed. Her responses were monotone, but she was probably frightened on the inside. It was obvious how much her emotions were pulling her around.

A short walk brought us straight our destination—Hoshizaki's condominium. I

punched the familiar room number into the auto-lock CALL button out front, then waited a few moments. Soon there was a response from across the intercom. The voice we heard, however, was not Miss Hoshizaki's, but her sister's.

"...Oh," she said. "You're the coworkers who came here a few days ago, right?"

"Apologies for the sudden visit," I replied. "Could we talk to your sister?"

"She's out shopping right now."

"Do you have an estimate as to when she'll return?"

"Probably soon. You can wait up here," she suggested as the entrance door opened automatically.

Last time, I'd been pretty hesitant to go in, but the people behind me being who they were, I decided to simply agree and intrude. Even Type Twelve would never harm a member of Miss Hoshizaki's family.

We all climbed into the elevator and headed up to the sixth floor, where Miss Hoshizaki lived with her sister. When we pressed the bell at the front door, it immediately opened, and the younger sister appeared.

When she saw us, she looked at me meekly. "...Mr. Sasaki, you're not actually a dangerous person or anything, right?"

"Why would you think that?" I asked.

"If you're not a weirdo," she said, "then why are you always hanging around children?"

"....."

I turned back to look at the others with me.

My neighbor, Abaddon, Ms. Futarishizuka, and Type Twelve. Now that she mentioned it, they *did* all look like they were in their early teens. And Abaddon was invisible, too, so the only ones she could see were girls.

In reality, three of the four were far older than me, and two of them weren't even human. The younger sister had no way of knowing any of that, though.

From an outsider's perspective, I was nothing more than a suspicious middle-aged man who had brought several children along with him.

In the otherworld, between Count Müller, Mr. Marc, and Mr. French, I never wanted for age-appropriate companions. Thinking about that made me start to feel lonely. I wished that at least Ms. Futarishizuka had grown up to look like she was around my age.

"You're not...panicking right now, are you, Mr. Sasaki?" the younger sister asked.

"No, no. Not at all."

That was a lie. I was *definitely* panicking. Starting with Peeps, I'd been meeting one person after another whose inside and outside didn't match up at all. My sense for such things had begun to go all out of whack. That said, it wasn't that I had stopped being able to see children as children, but that I now felt the need to scrape and bow to *anyone* I met, regardless of their appearance.

"I don't wish to impose," I told the sister. "We can wait outside for now."

"Someone might call the police," she replied. "Just come in."

"...Thank you."

"I can't let one of my sister's coworkers become a criminal."

Though reluctant, she invited us inside.

Yeah, I could see someone calling the cops, I thought. I couldn't think of a good defense if anyone ever questioned me about my job. Even the police book in my pocket might only go so far. People would think it was a fake. In the end, it would cause trouble for my boss, and I'd wind up owing him one out of carelessness.

So instead, I accepted her hospitality and went into the living room. She led us to a sofa, where we took our seats. On the three-person sofa sat Ms. Futarishizuka, Type Twelve, and my neighbor. The little sister sat on a stool next to that. I was a short distance away, borrowing a dining room chair. *I feel small,* I thought.

“Is your sister shopping for tonight’s dinner, perchance?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“No, I’m in charge of meal prep. That includes buying things.”

At that point, Ms. Futarishizuka took the lead. I decided to just sit back and listen. My neighbor and Abaddon were quiet as well, since they’d never met the girl before. The same went for Type Twelve.

“As soon as she got back, she said she was going shopping for stuff like toilet paper and emergency food and water,” the sister explained. “When she left, she looked a little scared. She never used to worry about stuff like that.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Do any of you know why?”

“Hmm. Well, we might, but then again, we might not...”

I got the feeling that after witnessing what amounted to an alien invasion, Miss Hoshizaki’s mental state had gone into “protect my family” mode. She’d never dream the root of all evil was right here in her condo, paying a visit. To be honest, even I wanted to start stockpiling necessities.

We chatted with Miss Hoshizaki’s sister for a little while, but no matter how long we waited, she didn’t return. After about thirty minutes, Ms. Futarishizuka looked over at me. “Well, this is rather odd. Should we try to get in touch?”

“You’re right,” I said.

I promptly called her bureau phone. But all I got in response was an automatic voice telling me the number I had dialed was either out of service or powered off. Miss Hoshizaki was a workaholic. She would have picked up any call to her work phone, even one that came out of the blue. This wasn’t like her.

“Apparently she either doesn’t have reception or her phone is off.”

“Do you think her battery ran out?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

I tried using the bureau’s service to get her phone’s location data, but that, too, claimed her position was unknown. I received a response stating that her token had been lost. If her location data was unavailable, then it was very possible her battery had run out.

After hearing our conversation, Type Twelve said in a critical tone, “Have you all lied to me?”

“Not at all,” I said. “Miss Hoshizaki is simply out at the moment, and we can’t get in touch with her.”

I didn’t want to give an explanation that would fan the flames of Type Twelve’s familial anxiety. But if I wasn’t careful, she was liable to resume her UFO-borne assault on Earth, so I decided to be as up front and straightforward as possible.

The sister’s expression as she stared at us grew increasingly severe.

Then, as if fed up with her useless guides, Type Twelve said, “In that case, I will use my terminals to conduct a search.”

In this case, I suspected “terminals” referred to the craft that had brought us here, along with some reinforcements. She must have been sending instructions to them remotely, like when she’d summoned one to my neighbor’s yard. I figured she also planned to illegally view the neighborhood’s information network in the same way she had hacked into the bureau’s database.

Everyone’s attention turned to her. She closed her mouth, faced directly forward, then froze. With her spine perfectly straight, she stayed absolutely still—so still I started to worry she was broken.

After a few minutes, she finally turned back to us. “I have discovered traces of Hoshizaki very close to this structure.”

“Traces?” repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. “What do you mean by that?”

“I shall display the event in question.”

As if in response to Type Twelve’s words, a display appeared in the air in front of the sofa. It was of the same type as the one that had allowed us to see outside the ship on our way here. This one was smaller, though—about the size of a normal living room TV.

“What’s that?” exclaimed the sister upon seeing Type Twelve’s super technology. “It looks like a TV floating in midair!”

Similar items existed, sure, but without any equipment nearby? It must have seemed like magic. How was I supposed to explain it?

“This is a recording captured by a camera positioned close to this building.”

“W-wait, then is...?” the sister stammered. “So if this is showing her, then...”

In front of her frightened sister, Miss Hoshizaki appeared on the display in her suit. She was walking down the road with large plastic bags in both hands. She seemed to have bought quite a lot, and both bags were fit to burst. I could see some toilet paper wrapping peeking out, just like her sister had said.

She was in a small alley between two buildings. Nobody else was visible nearby. The camera was focused on the back door of one of the buildings, and Miss Hoshizaki could be seen walking along at the corner of the screen.

As soon as the video started, a van drove past her from behind. It then parked a few meters ahead. The back doors flew open, and several people got out, their heads hidden by full-face helmets. One of them appeared to be holding a gun—and they had it aimed right at Miss Hoshizaki.

“It’s a taser,” explained Ms. Futarishizuka. Tasers worked by shooting a wire at someone, then running an electric current through it to shock them.

Miss Hoshizaki immediately dropped her things and reached for her inside pocket, probably to take out her own gun. Unfortunately, it seemed the taser had struck her before she could. While I couldn’t make out the shot itself, she began to convulse and twitch. Then, unable to get her gun out, she fell flat onto the road.

The men moved quickly, transporting her into the car in the blink of an eye, before driving away as though nothing had happened.

“Well, it would seem our beloved senior colleague has been abducted,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

Evidently, a very *terrestrial* abduction had just been carried out right under our noses.

<Free-for-All>

After we witnessed the scene of Miss Hoshizaki's kidnapping, the living room erupted into chaos. Her little sister had it the worst—she was flipping out.

"You owe me an explanation, Mr. Sasaki!" she shouted, rising from her stool and glaring at me.

Type Twelve's midair display had disappeared once the culprits' vehicle left the frame. In its place, an argument broke out over our kidnapped coworker's safety.

"Is this some kind of prank?" the sister continued. "Are you trying to get back at me for last time?! That's fine, if so. Just let me see her right now! That video, that thing floating in the air—that was all your doing, wasn't it?!"

"Please calm down," I said gently. "Unfortunately, that video was real."

"How could it be?! This! You people! All of it is really, really fishy!"

The sister appeared to doubt both the midair display and the reality it had shown us. Or maybe she simply didn't want to believe that her elder sister had been abducted. Given how close they were, I could understand her reaction.

Seeing her desperation, Type Twelve said, "I envy Hoshizaki."

"Wha—? Why would you say that?!" demanded the sister.

"I envy the worry her family member has just shown for her—and the true love, beyond doubt, that she enjoys. You treasure Hoshizaki. If she has built a family like this with you, then I am certain she is able to ease her loneliness every single day. I yearn for such an environment."

"You... What, are you making fun of her now?!"

“Not at all. I simply output my unaffected viewpoint.”

“You’re weird! How can you go on about stuff like that right now?!”

There was pure murder in the sister’s eyes as she watched Type Twelve. I recalled the time she told me she’d kill a man for her elder sister. Watching her rage like this, I realized she hadn’t been bluffing. I could see a lot of Miss Hoshizaki in that sharp gaze she had fixed on us.

Meanwhile, Type Twelve, as always, just kept moving to the beat of her own drum.

“Hoshizaki’s safety is of utmost importance to me, as well. I will conduct a search immediately.”

“No! No, we have to...we have to call the police!” cried the sister, pulling out her phone.

If I could, I wanted to prevent her from making that call. It would only complicate the situation. I unconsciously glanced at Ms. Futarishizuka, wondering if she could temporarily knock the girl out with her energy drain ability. With any luck, when she woke up, it would be like nothing had happened. I didn’t think Miss Hoshizaki would be happy if she found out, but I really didn’t want anyone calling the police right now.

“Fine, fine,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, catching on to her useless coworker’s intentions. The sister was looking down at her phone, her hands busy fiddling with the display as she tried to make the call. Coming up behind her, Ms. Futarishizuka reached out for her neck. As soon as her fingertips brushed the girl’s skin, her legs buckled, and she fell to the floor.

Ms. Futarishizuka just barely caught her in time, then turned back to me. “Personally, I’d like to rescue her sister before she wakes up, wouldn’t you?”

“I would, indeed.”

The sister showed no reaction to our conversation. She was out like a light.

“But who did it?” the girl in the kimono mused. “I can think of far too many who would.”

“Maybe the Kraken incident is to blame?” I suggested.

“That little swim we took in space yesterday wasn’t much better.”

“A swim in space?” repeated Abaddon. *“Seems your travels have been taking you pretty far afield.”*

“Abaddon, please don’t make his job harder,” my neighbor chided.

“It’s okay. We’re not doing anything at the moment,” I replied. “Feel free to chat.”

“I just thought of something,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “What if angels and demons exist on other planets, too? Though, from your names, it seems you’re definitely a product of Earth. And your view of the world seems to necessitate the existence of humanity...”

“Oh, who knows?” replied Abaddon.

I’d been curious about that, too. My attention shifted to him, but he casually deflected the question. He seemed unwilling to answer honestly. And because of how much Ms. Futarishizuka valued her relationship with him and my neighbor, she didn’t press the issue.

Instead, she turned to Type Twelve. “So what kind of search can you do?”

Like before, the alien was impassively standing in the middle of the living room. It looked like she was just spacing out, gazing at nothing. But if her previous remark was to be believed, she was internally doing some kind of super science to try to find Miss Hoshizaki.

“Searching nearby feeds for moving bodies. Three thousand fifty-two moving bodies of similar design identified within a five-kilometer radius. Once I have sorted each individual by their chance of involvement, I will use terminals to gain confirmation.”

“I didn’t see any identifiers in the video,” observed Ms. Futarishizuka. “No license plate. Nothing.”

“How will you verify it’s them?” I asked.

“I will approach and confirm optically.”

In other words, she'll check with her own eyes? I wondered. I assumed she would dispatch a terminal to the target, then have it peek in through the vehicle's windows. If the vehicle had been a little more unusual, we might have been able to find it relatively quickly—but it was a business van, and there were tens of thousands of those all over the city.

“How many usable terminals do you have?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Only a few. I withdrew most of them in preparation for global annihilation.”

“Gee, guess it'll take a while, then...”

“I am using one to check camera feeds installed in the neighborhood. By referencing this data, we can sort potential targets by probability, thereby increasing search efficiency.”

“But if they switch to another vehicle somewhere the cameras can't see, won't you get stuck?”

“...I cannot deny that possibility.”

Judging by the time stamp on the surveillance video, it had been a while since Miss Hoshizaki's kidnapping. It was possible the culprits had transferred vehicles already. They might have even switched to public transportation.

Thinking along those lines, I was hesitant to leave the search entirely up to Type Twelve. “Ms. Futarishizuka, I think we should ask the bureau for help.”

“I suppose in the end,” she said, “cases like these call for the strongest of all solutions: regular checkpoints.”

She was right. If the police in each region mobilized their officers to set up checkpoints on all the main roads, it was highly likely they'd be able to find our coworker. They could do the same with air routes and sea routes, too. And the advantage of using the bureau was that we could chalk it all up to terrorists or what have you.

“Are you certain?” I asked.

“Well, sure. Why not?”

With her approval, I took my phone out of my inside pocket, selected my boss’s name from the contacts list, and pressed the CALL button. A few rings later, I got through to him.

“This is Akutsu. Should I assume this number is Sasaki?”

“Yes, sir. We have an urgent situation. Do you have a moment?”

“You don’t often sound so rushed. Is there a problem?”

“Miss Hoshizaki has been kidnapped. We have no information on the culprits.”

“Oh, that is bad. Where did it happen?”

“Close to her home. We used surveillance camera records to confirm that she was tased and put into a car. I’ll send you the video once I hang up.”

“All right. I’ll prepare a search at once.”

“Thank you, sir.”

After a very brief conversation, I lowered the phone from my ear and pushed the END CALL button. The screen showed the notification of the call ending, along with how many free calling hours I had left this month. As I looked at it, I suddenly thought of something. I’d just promised him the video feed from the camera. How was I going to get that?

“Excuse me,” I said to Type Twelve. “There’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“What?”

“Could I have the video data from earlier?”

I had to try. If I could get it in a form that could be displayed on a TV or computer, that would be great. Type Twelve wouldn’t suddenly grow an output port somewhere on her body, would she? I didn’t want to take a recording of the midair display itself if I could help it, since I wanted to keep our cooperation with Type Twelve a secret from the bureau for as long as possible.

“Would it be to Hoshizaki’s benefit?” she asked.

“It would.”

“Then yes.”

“Thank you. But I’m not sure how I would access said data...”

“I will infiltrate this home’s network and secure free space on that device.”

I followed her gaze to the television sitting in the living room. Did she mean she’d worm into their home network through their wireless LAN setup and copy the video to the external storage used to record shows? That was the same method she’d used when fishing around for our personal information in the bureau’s database.

Internet-connected local area network waves were pretty much all over the place in modern times. I supposed that meant every single device with an internet connection was essentially at her beck and call.

Ms. Futarishizuka quickly picked up the remote control. She turned on the TV, then started messing around pressing buttons on the menu screen. And there it was, just as Type Twelve had said—a notification that part of the recording storage data had been accessed.

We waited for ten or twenty seconds. Then another video file appeared. Ms. Futarishizuka pressed play on it, and the surveillance footage from earlier began to play on the TV.

I guess with all the tech she’s got, it’s a piece of cake to imitate the protocols we use here on Earth. Once I recorded the video on my phone, we’d have to erase it before the home’s owner or her little sister saw it.

“I’m going to send this to the boss,” I said.

“I can see problems arising if he starts fishing around for the source,” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked.

“Well, we can’t do much about that right now.”

I wanted to keep our interactions with Type Twelve from the section chief if I

could. Ms. Futarishizuka and I both hoped to send her back to her home planet in secret before humanity realized what was going on. Nothing good would come out of her sticking around here, after all.

If our involvement with her was exposed, then given our positions as members of the bureau, I could easily imagine all kinds of requests coming in to us from other organizations and the like. I doubted even Mr. Akutsu would be able to repel them.

But for now, our top priority was saving Miss Hoshizaki's life, so I turned to the TV and readied my phone.

Then Type Twelve asked, "What is your plan, Sasaki?"

"I'd like to share this video with my place of employment, then have them use their resources to mobilize the public in order to pinpoint and secure the ones who took Miss Hoshizaki. Humanity has a playbook for how to handle situations like these."

"I see. This area is very densely populated, so there is a good chance of success."

"But if possible, could you keep on searching for her as well?"

"Of course. Hoshizaki's survival is my top priority on this planet."

"Thank you."

A casual remark from Miss Hoshizaki had secured Earth's fate by a single thread—a tightrope we'd been walking ever since the day before. My heart was still pounding.

Eventually, the surveillance camera video on the TV came to an end, and I finished filming what I would share with the boss. The file size wasn't that large, so I attached it to an email and sent it to his address.

"While we're looking after her little sister, I suppose we might as well watch some TV, hmm?" suggested Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I suppose we could. For the moment, we're just waiting on a report from the

chief.”

She’d already laid Miss Hoshizaki’s sister down on the sofa. We watched her sleep as we spoke. There wasn’t much else we could do. I felt bad for overstaying our welcome, but our only option was to sit patiently until the situation improved. Neither my neighbor nor Abaddon raised any opposition to the idea.

Ms. Futarishizuka used the remote to switch to the TV feed. “Not expecting anything good to be on at this hour, though,” she murmured.

“Yeah, it’s well before prime time,” I said.

“It’s all reruns of old anime. Makes this old lady want to shrivel up.”

“They always go back to the first episode before reaching the last one, for some reason.”

“Right?! I do *not* understand why. I end up getting curious about the ending and buying them all on disc.”

She changed the channel, we watched for a little while, and then she changed it again. Several programs went by as we stared at the screen, doing nothing of interest.

Then, suddenly, a familiar video appeared.

“Isn’t this the video from before?” I asked. “From the camera?”

“Oh, that’s quite odd,” she mused. “All I did was change the channel.”

On the screen was the video from the surveillance camera we’d had Type Twelve copy onto the TV’s external storage. It showed Miss Hoshizaki getting shot with a taser, followed by unknown men carrying her away.

Some words in one corner of the screen immediately caught my attention—they were meant to identify the channel we were currently watching.

The next thing we knew, a voice began to play.

“I am the being Earthlings refer to as the unidentified flying object. I will now announce the necessary conditions for the continued survival of all humanity. I repeat, I am the being Earthlings refer to as the unidentified flying object. I will

now announce the necessary conditions for the continued survival of all humanity.”

“Wait, what the heck is this?!” cried Ms. Futarishizuka.

This wasn’t the video copied onto the TV’s storage. No, this was actually playing on the channel we were watching. In another corner of the screen was a map of the city, showing an icon that seemed to point to a certain camera. Even someone clueless about the situation would realize the video had come from a camera located at that point on the map.

“Where have I heard that voice before?”

“Mister, um, that can’t be...*her*, can it?”

My neighbor and Abaddon joined in as everyone looked to Type Twelve.

Under our stares, she said flatly, “Sasaki, I adopted your viewpoint. I, too, will use humanity to search for Hoshizaki.”

It sounded like she’d just hijacked a TV station. Where was she broadcasting from? If one of the so-called terminals near the surface was sending the signal, I doubted it could reach very far. But if it was that big ship up above the atmosphere doing it, this video could well be showing all over the world right now.

“If the life of the abducted human in this video is threatened, I will wipe humanity from the Earth within twenty-four hours. I repeat. If the life of the abducted human in this video is threatened, I will wipe humanity from the Earth within twenty-four hours.”

The announcement, in Type Twelve’s voice, emanated into the room from the TV speakers.

Talk about bringing out the big guns.

A moment later, the video cut away to a portrait of Miss Hoshizaki. The picture showed her in work mode, done up with thick makeup and wearing a suit. Her expression was sharp and reliable.

I assumed Type Twelve had gotten it from the bureau’s database. Come to think of it, I remembered her headshot—the one used in the bureau’s internal

files—looking something like that.

“And now her face is on TV,” Ms. Futarishizuka said in alarm. “If she wasn’t up shit creek already, she is now.”

“...You’re right.”

What now? I thought. *Miss Hoshizaki just made her television debut.*

To Type Twelve, this probably felt like sending a dog to round up some sheep out grazing in the pasture. But as a result, she was about to ruin the social life of the person most important to her.

My neighbor and Abaddon watched the screen in astonishment. The two of them hadn’t been abducted or brought up into space, so this must have been like a wake-up call as to how dangerous the alien girl really was.

Soon enough, the phone tucked in my inside pocket began to buzz. Someone was calling me. I checked the display—the section chief. *Figured he’d contact me*, I thought. *So quick to respond, too. He really knows how to do his job.*

“Hello, this is Sasaki.”

“I won’t waste time. Is there a TV nearby?”

“We’re already watching it, sir.”

“I can’t say any more over the phone. Sorry, but could you come to the office? Immediately, if you would.”

“Understood.”

“And if you can, bring you-know-who with you.”

Even over the phone, his tone left no room for argument. He was sure of it now—the owner of the UFO all over the news was acting alongside his own subordinates. After all, the video on TV was the exact same one I’d just sent him. If he checked the time stamps in the metadata, he’d easily figure out it was from before the waves had been hijacked.

“I’ll try to secure her help to an extent that won’t endanger humanity.”

“Please do so.”

After that brief conversation, he hung up. This call had been even shorter

than the last one. As I tucked my phone away, I mapped out our plans in my head.

At this point, I just wanted to run away to the otherworld. I wanted to laze about and languish in listlessness at our inn in Baytrium. I wanted to dine at Mr. French's restaurant every day. I wanted to go sightseeing in fantastical locales while enjoying my little chats with Peeps.

My escape from reality lasted several seconds as I stared at my phone display. Then, finally, I turned back to Type Twelve.

"Excuse me, but could you stop this broadcast immediately?"

"Why?" she asked. "You said you wanted to help Hoshizaki. Your suggestion contradicts that intention."

"As the situation stands, this will only endanger her position."

"Humans lie daily."

"Look, I wish I was lying. I really do."

"....."

I locked eyes with her; she was as impassive as ever.

But she was the first to break. "...Understood. I will adopt your suggestion, Sasaki."

"Also, I'd like to change locations. Would you mind coming with us?"

"Is this change of location related to Hoshizaki as well?"

"We're headed to her place of employment. As I explained before, they are also carrying out a search for her. Better to get as much information as we can rather than wait here twiddling our thumbs. Will you come?"

"All right. I will accompany you."

"Thank you."

As soon as she agreed, the picture on the TV changed. The still image of Miss Hoshizaki's bust and the surveillance camera clip of her being kidnapped, which

had been cycling back and forth until now, disappeared from the channel in an instant, and it switched back to what seemed to be the news program originally running.

A news studio was visible, with the announcer looking very out of sorts after the hijack. He apologized profusely for the confusion, explaining several times that the content Type Twelve had injected didn't represent the TV station. This must have been a real disaster for them.

"I'm fine with going to the office, but what shall we do with the girl?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka, looking at Miss Hoshizaki's sister still lying on the sofa. "She should wake up on her own if we leave her, but if she comes to before we've rescued her sister, she might cause problems. It's even possible they could kidnap her next."

"Hmm..."

"Mister, why don't we watch her instead?" offered my neighbor.

"I'd be very grateful, but are you sure?" I asked.

"We don't have anything else to do. Besides, we're the ones who brought *her* here," she replied, glancing at Type Twelve. Abaddon remained silent; he probably had no objections.

But after a moment, I reconsidered. The three of them still seemed too vulnerable. "On second thought," I said, "I'll ask Peeps to watch her instead."

Abaddon was invincible inside isolated spaces, but outside of them, he was only about as powerful as a mid-rank psychic. The same went for my neighbor. If anyone stronger showed up, they'd almost certainly lose.

Humanity was already in an uproar over the crater. After seeing Type Twelve's TV broadcast, more than a few other countries and organizations would now have their eyes on Miss Hoshizaki. I was hesitant to leave her relative in my neighbor's and Abaddon's hands alone.

"That *would* be more certain," agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. "That sparrow packs one hell of a punch."

"Could you two wait with him at the Karuizawa villa?" I asked my neighbor.

“All right,” she said. “If that’s what you’ve decided, mister, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Yup! I’d be happiest with that, too.”

Fortunately, my distinguished Java sparrow already knew where Miss Hoshizaki lived. I could shoot him a text, and he’d come right away. And if he teleported, he could retrieve the sister without anyone finding out.

I felt bad imposing on him, but since someone’s life was on the line this time, I needed his help.

“Right,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, turning to the alien. “Then could you call that crazy craft of yours again?”

“Understood,” replied Type Twelve. “I will summon the transportation terminal.”

“If possible,” I said, “please consider putting it down somewhere cars won’t collide with it.”

Just then, from outside the living room window, we heard a loud crash.



After leaving Miss Hoshizaki’s residence, we got into Type Twelve’s vehicle. Then, as Mr. Akutsu had instructed, we set off toward the bureau. The trip only took a few minutes, even faster than our earlier flight from Karuizawa to Tokyo.

Type Twelve set the craft down in a park right next to the bureau’s building. We sneaked out under the cover of night so no one would see us and walked the rest of the way on foot. We encountered no problems along the way. I doubted it would have gone as smoothly if we’d used public transportation or a car.

My neighbor and Abaddon, meanwhile, had met up with Peeps and headed to Karuizawa. Just before leaving for the office, I’d informed the sparrow of the situation and left Miss Hoshizaki’s little sister—and the two others—in his care. He’d sounded especially reliable as he replied, *“Very well, I shall handle it.”* With the Starsage’s seal of approval, I left for work worry free.

Now we were in the office in our usual meeting space. Type Twelve, Ms. Futarishizuka, and I sat on one side, with Section Chief Akutsu facing us across the table.

“You got here awfully quickly, Sasaki,” he said. “It was only a little while ago that I contacted you.”

“This girl has been very hospitable, sir. She gave us a lift.”

Ever since we entered the office, the chief’s attention had been glued to Type Twelve. He always maintained a cool persona, and even now he was feigning total calm. Still, I sensed a stiffness in his expression. It was a lot like when I first brought Ms. Futarishizuka into the office. *I could get used to this*, I thought.

“Sasaki, please explain the relationship between this human and Hoshizaki in your own words,” said Type Twelve.

“He is her superior at our workplace, and his name is Akutsu.”

“Yes, I am Akutsu,” said the chief. “If you don’t mind, could you please tell me your name?”

Whoa. He just got really polite, I thought. *I don’t think I’ve ever seen him act like this. Feels sort of...fresh, in a way.* We never ran into anyone of a higher rank than our boss while working in the field.

“To state my name in accordance with the rules of your language, I am Independent Multipurpose Early-Model Frontier Sector-Pioneering Long-Range Space Cruiser Type Three-Seven-Six-Nine. However, this point of contact possesses a unique manufacturing name.”

“May I ask about this ‘point of contact’ as well?”

“To state this point of contact’s name in accordance with your language, it is Humanoid Point of Contact Type Twelve, based on Independently Operational Small Point of Contact Basic Design Three-Five-Seven-Eight-One, whose primary objective is to

facilitate communication with local life-forms.”

“.....”

I totally understood how the boss felt right now. It was so hard to figure out what to call her. Neither of us had referred to her by name yet; even Ms. Futarishizuka seemed hesitant to call her by a nickname.

Ignoring the boss’s predicament, Type Twelve continued. “I have confirmed from Sasaki that you and your organization are performing a search for Hoshizaki.”

“Yes, we are.”

“If you can confirm her location, I would like her positional information.”

“Unfortunately, we still haven’t pinpointed her location. I’m sorry.”

“Then I would like to know your prospects.”

“I’ve given the order for emergency checkpoints to be deployed on all main roads leading in and out of the Kanto area. Based on the location of the incident and the culprits’ estimated vehicle speed, it’s highly likely they are still in Tokyo. There’s a good possibility that we’ll be able to arrest them.”

As I’d expected, he was keeping an eye on all incoming and outgoing traffic. Emergency checkpoints—it was just like something out of a detective show. I bet traffic jams were forming all over the city right about now.

“I would like you to inform me as soon as you locate her,” replied Type Twelve.



“I can do that. But in exchange, there’s something we’d like to ask of you,” said Mr. Akutsu.

“I do not mind hearing your request.”

“Today, we sustained a unilateral attack—one you carried out. I would like to ask that you refrain from such acts in the future. We are willing to adhere to your wishes and would appreciate your acceptance of our good will.”

“I will consider it once Hoshizaki returns.”

“Not to be rude, but what exactly is your relationship to Hoshizaki?”

“Her advice was extremely valuable to me. I would like to thank her. And if possible, I would like to continue obtaining words of advice from her.”

“.....”

Now his gears are really turning, I thought. The chief was very smart, and he was probably reading pretty deeply into what she was saying, though I doubted he’d ever imagine that a lonely alien had come to Earth seeking love from humans. Speaking of, I was quite curious what sort of experience she’d had at my neighbor’s new school.

But having the boss get too familiar with Type Twelve would cause problems, so I decided not to help him out by explaining. Ms. Futarishizuka appeared to agree, and we both zipped our lips. Our little faction wanted her to go back to her home planet as soon as possible, after all. *In fact, maybe I ought to try to change the subject.*

Just as I had that thought, the chief’s phone started vibrating in his pocket. At the very same moment, Type Twelve stirred. And then, before the chief could even pick up, she delivered some shocking news.

“I have confirmed a combat situation between humans several dozen kilometers from here.”

“What?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If you observed the scene using a terminal,” I said, “would you please show us the video?”

“Yes. Given the location and time, there is a chance Hoshizaki is involved.”

No sooner had she agreed to my request than a display appeared in the middle of the meeting table. The two of us had seen this happen before, so we were used to it. Mr. Akutsu, on the other hand, was so shocked he sprang out of his chair with a clatter.

The display showed a mountainous area. Through the middle ran what looked to be a narrow logging road; the recording was being taken from above. Smack-dab in the center, we could see a car, flipped over onto its side and covered in flames.

It wasn't the same vehicle we'd seen on the surveillance cameras. Instead of an unadorned business van, it was a standard family minivan. But it was possible the culprits had switched vehicles on the way, so we couldn't make any judgments just based on the model.

Several armed helicopters painted with a camouflage pattern hovered in the air, surrounding the flaming minivan. Type Twelve was right—it seemed likely the incident was related to Miss Hoshizaki's kidnappers.

“Where is this?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “That ridge looks like something around Chichibu.”

“Displaying current location now.”

A map appeared in the corner of the display. My coworker had been correct—it was a mountainous area between Hanno and Chichibu, both cities in Saitama prefecture.

I was astounded by her speedy recognition. Even limiting the location to somewhere around Tokyo, the display showed only a featureless logging road. Had she driven around the area on her bike or in a car a lot when she was young? If she'd only been there once or twice, I couldn't imagine she'd be able to pinpoint it so quickly.

“I’m surprised you could identify the location at a glance,” I said.

“I used to drive around there a long time ago,” she explained.

“I see.”

Apparently, I had been right. But when was “a long time ago”? Had she been a street racer? I bet she had.

“Sasaki, to confirm,” said the chief, “is this a live video of the site?”

“As far as we can tell, sir—yes.”

“It seems our visitor from beyond the solar system has some incredible technology.”

The section chief sat back down across the table, evidently able to see the video from his side, too. He reached out toward it, and his fingertips passed right through the screen. I went to do the same thing, but then stopped after considering the potential health risks.

“I bet they took the Nerima interchange to the Kan-Etsu Expressway, then got off somewhere near the Kawagoe interchange and headed down the mountain,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “If you keep going, you’ll reach the Sea of Japan. Only locals ever use those roads—you’d be able to avoid the checkpoints.”

“Then I’m surprised they were located so easily,” I pointed out.

“It’s a minivan on a logging road at night with its lights on. Any optical satellite would catch it, don’t you think? I’m sure they didn’t predict that every agency in the area would get this desperate over one kidnapped bureau member.”

“Are you implying Miss Hoshizaki’s home and neighborhood have been under surveillance this entire time?”

“The boss warned us about this quite recently, if you recall.”

“Your concerns are reasonable,” said Mr. Akutsu, “but I have yet to hear a word about this matter.”

“I hope you’re telling the truth,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

Miss Hoshizaki’s neighborhood had only recently been the site of a big psychic

fiasco. I had a feeling that everyone, enemy and ally alike, had eyes on Karuizawa as well. My neighbor's transfer to her new school had gone through all the regular channels. If the bureau's database had a record of it, then naturally the section chief knew as well. That meant other organizations friendly with the bureau would also be in the know.

"In that case," I mused, "perhaps the TV broadcast earlier wasn't completely pointless."

"As I thought, my judgment was correct," said Type Twelve.

"That's definitely your emotions talking," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Futarishizuka, remarks such as those make my heart lonely."

"Ack! That was a lie. You know we humans love to lie. Seriously, I was just kidding, okay?"

Type Twelve's broadcast must have felt like cheating to the kidnappers—like when someone puts out their hand a second late in rock-paper-scissors. I still had no idea who they were, but I was sure they were panicking right about now.

Personally, though, I was more interested in the helicopters hovering above the minivan as it continued to blaze. What on earth had led to the present situation?

"The people returning fire from the ground are one thing," I said, "but aren't you curious where those helicopters came from?"

They certainly weren't civilian craft, like the kind news organizations used. These were painted with camo and armed with machine guns and missiles. And it wasn't just one of them—there were three surrounding the flaming vehicle from the air. Plus, as we watched, their machine guns were going *rat-tat-tat-tat*. It was like watching a scene from an action movie.

Not a moment later, nearby trees were uprooted and rose into the sky. I assumed a telekinetic psychic had arrived on the scene, but since it was night, I couldn't see the ground very well. At one point, though, I thought I caught a glimpse of a figure between the trees.

The helicopters frantically ascended higher into the air. One of them moved too late, however, and a tree struck its rotors. Having lost its means of propulsion, the helicopter plummeted to the ground and exploded, catching fire.

“There aren’t many groups that can fly helicopters wherever they please inside Japan’s airspace,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “If they’re already engaged in combat, and our boss still hasn’t heard anything, it seems pretty obvious.”

“I see.”

The first person I could think of was Captain Mason, who we’d met at Atsugi Base. He’d mentioned he was usually in Yokota.

“Things might be different on a proper battlefield with bomber jets and missiles and the like,” she went on, “but these days, with guerrilla warfare being the main mode of combat, it’s way more efficient to use psychics to fight other psychics. How many do you think they could they have hired for the price of that one crashed helicopter?”

“I’m starting to understand why we keep getting scouted everywhere we go,” I said.

Though I’d witnessed several instances of psychics fighting one another, this was the first time I’d seen them face off against modern weaponry. As I watched them holding their own against military helicopters, I couldn’t help but be impressed.

If the total population of psychics was a little lower, perhaps their existence wouldn’t be so much of a factor. But as things stood, there were a fair number of them, and their population continued to increase at a fixed rate, more or less, each year. If one person decided to use them for their own ends, others would be forced to do the same.

“If Hoshizaki is involved, then her survival is at risk,” said Type Twelve as we all sat watching the video in shock. “This point of contact will proceed to the location to investigate.”

“I agree with her,” the chief added immediately. “Sasaki, Futarishizuka, get on the scene as quickly as possible. You are to confirm Hoshizaki’s safety and work

to gather information and cover up the psychic presence there.”

“Are you sending us to die?” demanded Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Aren’t you supposed to be indestructible?”

Normally, I would have balked at the boss’s order, but my colleague and partner was in a life-threatening situation. We had to act. Plus, her survival was linked to the continued existence of humanity.

If they had heard and understood Type Twelve’s intentions, I doubted any group or organization would want to endanger Miss Hoshizaki. But seeing that car in flames had me worried.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “We’ll head there now.”

“I’m happy to finally hear a confident response from you, Sasaki.”

“In exchange, please keep this girl’s existence a secret until we’ve rescued Miss Hoshizaki and brought her back here. If you can’t promise me that, then unfortunately, I may be forced to abandon my position at the bureau.”

“You have my word.”

I wasn’t sure how much his word was worth, but we’d gotten his understanding regarding Type Twelve’s treatment. Once that was settled, I rose from my seat.

A moment later, the alien looked up at me and said, “Sasaki, Futarishizuka, I understand that a portion of humanity possesses unique abilities.”

Apparently, she already had an understanding of psychics. *I guess that makes sense—she was fishing around in our database, after all.* She must have known of our powers, too, since they would have been listed. My ability to produce water aside, Ms. Futarishizuka’s talents shone in guerrilla situations like these. In fact, I couldn’t think of anyone stronger. I tended to forget, but she *was* one of a select handful of rank-A psychics.

“The chances of successfully rescuing Hoshizaki will increase if you use those abilities,” Type Twelve continued. “Conversely, should you not use them, the expected probability will lower. I would counsel you both to cooperate with this point of contact while on-site. Should you decline, the loneliness inside me will

—”

“We will, don’t worry,” I assured her. “You didn’t even need to ask.”

“You could have just asked us to save her, you know,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“.....”

Having secured our agreement, the alien fell silent. Apparently, she hadn’t predicted such a response. But that reaction only lasted a moment.

“...Sasaki, Futarishizuka, please, save her,” she said, her tone a little more polite.

She’s so honest, I thought. It seemed she was telling the truth when she insisted that mechanical life-forms didn’t lie. Her face, as always, was emotionless. But her slight hesitation before she gave her response provided a glimpse of the emotion she talked so much about.

“Never fear,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “This will be duck soup!”

“That’s a weird metaphor,” I said.

“Never heard it? It’s cousins with ‘piece of cake.’”

“Was it trending before the Showa era?”

“What? No. I’m in brand-new Reiwa mode right now.”

“Are you sure you’re not just making things up?”

Whether she was hiding embarrassment or just half crazed with desperation, her response was very chipper. I suspected it was a little of column A, a little of column B. If she’d been anyone else, the chief wouldn’t be asking so much of her, either.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, thank you both for your cooperation,” said the alien girl.

And with that, we headed out with Type Twelve to rescue our coworker.



After leaving the chief in the meeting space, we exited the office right away.

To reach our destination, we once again boarded Type Twelve's strange flying craft. Its body remained invisible—all we could see was the shape of the entrance and the empty space within. In minutes, we had arrived in the Chichibu area.

Inside the airborne craft, a display appeared beneath us showing the ground, making the floor appear transparent. Like the earlier feed, it showed the burning, overturned car and the helicopters hovering at a safe distance.

We could see periodic flashes in the darkness, but I wasn't sure if they were from firearms or psychic powers. Along with the video, the sound of explosions and screams came through from somewhere, putting me on edge. It was possible several different organizations were all locked in a chaotic battle down below.

"It will be very difficult for this terminal and point of contact to descend alone, secure Hoshizaki, and withdraw. It would be possible to manufacture additional points of contact and deploy them, but that would require time. I would prefer to ensure Hoshizaki's rescue is successful by—"

"Yes, yes, we understand already. You want us down there with you, right?"

"Futarishizuka, your thinking is correct."

"How do we get down?" I asked. "It looks like we're pretty high up."

"We will now land," said Type Twelve as the flying object, previously hovering with absolute stillness, began to move once again.

Below us, the ground on the display grew closer and closer. We weren't attacked on the way down; just like when we boarded, nobody seemed to notice us. Since it was nighttime, I wouldn't be surprised if many of those present had been issued thermal night goggles, but there was no response at all. I assumed that meant the alien tech included countermeasures for such devices.

When the flying craft eventually touched down, the inside became pitch-black. If our last glimpse of the ground was to be believed, we'd landed right in

the middle of the chaos, very close to the flaming minivan. I'd verified that no people were out on the pavement, at least.

Just then, the craft's exit opened back up, and we could clearly hear the tumult from outside.

"Sweet!" exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. "Let's charge!"

"I'll provide backup," I told her.

She burst outside as though it were a race. Whatever she might have said, she clearly wanted to ingratiate herself with Type Twelve. I didn't want to play second fiddle, either, and ran out after her. A quick glance over my shoulder told me Type Twelve was following us. Once everyone was out, the craft's entrance closed back up.

Our first destination was the burning minivan. We gave the inside a quick check.

"One dead in the driver's seat," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "but no sign of our dear colleague."

"Is there another vehicle nearby?" I asked Type Twelve. "Can you detect anything?"

"I have been using the terminal to check the surrounding area. There are currently no humans or objects moving away from this location. However, I detect several heat sources approaching."

If this whole disturbance amounted to a fight over Miss Hoshizaki, it was very likely she was still being dragged through the mountains by one party or another. Our first task was to get a read on her general location.

Incidentally, I'd activated my barrier spell on all three of us already. Since there were no streetlights in the vicinity, I felt we were likely safe from bullets unless someone attempted to shoot us at very close range. However, if there were any psychics able to fling around fireballs or the like, that might cause an issue.

Just as the thought crossed my mind, there one was, flying right at us—a roaring, blazing sphere of flames about the size of an exercise ball.

“We’re sitting ducks on the road!” shouted Ms. Futarishizuka. “Get to the side!”

“Understood.”

“I will follow Futarishizuka’s judgment.”

Ms. Futarishizuka began running toward the side of the road. A fireball burst right next to her, gouging a hole in the asphalt with a *boom*. Since we were protected by my barrier spell, though, we were fine. We used the explosion to cover us as we fled into the mountains.

We ran down the road leading up to the pass, which didn’t even have guardrails, and wound up sliding down a sharp, several-meter-long slope. Somehow, we managed to get back together and come face-to-face again somewhere along the side of the mountain.

If I was to disengage my barrier spell now, we could die instantly. I decided to keep it up permanently and play it off as some super technology provided by Type Twelve.

“If you have eyes on the ground,” Ms. Futarishizuka said, addressing the alien, “can you bring up a heat map of the area as seen from above? I want to know how many rivals we have in the search for our dear colleague.”

“Yes.” Type Twelve nodded, and a display instantly appeared in the air in front of us.

It showed a map of our surroundings, plus numerous visible heat sources, likely either people or animals. The data was being sent from the terminal in real time, it seemed, and you could tell when those hidden nearby so much as shifted their weight.

“Well, that’s quite the crowd,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I had no idea so many people would be hiding here,” I agreed.

“Seems we’re in the midst of a full-fledged battle royale, eh?”

“There have been a lot of games like that in recent years, haven’t there?”

“You’ve been playing those, too? Tell me which ones when we’re done with

this.”

“Oh, actually, I’m terrible at those kinds of games, so...”

There were a significant number of heat sources displayed on the map. Some of them were alone, while others moved in groups. There had to be thirty or forty of them, all hiding in the mountains, doing their own thing.

Even if Miss Hoshizaki was among them, it wouldn’t be easy to confirm her location in the pitch-black wilderness. The only light source was the moon’s glow filtering through the dense foliage above. We couldn’t see more than a couple meters in front of us—which was probably why our opponents were having such a hard time escaping.

“If we bring down the helicopters, we should have free rein of the place,” pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If anyone finds out,” I said, “Captain Mason will give us the scolding of a lifetime.”

“I can use my terminal to capture and disable them,” said Type Twelve.

“I see. Shall we, then?”

“I rather like this side of you,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Now disabling the aircraft and transporting them outside of our area of activity.”

A few seconds later, we noticed a change in the two helicopters overhead—specifically, their rotors suddenly stopped moving. And yet, mysteriously, they remained hanging in the air. Type Twelve must have been using the same technology to keep them floating as when she’d abducted our swan boat. The UFO was able to re-create Earth’s gravity in its interior, after all, and the terminals had the ability to nullify inertia in the case of sudden stops.

We could easily lay the blame for the helicopters on Type Twelve and her concern for Miss Hoshizaki’s safety. After all, the UFOs were all over the news. I doubted even Captain Mason could say much about that.

“Whoa. Looks like we’ve got a battle starting up nearby,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, pointing to a spot on the midair display’s map.

“All those new heat sources have to be psychic powers,” I agreed.

One of the groups moving through the mountains had encountered another stationary party. A moment later, we heard far-off explosions. As we kept our eyes on the map, it zoomed in, enlarging the area in question.

The heat sources, appearing from nowhere, flew between the two groups. Bullets would be too fast to show up on the map, and the projectile motion we were seeing implied some sort of heat-related psychic powers, like the fireballs we’d encountered on the road.

The clash only lasted a few moments before one group stopped moving. The defenders had turned the tables on their attackers.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, I have determined that it is unwise to continue waiting.”

“Then what say we start hunting?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Closest ones first.”

“We’ll stand a much better chance that way,” I agreed.

With Type Twelve cracking the whip, the three of us began to move toward a group of heat sources about ten meters away.

We were up against a three-person team. Once we’d gotten close enough, Ms. Futarishizuka launched into a dash. Despite the slope of the mountain, she rushed toward them with the speed of a wild animal.

The counterattack came from a psychic; specifically, one with the power to manipulate nearby plant life. When we arrived a moment later, we saw enlarged, gnarled tree trunks and branches protecting people who had already expired. Our companion must have wasted no time sucking them dry.

“Well, it wasn’t them,” she said.

She had one scrape on her cheek. I didn’t have to use healing magic, either; it vanished quickly on its own thanks to her restorative powers. I found myself wondering if she’d genuinely been forced to sustain the wound or if she was just trying to gain points with Type Twelve.

As I thought about it, I realized I could no longer sincerely trust her. While she wasn’t as bad as Type Twelve, she probably led a pretty lonely life.

“I doubted we’d get lucky on our first try,” I replied.

“I have determined we should hurry on to the next group,” said Type Twelve.

“Roger that,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

We continued, attacking three more groups. Miss Hoshizaki wasn’t in any of them. Two had psychic assistance; when Ms. Futarishizuka questioned them, both groups admitted to being foreign agents. We had them swear an oath of silence—they’d seen nothing, heard nothing, and would say nothing.

My biggest concern right now was the nerd—a rank-A psychic. If we ran into him with our current group, we’d be sure to lose. Ms. Futarishizuka, however, insisted that if he had been present, the struggle would have quickly come to an end.

We were just heading off through the mountains toward our next targets when suddenly all the gunshots and explosions went quiet.

Everything around us was now dead silent.

The midair display was also affected—the map disappeared, replaced by a white void. We had to stop; we’d been relying on its information for all our movements.

“Another one of *those*, is it?” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Highly likely,” I replied.

We exchanged nods. A death game instance had just begun—a true, no-holds-barred battle royale.

“All connections aside from this point of contact have been lost. Switching to stand-alone operation,” said Type Twelve, addressing no one in particular.

She looked right, then left, then froze, seeming to space out for a few moments. Her face was devoid of emotion, as always, but soon enough, her attention came back to us.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, what is happening?” she asked. “All external communication has been cut off.”

“Think it’s a coincidence?” I wondered aloud.

“I would assume it’s due to Disciples someone mistook for psychics, kind of like you,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“That’s definitely possible.”

Disciples who accomplished feats during the proxy war received various bonuses, or rewards. My neighbor had used this system to gain what was essentially the power of flight. If you didn’t know any better, you might easily mistake such an ability for a psychic power.

I wouldn’t be surprised if others were using the title of psychic as a cover, just like I was. If two or more such Disciples from different factions were included in this operation, an isolated space would form.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, if you understand the situation, I request an immediate explanation.”

“Wait, you’re not *panicking*, are you?” teased Ms. Futarishizuka.

“During stand-alone operation, this point of contact’s actions are significantly limited. I am concerned that my available resources for rescuing Hoshizaki have been greatly diminished. I cannot provide geographical information in this state.”

As she spoke, Type Twelve remained stone-faced. But somehow, I got the feeling she was restless. It seemed as if her knees were shaking almost imperceptibly.

“You’re panicking like a kid whose social media account got suspended,” replied my coworker.

“To her, it must feel like her eyes and ears have suddenly disappeared,” I said.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, the loneliness is pressing down on me at this very moment, and my heart is—”

“It’ll be fine. You’ll be fine,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Neither you nor your terminals are broken.”

“I request to know your grounds for that assertion.”

“I believe we’ve been temporarily moved to another location, cutting off our connection with the outside world,” I explained. “We’re not that familiar with the process, but we know that these situations are temporary. If we wait it out, everything—including the surrounding environment—will go back to normal.”

“I wish to confirm how long you estimate ‘temporarily’ will last.”

“I don’t know, unfortunately.”

“You said you were in stand-alone something or other, yes?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “If your point of contact can operate independently, it must have been designed with situations like these in mind. Why, then, are you panicking?”

“Futarishizuka, that is incorrect.”

“What is?”

“Regardless of my design, loneliness is constant.”

“Uh-huh.”

Type Twelve is really letting her emotions go wild, I thought. I hope she can preserve her mental state through this.

“Anyway,” continued Ms. Futarishizuka, “even we can’t afford to be careless inside this space.”

“I hope the partner of the Disciple who created it isn’t too strong. If they’re as powerful as Abaddon, we’ll have to flee.”

“Sasaki, that information serves only to accelerate my loneliness.”

“What’s one wrecked point of contact for you anyway?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “If your mothership is still safe, what’s the problem? Weren’t you just talking about a core module or something? That’s not inside the one here with us, right?”

“Futarishizuka, that is incorrect.”

“What is?”

“At this moment, I am lonely.”

“Look, if there’s nothing you can do, could you just be quiet for a little while?”

“.....”

Type Twelve stared at Ms. Futarishizuka, face serious, before clamping up.

At that moment, something stirred in the soundless world. We began to hear the rustling of tree leaves in the distance—whoever it was, they were heading toward us, and fast.

“Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said, “keep her safe.”

“Mm. I’ll let you handle it from here.”

After leaving Type Twelve in my colleague’s care, I turned in the direction of the sound. Within the isolated space, the ban on my otherworld magic was lifted. Maintaining my barrier spell, I got my laser beam spell ready to fire.

And then, who should appear but a familiar face.

“It’s the magical middle-aged man. What are you doing here?”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “You saw the chaos and came to take out some psychics.”

“Yes. I will kill them all.”

From out of the trees appeared the pink magical girl—the one who had settled here in Japan. Levitating with Magical Flight, she’d been using Magical Barrier to part the leaves and branches. The latter of these abilities had likely resulted in her presence here inside the isolated space.

No sooner had Magical Pink shown up than we began hearing noise from another direction. This time, however, it was explosions. *Did the angel and demon start fighting?*

“Ack!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. “Now I’m hearing something else!”

“I will kill the psychics.”

“Wait a moment,” I said. “Would you mind if we came with you?”

“Why?”

“We’ve seen things that are more terrifying than psychics in this soundless world. And that noise is probably them fighting. You want to bring down as many psychics as possible, right? Then could you help us so that we all survive?”

“Sasaki,” said Type Twelve, “this is not what you said before. The danger level is rapidly increasing.”

“Look, I’ll protect you,” Ms. Futarishizuka said. “So just pipe down for a moment.”

“Is that true, Futarishizuka?”

“Oh, it’s very true.”

“Understood. I will remain silent for a time.”

“A little kindness goes an awfully long way with you, eh?”

Having joined forces with Magical Pink, we all headed off in the direction of the noise.



After a few minutes foraying through the mountains, we came within view of the scene.

It was unfolding on the overgrown mountainside along the winding road that led up to the pass. From between the trees, we could see people facing off out in the open, on the paved road. Thanks to the moonlight, we could even make out their faces. There were five in total.

One of them wore a robe and had white wings coming out of his back—an angel, no doubt. He looked like an attractive forty-or fifty-year old, with a huge frame and rippling muscles. In front of him, he held a large shield at the ready. The lady right next to him had to be his Disciple; she was probably around twenty.

A short distance away, I could see a horned figure—likely the demon. He appeared high school age, held a large knife in each hand, and wore a crude, single-layered loincloth. Nearby was a girl of similar age, probably his Disciple.

The last of the five, however, was someone I knew.

“Is that Magical Blue fighting the angel and demon?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“It certainly seems like it,” I replied.

It was Ivy, the magical girl from our allied nation who acted alongside Captain Mason.

The angel and demon were both tenaciously attacking her, placing her at a disadvantage. Several balls of flames floated around the angel, who was sending them flying at Ivy one after another. The latter protected herself from a few with her Magical Barrier, while using Magical Flight to flit through the air, dodging the rest.

The demon boy was in the air, too, slashing at her with his knives. His relentless strikes bounced off the Magical Barrier, but eventually brought it down, forcing the girl to hastily erect another.

The cycle repeated with the demon serving as main attacker and the angel playing backup—I felt they made a rather excellent team.

“The angel and demon are working together,” I noted.

“I doubt this was a planned encounter,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “They must be putting their job first—abducting our poor coworker. And since Magical Blue’s association is well-known, they’re hoping to remove the biggest threat first.”

“You were right. This really *is* a battle royale.”

Like Abaddon and my neighbor, there certainly seemed to be plenty of participants who came to these battles with their own interests in mind. The former’s earnest plea, way back at the beginning, for our support outside the isolated spaces spoke to him having seen such things transpire in the past. It felt like the death game was finally getting started.

“I have to save her!” exclaimed Magical Pink.

“You can leave that to us,” I said, realizing immediately that she was referring to Magical Blue. I knew from the Kraken incident that the magical girls were all good friends—well, at least Pink and Blue were.

“Who shall we target, then?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The angel.”

The death game participants didn’t appear to have noticed us yet, so I decided to go for a surprise attack using my laser beam spell. I didn’t want to attack the Disciple, but the angel, on the other hand—I could shoot *him* without a second thought, because according to Abaddon, all the angels and demons were simply copies, or Divisions, as he called them. Destroying one wouldn’t hurt its main body; it wouldn’t even scratch them.

“Here we go,” I said, thrusting my hands out in front of me and firing my laser beam spell. I narrowed its focus, making it about the thickness of a telephone pole.

Just before it went off, the angel noticed us. He skillfully repositioned his shield. The spell, traveling straight along its planned trajectory, struck the center.

The light, which had once engulfed an entire army of angels, was completely blocked by the huge shield. This angel had some pretty sturdy defenses. Maybe he was of a high rank, like the six-winged little Mika. It had been rash of me to think I could take him down in one hit. *Lesson learned*, I thought.

Still, the attempt hadn’t been completely worthless. The beam spell was powerful enough to push him back; his feet scraped across the ground as he held fast to his shield. He looked desperate. I got the feeling I’d be able to overpower him if I kept going.

That said, we were a little pressed for time. “Ms. Futarishizuka, could you—?”

“Keep firing that laser!”

My coworker was already dashing along the road before I could finish my sentence.

She was going straight for the angel’s Disciple, who froze in shock when she

saw us through the trees. The shield-wielding angel quickly realized who the kimono-clad girl was after, but he had his hands full blocking my laser beam spell—he couldn't move to assist. The same went for the demon, who was in the middle of a midair close combat battle with Magical Blue.

“Angels and demons may scare me,” she said, “but not their Disciples.”

Using her inhuman leg strength to take advantage of the opening, Ms. Futarishizuka arrived in front of the Disciple in a flash.

The rest took only a few seconds. She quickly reached out and touched the Disciple as the woman turned to flee.

“You can run as far as you like, but you'll never escape the fear of death. Isn't that right?”

“Huh...?!”

The Disciple's face twisted with doubt. She didn't seem to know who Ms. Futarishizuka was. A moment later, her knees buckled, and she fell. Her whole body went limp, and she collapsed face down onto the road with a *thud*.

From what I'd heard, some of these angel–demon proxy wars could last over a decade, and most of the participants were minors, with the eldest in their early twenties. I was extremely hesitant to attack people still so young.

But whether she was aware of my feelings on the matter or not, Ms. Futarishizuka declared her victory. “One point for us!” she cried. I didn't need to ask what she meant.

I quickly deactivated my laser beam. A few moments after Ms. Futarishizuka's victory shout, the chaos around us returned. Apparently, the woman had been the only angelic Disciple nearby, and now that she was gone, the isolated space had dispersed.

“Ivy!”

Immediately, Magical Pink burst out from the trees. She was still flying as she fired off a Magical Beam at the demon.

The demon tried to evade, but the shot struck his lower half, and he fell to the ground. Seeing a chance to turn the tables, Blue quickly shot a second Beam,

thick as she could make it. The demon didn't even have time to scream before vanishing altogether.

His Disciple, seeing this, panicked and withdrew.

Unfortunately, a moment after she began to run, a bullet took out part of her head. Right as we heard the *bang*, we saw her fall down onto the asphalt.

With the help of the moonlight, I could tell she'd been sniped by some organization or other hidden in the woods. Naturally, more bullets followed—aimed at us and the magical girl—but they were all nullified by our barriers.

After draining the Disciple's energy, Ms. Futarishizuka quickly fled back into the trees. "You really like giving me all the dirty jobs, don't you?" she grumbled.

"In return, you can have all the credit for beating the angel's Disciple."

"Oh, is that how it works? Then I suppose I don't mind at all."

"And you can be the one to tell Abaddon about it."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

I quite liked this aspect of Ms. Futarishizuka's personality. She was both refreshingly frank and dependable—almost to an extreme.

"All external connections restored. Switching point of contact to normal operation."

Type Twelve seemed to have soothed her loneliness just fine, too. Her knees had stopped shaking, and her voice sounded calm again.

Having slain the demon, the magical girls quickly joined us. They were probably trying to escape the veritable deluge of bullets and psychic powers. The road offered no cover; staying out there would only invite unprompted attacks.

"Thank you, magical middle-aged man."

"It was no problem—this worked out well for us, too."

Because Magical Blue had already been fighting, we were able to deal with the angel with minimal effort. The angel's shield had been nigh impenetrable,

and without the advantage of a surprise attack, we would have had a much rougher time of it.

As we spoke, we heard the sounds of brushing leaves and scraping branches behind us. They were regular, like human footsteps. We all turned around, expecting an attack. The two Magical Beams Pink and Blue had fired were flashy and had likely drawn a lot of attention.

But out of the dark, who should appear but another familiar face.

“<Ivy, you suddenly dropped off the radar. How did you end up with them?>”

It was Captain Mason, clad head to toe in military camo, holding a gun at the ready. A few other soldiers were with him, all dressed the same.

“<Captain Mason!>” Seeing her superior, Magical Blue headed over to him.

Now he, too, would be privy to information on the proxy war. Chances were high he already knew about it, but either way, this meant it would get around. I’d have to take the death game into account whenever we spoke to the chief from now on.

“<Everyone around me suddenly vanished, sir! And then I was attacked. One of them had horns on his head, and the other one had wings on his back. I didn’t think I was going to make it, but then these people helped me!>”

“<I see.>”

The captain and Ivy were speaking in English. I had no idea what they were saying. I could guess, though, that she was reporting on the situation, given all her excited gesticulations. Her charming behavior reminded me how young she was and warmed my heart.

“<She just told me what happened,>” the captain said to us. “<I’d like to extend my thanks for saving her.>”

“<That’s all well and good, but have you seen our coworker?>” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “<I’m sure you came because you saw her on TV, though you must already know what she looks like, since she was with us when we met at Atsugi.>”

“<Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to locate her since she was taken into

the mountains.>”

“<If you’re hiding anything, humanity’s going to be in big trouble, you know,>” warned Ms. Futarishizuka, shooting a glance at Type Twelve.

Was she using the UFO’s presence to threaten him? Captain Mason looked troubled; he probably knew what she was implying. It appeared our senior colleague was still nowhere to be found.

“<I’m serious,>” he said. “<Please believe me.>”

“<Well, it doesn’t matter much what I think,>” she replied. “<The final decision is up to her.>”

Type Twelve offered no comment, but she was attentive to their conversation, as though she fully understood their English exchange. I found myself wishing she could provide some simultaneous interpretation, but I decided to hold back—that would probably be asking too much. The way things were shaping up, it seemed like I really needed to learn some English. Unfortunately, I was uniquely terrible at it.

“<Could I ask a question, sir?!>” Ivy chirped.

“<What is it, Lieutenant?>”

“<I’m curious about how you said I suddenly vanished.>”

“<Right. I’ll debrief you on that later when this is all over.>”

“<Yes, sir! Understood!>”

It seemed Magical Blue had raised a question after picking up on her commanding officer’s distress. She was young but very perceptive. That said, I still had no idea what they were saying.

All this useless corporate drone could do was bow and scrape to his coworker and ask her for the details. “Ms. Futarishizuka, I’m sorry to interrupt, but what are they talking about?”

“The magical girl seems rather distraught over what she was caught up in,” she explained.

“I see.”

Captain Mason and the others must not have been inside the Magical Barrier; otherwise, they'd have been pulled into the isolated space along with her. I assumed that Magical Blue had been on her own, acting independently.

Against normal psychics, magical girls were virtually invincible. It would be more efficient for her to locate and secure Miss Hoshizaki alone than to fight alongside Captain Mason and the other soldiers. That was probably the very reason Mason had brought her along.

But there were always exceptions.

Just then, someone appeared on the road near the foliage keeping us hidden.

The figure floated down out of the air right beside the angel's disciple that Ms. Futarishizuka had defeated. His slender silhouette was backed by the glow of the moon, but his anime T-shirt and the long hair stretching down to his shoulders stood out like a sore thumb.

He seemed to notice us right as he landed. Immediately, he turned our way and groaned. "Welp. Not exactly who I was hoping to see."

It was the nerd—the person I had most wanted to avoid.

Though we remained hidden in the woods, he was staring straight at us as he spoke. The final two Magical Beams fired at the demon had gone off after the isolated space dissipated. He must have come to see what was going on only to bump into us.

"I'd love to resolve things peacefully," he said. "Any chance we can talk it out?"

We couldn't see anyone with him. He'd arrived alone.

His landing heralded a spray of gunfire and psychic powers from the surrounding area, all aimed at him. Every projectile vanished before touching him, though—disappearing into thin air a few centimeters before making contact, as though sucked into some invisible bag. He was using psychic powers to protect himself, just like Magical Barrier and my otherworld spell.

The nerd looked around. "I wasn't talking to any of you," he said.

At that, all the bullets and psychic powers that had just vanished around him

shot back out, their trajectory reversed. A moment later, we heard a succession of screams, assumedly from those who had fired.

I couldn't see the victims in the darkness—but I didn't notice anyone firing back, either.

"I guess this happened too quickly to recruit any decent psychics."

How is he so strong? I thought. *He's like a final boss.*

Collecting everything thrown at him and sending it back whenever he felt like it—it was too convenient to be real, but he'd made it happen. You saw this sort of scene a lot in anime and manga. It wasn't clear exactly what form it was taking here, though.

Also, personally, I was seriously concerned about the state of the forest. All the nearby trees were ablaze thanks to the fire-type psychic powers flying this way and that. And given the situation, the fire department couldn't very well show up to put them out. Precious woodland resources were being consumed. I was overcome with the urge to blast them with water in an attempt to put out the flames.

"<Shit,>" said Captain Mason. "<Just our luck to run into him...>"

"<Captain, isn't he the one we fought up in space?>"

"<Yes, and he's dangerous, Lieutenant. We can't fight him—not in this situation.>"

"<U-understood, sir!>"

The other day, while we were freestyling back into the earth's atmosphere, Magical Blue and the nerd had been duking it out. The former's exchange with the captain was incomprehensible to me, but the tension on their faces made it easy enough to guess what they were discussing.

This is dangerous, I thought. *Extremely dangerous.*

Even the smile of the anime girl on the man's shirt struck me as ghastly. I wondered what show she was from. If I'd looked it up beforehand, maybe I could have stalled for time by asking his opinion on it. I'd have to check with Ms. Futarishizuka when I got a chance.

“Hey, are you just gonna leave me hanging?” he said. “It’s freaking me out a little. Doesn’t have to be an essay. I saw you hiding there before—the magical girl’s beam lit you up. And I can hear you whispering to each other, too.”

Once again, he encouraged us to speak. If we ignored him now, he probably wouldn’t give us another chance—he’d just attack. I didn’t want to involve any of the others, so I rallied my courage and put myself in the line of fire.

“Allow me to apologize,” I said. “We’re pretty confused ourselves.”

“See, I knew you were there. And I knew I recognized you, too.”

I parted the branches in front of me and walked out onto the road. While normally the hard sensation of asphalt under my soles would have reassured me, my increased proximity to the nerd canceled out the effect. I ended up coming to a stop a few meters away.

“Ah, so all of you are on this mountain scavenger hunt, too, then?” he said.

“She *is* our coworker, after all.”

“She is, isn’t she? I figured I’d probably run into you sooner or later.”

“Why are *you* here, then?”

“Because my business partner scared me into coming. I mean—look, I’m alone. Running into you all could end in a party wipe. No point letting valuable subordinates die in vain, eh?”

“As a fellow subordinate, that’s the kind of decision I would hope for in a boss.” That sounded like the total opposite of our section chief. I was a little envious.



“Hey, if you don’t like where you’re working, you’re always welcome to join us,” he offered.

“A very attractive proposal, but I’d like to keep my current job for now.”

“You said the same thing last time.”

Considering what happened in space, I assumed his organization and those under Captain Mason’s command were like cats and dogs. In a situation like this, I wanted to avoid any dangerous topics. Shooting a glance back at Captain Mason’s group, I saw all of them glaring at the nerd, ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

“If you’re all on the job already,” he continued, “then maybe I’ll just go home.”

“Personally, I don’t see a need for you to concern yourself with our coworker,” I agreed politely, glancing back to the side of the road from which I’d come—Type Twelve was standing there. The nerd would have seen her aboard the UFO.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t fascinated,” he replied, “but my task was only to secure your coworker. And you *do* seem to have made a bedfellow out of the person from the UFO. I assumed you left the ship on bad terms with her, just like the rest of us. Was I wrong?”

Apparently, he was still wary of the sparrow from our last encounter. It didn’t seem like he had any desire to engage us in battle. To my great relief, even the presence of Type Twelve didn’t seem to rouse any enthusiasm.

Since we still hadn’t found Miss Hoshizaki, I wanted to use my wits to settle things quickly. If worse came to worst and we *did* end up fighting him without Peeps to help, we’d lose for certain.

“By the way,” said the nerd, “your shoulder is looking a little lonely today.”

Crap. Did he figure it out? I thought.

He glanced around as he spoke—doubtless searching for Peeps. “Does the bird suffer from night blindness, perhaps?”

“Who can say? I’ve never asked him, so I’m not sure.”

“You know, I did a bunch of internet research after what happened. Apparently, there aren’t that many birds affected by night blindness. Among the more familiar varieties, chickens are, but that’s it. In fact, they’re the reason we call it being bird-eyed in Japan. Most birds can fly around just fine at night.”

During his casual monologue, something burst out from underneath his feet. It zoomed past me, then lanced straight at the people hidden just off the road to my back.

“Aaagh!” someone screamed almost instantly.

I whipped around. The sound had come from one of the camo-clad soldiers in Captain Mason’s group. A knife was now sticking out of his eyeball. Perhaps the nerd had picked it up along with the other projectiles a moment ago. The soldier writhed for a few seconds, then fell to the ground and began to spasm.

“Welp. That got through pretty easily.”

“.....”

The nerd sounded almost gleeful. He must not have expected his attack to hit—he’d probably assumed it would bounce off.

“<Captain!>” cried Ivy. “<It went through the Barrier!>”

“<Retreat! Use the trees as cover! Get away from him!>”

The knife stuck in the fallen soldier’s eye had a very interesting design. From Magical Blue’s panic, I guessed it had pierced her barrier. But that meant it was no normal knife. Maybe it was a product of his fantasies. He’d used a weapon last time that could erase a person’s existence.

“Still not up for calling your partner?” he asked me.

He was really making this difficult. If I called Peeps on the phone, he’d head over. But I couldn’t instantly summon him or anything like that. In the mountains at night, it would take him a few minutes at least to locate us. Would we be able to hold out against the nerd’s attacks in the meantime?

I had a very bad feeling about this.

“If I called him, I think he’d come right away,” I said.

“Oh? Then maybe this is my chance.”

Another knife appeared out of nowhere, right in front of the nerd. It sported the same design as the kind that had stabbed Captain Mason’s subordinate. And this time, it flew toward me.

“Ack...”

I had my barrier spell up, but I didn’t know how much good it would do. Not much, I figured, considering the last one had punched through the magical girl’s defenses. Weapons that could pierce barriers were a cliché in RPGs, after all.

Immediately, I raised my hands to protect my face.

Then Ms. Futarishizuka burst out from the roadside and got in front of me.

“We draw the short stick every time these days, eh?”

The knife stabbed her through the palm. It seemed she’d protected me.

I’d applied the barrier spell to her, too, so I was now sure we wouldn’t be able to handle the nerd’s knives—not with my abilities, at least. That was probably why he’d used the same attack again: to verify. And I guessed Ms. Futarishizuka had the same goal in mind when she jumped in front.

“You never learn, do you, Shizu?”

“Well, this guy *is* my coworker.”

“Wait, are you serious about him?”

“Oh, trust me, I wish he was worth it. But this man is absolutely *flaccid*.”

“For real?”

The knife’s ability to pierce was terrifying, but the physical object didn’t seem to pose much threat. At least, not to Ms. Futarishizuka. She pulled out the blade, and the wound healed itself instantly. I probably would have been able to handle it with my healing spell, too. The knife’s only strong point was its piercing ability, but depending on where it hit, I might not have the time to use magic.

I started to wonder where he was getting this stuff. Maybe I ought to take the time to watch some anime or read some novels and manga to see if I could

figure it out.

“Still,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “I can’t imagine you stand to gain much from picking a fight with us.” She used her eyes to point to Type Twelve, who was still at the side of the road.

Captain Mason and his group were already retreating, leaving behind the four of us—Ms. Futarishizuka, Type Twelve, Magical Pink, and me. Those hiding nearby were all gone now, thanks to the volley from before, and the surrounding area had grown quiet.

“Personally, I just want to shoot the stupid thing out of the sky,” replied the nerd. “I think trying to secure it is way more dangerous. What about all of you? The alien said she’s going to wipe out humanity. Don’t you want to make all that go away?”

Finally, we had his true intentions. Sooner or later, it seemed he planned to attack the UFO. The current situation had practically forced his hand. With Peeps absent, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him. In fact, he would likely end up fighting both the sparrow *and* Type Twelve if he let this chance slip by—a serious difficulty spike.

Despite his friendly nerd exterior, thinking back, he’d always been a bit wild and aggressive.

“That’s pretty rude,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “She’s right there, you know. Don’t you feel bad for her?”

“She flung us into outer space and declared war on us without even explaining what was going on.”

“Don’t you think it’s best we humans show her how patient and understanding we can be? Impatience punishes itself.”

Even now, Ms. Futarishizuka was ingratiating herself to Type Twelve. Both of them were trying to remove the alien from Earth, but their approaches were strikingly different.

The mark on the back of Futarishizuka’s hand probably had something to do with her attitude. If not for the curse threatening to eat away at her, she might have used this chance to defect. The thought reminded me how important it

was to keep training at magic.

“You’re making me sad, Shizu,” said the nerd. “Don’t you remember how we once ate at the same table?”

“I don’t remember eating that much, now that you mention it,” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked.

“Ah, I know. You’re trying to get your crush to think you’re pure. You want him to think you’re a virgin.”

“Hey, he thinks you only go after virgins,” she said to me. “Shouldn’t you be denying that?”

“I don’t intend to deny any specific sexual proclivities,” I replied. “You may make whatever judgments you wish.”

“Wait, are you for real?” she said incredulously.

In all honesty, I didn’t care much about sex. That kind of relationship between a man and a woman was more trouble than it was worth.

“And the alien isn’t the only one I want to bring down, if you catch my drift,” said the nerd, ignoring Ms. Futarishizuka’s confusion.

Dozens of knives, the same kind he’d launched earlier, began to form a shape around him. Had his power created each one individually, or had he materialized an item that could copy other objects? I wasn’t sure what to think.

If it was the latter, it would imply a limitation to his psychic power—he could only bring so many fantasies into reality at once. But if it was the former, we were done for. We didn’t stand a chance against someone with quality *and* quantity on his side.

“You, magic girlie!” shouted Ms. Futarishizuka after seeing what was happening. “Join us!”

“Okay.”

Perhaps because we’d just helped rescue Magical Blue, Magical Pink simply agreed, despite the command having come from a psychic. Using Magical Flight, she floated up into the air and over to us.

I quickly used flight magic as well, lifting my body into the air. It didn't matter who saw me—I no longer had the luxury to hold back. I decided to lift the ban on all my otherworldly magic.

“Let's end this right here. You've been a real thorn in my side,” said the nerd, unleashing his knives. Once he'd spoken, the weapons all fired at once.

I was the main target—90 percent of them were headed my way. Barrier magic couldn't block them, so I'd have to handle this another way. Using flight magic, I launched myself backward as hard as I could. At the same time, I unleashed a spell to make the asphalt below swell up. It formed a wall, two or three meters high, right in the weapons' path.

But then the knives swerved to avoid it. Their movements were so vivid, so flowing—like bait balls of small fish forming clumps in the ocean. They popped up above the wall, before quickly reorienting to point at me where I stood behind it.

A moment later, they were after me again. I'd considered this possibility, too. Had he materialized a telekinetic psychic and had them stand by somewhere we couldn't see? Or did the items he'd created have this sort of ability to begin with?

I didn't know which it was, but that didn't change what I had to do. I instantly flung my body up into the sky, positioning myself so that the swarm of knives was right between the nerd and me. I couldn't see Ms. Futarishizuka or Magical Pink nearby. They were both busy escaping the knives, just like I was.

That meant I didn't need to hesitate. I fired the laser beam spell I'd already prepared. Light engulfed the knives and kept going, headed straight for the nerd.

“Ugh...”

Its radiance lit up the entire area like it was daytime. It hurt my eyes, which were already adjusted to the dark. I was sure Captain Mason's group had seen it clearly as they retreated.

I waited a few moments but no knives came through. Evidently, I'd gotten rid of them all. They might have been excellent at piercing barriers, but the blades

themselves weren't that durable, it seemed.

When the light of the beam spell faded, however, the nerd was still on the ground. It didn't seem like he'd moved at all; he was standing in the same place. Bullets and fireballs were one thing—but could he absorb even the beam spell? I felt a cold sweat trickle down my back.

“Even without the bird, you still have plenty of moves in your arsenal,” he remarked. “What on earth is your psychic power? I never figured it out. I'm really racking my brain here. Since you're about to die anyway, what do you say we compare notes?”

“Isn't your psychic power something similar?” I asked him.

“You can't possibly have the same one as me. Can you?”

“Who knows?”

“If you do, I *really* need to kill you right now.”

A moment later, the beam spell fired back—launched from a spot in front of the nerd and aimed directly at me.

He was reflecting it, as I'd feared. I barely avoided it with my flight spell—and only because I was prepared for the possibility. The ray stretched up and up, blasting high into the sky, before finally dissipating and vanishing. The only casualty was the top of a tree it had caught along the way.

I was out of options. He'd blocked the most powerful attack I had.

“Nwoooohhh! Why are you following me?! Stay away!”

“I'll shoot down the knives with Magical Beam.”

“Yes, and me along with them, I'll bet...”

A short distance away, Magical Pink—dealing with the knives in the same way I had—was assisting Ms. Futarishizuka. With a volley of Magical Beams, she whittled down the weapons persistently following my colleague.

Come to think of it, what's Type Twelve doing? I wondered. The version of her accompanying us was but one of many points of contact under her control. Even if this one was destroyed, she'd implied a replacement could be

manufactured, so I hadn't been worrying too much about her. Unlike us, she didn't stand to lose everything, after all.

Curious, I glanced around and saw that, at some point, she'd moved onto the road. I couldn't see any injuries. Several knives lay at her feet, their blades shattered. Had the point of contact done that—or one of her so-called terminals up in the sky? I wasn't sure how, but she seemed to have dealt with the issue by physically breaking the weapons.

A moment later, she called out in a loud voice, “Sasaki, Futarishizuka, Pink One—please distance yourselves from the target as quickly as possible.”

Just then, I was several meters away from the nerd, but I had a *really* bad feeling about whatever was coming. Panicking, I ran as fast as I could.

Ms. Futarishizuka and Magical Pink did the same. The latter used Magical Flight to speed through the air like me. Ms. Futarishizuka dashed after her at full speed over the asphalt.

Then, as if we'd planned it in advance, all three of us flocked to Type Twelve. Beside her had to be the safest place here, right?

The alien's next words were chilling. “Target locked. Terminal standing by above will now eradicate the enemy human.”

The nerd didn't move.

Not a second later, brilliant light rained down from above.

Everything within a few meters of him was engulfed by the radiant torrent. The pillar of light reached from one side of the mountain road to the other, even extending past the asphalt to the mountain's surface. It was like the magical girl or I had fired one of our beams from the air straight down to the ground.

I looked up. The ray of light extended from above the clouds and continued to rain down for more than ten seconds, causing the air around us to buzz and vibrate.

Eventually, Type Twelve said, “...Abandoning eradication of the target.”

“What? Are you serious?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka, startled. The magical girl

and I were making the same expression.

As we looked on in bafflement, the glow raining down from the heavens began to fade, losing its strength. Like an open faucet being squeezed shut, the terminal's attack came to an end. The beam's rumbling presence disappeared, and the area fell quiet.

A deep hole marked the point the light had struck. From where we stood, we couldn't even see the bottom.

But there, right above it, near the center—and I can't say I was surprised—was the nerd. It didn't look like he'd moved a single step. Despite the loss of solid ground, his body remained in the air via some sort of fantasy; he was standing just as before, in the very same place, as if nothing had happened.

Upon seeing him, Type Twelve said, "This human is scary. This human is hateful."

"You're far too quick to give up, girl!" exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. "Have a little more stamina, would you?!"

"I lack the requisite pampering. Right now, the loneliness in my heart is accelerating."

"Aha, the truth comes out."

"She said mechanical life-forms never lie," I interjected. "There's nothing we can do about it."

Type Twelve's heart was broken. Her mouth was twitching repeatedly, disrupting her perpetual poker face. I had no doubt this was a result of all the stress she was suddenly feeling. And yet she stayed where she was—she didn't run. I appreciated that about her.

I, too, was reaching my limit. Our only option now was to contact Peeps. But would we have enough time to do that?

"I have a very, *very* bad feeling about this," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"What a coincidence," I replied. "Me too."

"Maybe we should run away for now—," Magical Pink began.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka,” interrupted Type Twelve, “I can ensure a swift escape by abandoning this point of contact—”

Right then, the exact same light we’d just witnessed suddenly fired at us from the nerd. The incredible brightness turned our vision white. I shut my eyes, unable to keep them open.

Trusting in my barrier spell, I held fast. Just in case, I put the same spell over Magical Pink as well.

After a few moments enduring the terminal’s reflected attack, the light past my lids began to dim; sensing it was dissipating, I opened my eyes again.

“Ah, we made it...,” breathed Ms. Futarishizuka.

“What did you do?” asked Magical Pink. She had been protecting herself the whole time with Magical Barrier. I assumed she was looking at me because she hadn’t felt anything hit it.

“I reinforced our defenses,” I explained. I had covered all four of us with my barrier spell.

“Even without the bird, you certainly know how to defend yourself,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Maybe,” I replied. “But I don’t have much in the way of attacks, unfortunately.”

“If only I had an opening to touch him.”

“He knows your tricks, so I doubt it’ll be easy.”

“You think?”

Fortunately, the road here was sloped, and the nerd was standing at a lower position than we were. He’d fired the beam at an angle. Though only slightly, his attack had bent up toward the sky and disappeared into the void. If we’d been in opposite positions, the ground beneath us would have been utterly destroyed.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka, I propose an immediate withdrawal.”

“And to think you were once brave enough to declare war on all of

humanity,” teased Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I am aware of the existence on your planet of a concept known as the PDCA cycle. When you do something, and obstacles arise, you immediately run a check, evaluate the results, and correct your mistakes. I had thought this common knowledge among you humans.”

“I can’t believe you’re bringing up some obscure term you found in an online dictionary,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. “What a show-off!”

“I have determined this is not a situation warranting jokes.”

“Then are you going to abandon our friend? I thought you wanted to thank her.”

“Ah...”

Even I wasn’t sure where Ms. Futarishizuka was going with this. Was she *still* trying to cover for my identity as a magical middle-aged man? Did she really think she could beat this nerd?

Type Twelve was on the verge of a mental breakdown. It wasn’t just her mouth anymore; her cheeks and brow had started trembling and shaking, too. The emotions flowing out of her core module were threatening to exceed the point of contact’s capacity. She looked as terrified as a puppy waiting for a shot at the vet.

“Losing one point of contact is no problem for you, right?”

“I...”

“She’s being considerate of us, you know. I think we should respond in kind.”

“Yes. That is an excellent point, Sasaki,” said Type Twelve, sounding improved.

Though she’d said she didn’t lie, I couldn’t be sure what the truth was. Communication between us was growing precarious. Our alliance was held together by a thread; it was like a candle in the wind—the wind being our superstrong opponent.

All of it could be blamed on the man in front of us.

Our biggest problem was that the nerd was simply too OP. In fact, I was beginning to think he was a much bigger threat than the UFO.

“Looks like you’re out of moves,” he said. “I guess it’s game over.”

Still floating above the hole, his body moved horizontally in our direction. He then alighted on the asphalt a few meters in front of us.

Judging by what he’d said, he probably let each of us attack him to see how the magical middle-aged man fought without Peeps and what sort of arsenal Type Twelve had at her disposal. If that was true, he certainly had guts. It seemed a little strange to me, though, in light of his instant surrender to the Java sparrow.

“I don’t think running will be very easy at this point,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The data accumulated inside this point of contact has already been fully uploaded to the mothership. By disconnecting the external link and shutting off the main power source, escape is possible. I can have the terminal standing by in the area simultaneously move outside the atmosphere.”

“You’re not trying to leave by yourself, are you?”

“I cannot deny that possibility.”

“If you do that, he’ll get his hands on your discarded point of contact. Are you sure that’s all right?”

“By activating the self-detonator installed in this point of contact, it can be blown to smithereens.”

“But wouldn’t that blow *us* to smithereens, too?”

“I believe protecting yourself from the explosion is possible with the defense you utilized before. And in an ideal situation, the blast will not only penetrate that human’s defenses but also

deal damage to his body. In brief, it is a superb plan, excelling in both offense and defense.”

“All right, I get it. You want to escape no matter what. That shows a lot of spunk.”

Type Twelve had completely lost her will to fight. At this rate, I couldn’t see any chance of us winning, either. Our only hope was Ms. Futarishizuka’s energy drain. But the nerd would never let her near him, and the girl in the kimono seemed to have mostly given up on the idea already.

Meanwhile, Magical Pink was still raring to go.

“I will kill the psychic.”

“You know, in this situation, those words actually reassure me. How frustrating.”

It was just as Ms. Futarishizuka said—with her glare fixed on the nerd and her wand gripped tightly in her hand, the magical girl gave off an air of power and dependability far beyond her apparent years. Unfortunately for us, her defeat seemed all but assured.

While we were busy losing our cool, the nerd held out an arm and said, “I believe this will finish things.”

Knives appeared all around him—many more than before. I estimated three digits’ worth of them. They all glittered in the moonlight, terrifying but beautiful, too. And the closer I looked, the more I noticed blades of a different design, here and there.

Those were the ones he’d used against Peeps last time. They were absolutely vicious—if one of their edges drew even a little blood, they would erase your very existence.

“If I’m seeing things right,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “a few of those daggers won’t be giving him any experience points.”

“It certainly looks that way,” I agreed.

The item in question was from a game Ms. Futarishizuka was into. They didn’t affect bosses, and if you used them on basic enemies, you didn’t get any

experience for it. I wondered what would happen if we managed to get classified as bosses, though I had no idea how we'd go about doing that. Could we get some title that would confer the status on us?

"Those have got to be meant for me," she murmured.

"Are you classified as a boss?" I asked her.

"Before, I might have said yes. But I lost a lot of confidence after meeting you and that bird. At most, I think I'd be an early game mid-boss who reappears as a random enemy near the end."

"But enemies like that have such high attack power, they can be even more of a struggle than some of the bosses, right?"

"Would you possibly mind scooping me up into your arms and carrying me away? To Karuizawa, perhaps?"

"What a coincidence. I was just thinking that was our only option."

I have no confidence whatsoever against someone flinging thousands of knives everywhere, I thought. If we had any chance at all, it rested with the Starsage, who was waiting in the Karuizawa villa. *If we can just get to him, maybe...*

As I took a step toward Futarishizuka, something happened: A clear voice rang out through the darkness of the quiet mountain road.

"Sasaki! Make water!"

The familiar sound shook this corporate drone to his core. Those words—I'd heard them so many times. I almost obeyed them on reflex alone.

Wasn't this exactly the person we were searching for?

I shifted my gaze toward the voice and saw Miss Hoshizaki weaving through the trees, heading in our direction. Her clothes were covered in dirt, with what looked like splashes of blood here and there. Scrapes and bruises covered her limbs and cheeks; she looked like she'd really been through it.

Surprisingly, she seemed to have escaped her captors on her own. Or maybe she'd been released from the car just before it exploded and caught fire.

She was about halfway between us and the nerd; I assumed she'd seen Type Twelve's bombardment and headed over. You probably could have seen that pillar of light from the next prefecture over.

"Make as much as you possibly can!" she cried. "Fill the area!"

"All right." Following her instructions, I used my magic to create water.

Once, before I'd learned flight magic, I'd been plummeting from the otherworld's sky, only to save myself by using everything I had to shoot out huge streams of water. This time, I pushed out even more than back then, aiming it straight in front of me, from my higher vantage point.

A huge torrent of water splashed down onto our surroundings, like a big swimming pool had been turned on its head. I narrowed the scope of it to the nerd, excluding the area where Miss Hoshizaki stood. Otherwise, I might have crushed her with the weight of the water.

My hope that this would wash away the knives was naive, however. None of the floating weapons moved a millimeter. The same went for the nerd himself, who was using his psychic powers to stock up the water pouring on him. His clothes weren't even wet.

The water that he *didn't* stock continued to flow downward, flooding the entire mountain road. I doubted even a typhoon making landfall would turn the place into this much of a swamp.

"You," said the nerd once he saw Miss Hoshizaki. "You're the one who caused all this. What have you been doing this whole time?"

I thought she'd make her move right away once she had her water, but she didn't. All the water I'd created just kept making the surroundings wetter and wetter. She didn't move it, or freeze it, or anything.

If there was one thing worth keeping an eye on, though, it was our feet. A puddle on the road now connected Miss Hoshizaki to the nerd. Their shoes were soaked. But I really doubted she could do anything just by bending a puddle of water to her will.

What was her plan?

The nerd seemed to be suspicious as well. He looked around, sighing. “Playing with water now? You got my shoes soaking wet.”

“Don’t mess with my juniors,” she said.

A portion of the knives aimed at us swung around to point at Miss Hoshizaki.

Just as they did, it happened—suddenly, with a *wmphhh*, the nerd’s body burst apart. It was one hell of a sight.

In an instant, all his parts scattered, like a bomb had gone off inside him. A huge amount of blood, scraps of flesh, and internal organs splattered all around, smacking onto the ground with awful, sticky noises. The vivid color of the intestines was grotesque.

A few scraps landed near us. Miss Hoshizaki, who had been closer, ended up covered in blood—and yet she stood there calmly, looking at the nerd’s remains.

She didn’t seem disturbed in the least. It must have been her.

What I didn’t understand was *how*.

It was Ms. Futarishizuka, standing right next to me, who offered an answer to my question. “Did your power level up?”

“You got it in one,” she replied. “Not that I’d expect any less from you.”

“If you can now freely manipulate the fluid in someone else’s body, that’s a *big* upgrade.”

“To be precise, it’s more like I gained the ability to manipulate it across thin barriers, such as human skin. I could control spit and blood from wounds already.”

“And you could access his bodily fluids through the water underneath us?”

“That’s right.”

Miss Hoshizaki’s psychic power used to be the ability to control any water she directly touched. Now she could do the same thing through barriers of a certain thickness. In this case, she’d used the puddle on the road, gone through the man’s soaked shoes, and arrived at his skin.

And as a result, he'd exploded.

Given that the mess of flesh was still steaming, she'd probably caused all his fluids to instantly boil. The skin of his face had been ripped off his skull in the blast and now lay on the asphalt. It was terrifying.

Incidentally, all the knives he'd created had vanished when he blew up.

"And what *have* you been up to?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"If you're all here, you must know about me getting kidnapped," said Miss Hoshizaki.

"Yes, though it's a long story."

"We saw the recording from a surveillance camera set up near the scene," I explained.

Now that the nerd was confirmed dead, Miss Hoshizaki came over to us.

As she drew closer, I felt my expression stiffen. Her attack just now had been *vicious*.

But once I calmed down a little, I realized my own sparrow could probably do something similar. In that light, it was a little silly for me to be afraid of my senior's new powers. Thinking of my pet bird naturally soothed my tension, too. *Thanks, Peeps.*

"Once we reached this mountain road," she told us, "someone else attacked the car I was in. Then they dragged me out and took me deeper into the woods. They held me down, pointed a gun at me, and said a bunch of stuff in English..."

According to Miss Hoshizaki's explanation, she'd been traveling in the minivan that exploded and caught fire, just as we'd thought. It seemed a different group had already kidnapped her by the time we arrived.

"I was so desperate to survive that I unconsciously used my power."

"And made them explode?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. "Like you just did with *him*?"

"That's right."

I'd asked her once in the past whether she could manipulate the blood in

someone's body by touching their skin. She'd told me no, but that she was working hard to make it possible. And now, faced with an emergency, at the very last moment, those efforts had borne fruit.

"After that, I was totally lost," she went on. "I was starving and parched—and thought for sure I'd wither up and die. And then that big pillar of light came out of the sky, right? I knew I was grasping at straws, but I figured I'd come over anyway."

"Then my action was correct, after all," said Type Twelve. I saw her nostrils flare somewhat. She must have really been craving that affirmation.

"You did that?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Hoshizaki, your thinking is correct."

"Well, then thank you. You saved me."

"Ah...! Hoshizaki, those words are very good."

"A-are they?"

"They soothe the loneliness in my heart very effectively."

"Quick to change your tune, I see," murmured Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I was not wrong for believing in your advice, Hoshizaki."

Type Twelve seemed to think even more highly of Miss Hoshizaki now. That was a much better outcome than the opposite. In fact, maybe we could simply leave the alien in her hands for the time being. Though with Miss Hoshizaki's younger sister in the picture, their relationship would need skillful mediation. I'd have to discuss it with Ms. Futarishizuka later.

"By the way, could I have some water to drink, Sasaki?" she asked, walking over to me.

"Well, sure..., " I replied, producing some.

She deftly controlled it and began slaking her thirst. For some reason, the gesture struck me as a little erotic, but maybe that was just my imagination. At the moment, my senior colleague seemed much more mature than usual.

Next to us, Ms. Futarishizuka—her eyes still focused on the nerd's remains—said, “I never thought he'd die.”

“You knew that psychic, didn't you?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Even on a global scale, he's rank A, and a high A, at that,” Ms. Futarishizuka pointed out. “You don't know how many have tried to do him in, do you? This is one for the history books.”

“W-well, I couldn't help it. It looked like he was about to kill the rest of you...”

“You rescued us from a very dangerous situation,” I said. “You have my sincere gratitude.”

“I have nothing to say but my honest thanks. No teasing this time,” agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. “You saved our bacon, seriously.”

“Sasaki's one thing, but it feels weird to have *you* thanking me so earnestly.”

“It's a special occasion. Just take it as intended, all right?”

But we only had a few moments to rest before something began to happen nearby.

The nerd's flesh and blood strewn about the road—the pieces on the ground, big and small, all floated into the air, radiating a faint light, and began to reassemble in one place. The sight of the intestines squirming under the moonlight was grotesquely vivid.

“Wait, what the...?!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka.

“He's not about to revive, is he?” I asked. “The parts are all going to the same place.”

“I can think of plenty of revival items like that, but come on! This is against the rules!”

Certain items could automatically resurrect a dead character when equipped. Even I could think of a few off the top of my head. Special rings or pendants, for example, that bestowed the effect on a character when worn.

Was that why the nerd had seemed so confident?

“Can psychics bring back the dead?” asked Magical Pink.

“I’ve never heard of one who could,” I replied.

“Even if one existed, we’d never hear about it,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “We’re at the bottom of the ladder.”

As we’d anticipated, the scattered flesh and blood continued to gather in one spot.

Once it was all together, it began to writhe and squirm—much like Abaddon’s meat form—as it regained a humanoid shape. Yet another terrible sight. It looked like pieces of a human-shaped model kit were floating through the air, reconstructing the whole.

When this kind of thing happened in games, an angel or something would enter from off-screen and bathe a character in a pale glow, resurrecting them immediately. What happened to all that? The process occurring before us wasn’t immediate, but it was still fast; in no time at all, the flesh had regained its original shape.

In mere minutes, the nerd had been revived right where he’d been standing before. His eyes opened, and then he spoke.

“...This feeling must mean my auto-revive triggered.”

“So that’s why you’ve been on your high horse, eh?” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

Apparently, she’d had doubts about the man’s attitude as well. He was usually much more careful.

“I don’t remember the moment I died, though,” he said. “Did I go down before realizing what happened? But that would mean this woman has power equal to a ToD—or even an LoD, depending on the situation...”

“And I’d thank you not to underestimate her, hmm? She’s pretty much the strongest.”

“W-wait! Don’t start making stuff up about me,” complained Miss Hoshizaki.

“I’m only telling the truth. You outclassed me just now.”

Unfamiliar words were spilling from the nerd’s lips. ToD and LoD. They seemed to be some kind of specialist lingo used among psychics. “What is a

ToD?” I asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Touch of death,” she explained. “It refers to a psychic power that can kill with a single touch.”

“I see.”

Then LoD probably meant “look of death” or something. Did psychics like that exist? Ones who could kill at a glance? The thought was terrifying. But with Miss Hoshizaki’s new powers, if it was raining, she could potentially pull off the same thing.

“Yeah, I don’t like my chances anymore. I’ll give up and go home like a good little boy,” the man grumbled after hearing our exchange.

It seemed he’d acknowledged Miss Hoshizaki as a threat. I remembered his fight against Peeps—when he’d decided to flee, he did so incredibly quickly. It seemed he was partial to making snap decisions.

“Oh, you thought we’d let you?”

And Ms. Futarishizuka was just as quick. As she shouted enthusiastically, she glanced at Miss Hoshizaki. Just a moment ago, she’d been ready to flee, and now she was trying to kill the guy. It was very impressive.

“Get him!” she called out to Miss Hoshizaki.

“But what’s the point if he just revives again?” she objected.

“Then you can just keep going, as many times as it takes!”

“Oh, *very* scary. I think I’ll be leaving now,” said the nerd, disappearing almost instantly. I was reminded of Peeps’s teleportation magic.

If he’d prepared an escape route, then he’d probably foreseen an encounter with the Java sparrow. It was difficult to say for sure whether he’d envisioned engaging us in battle, though.

A moment later, Miss Hoshizaki’s power proved the nerd had done as he said. “I can’t sense him anywhere nearby. It seems he escaped.”

“Ugh. We almost had him,” said Ms. Futarishizuka bitterly. Though he was her former employer, there seemed to be no love lost between them.

Meanwhile, after hearing Miss Hoshizaki's remark, Type Twelve went over to her. Looking her straight in the eye, she said, "I feel very pleased that you are safe, Hoshizaki."

"O-oh," she replied. "It seems like you've had a change of heart."

"Yeah, right," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "She was the first one of us to try to run away."

"Mechanical life-forms do not lie. Hoshizaki, I request an opportunity to defend myself from that woman's claim."

Despite her "do not lie" spiel, she was sure trying to make herself look good in front of our coworker. Was this sudden display of subtlety a manifestation of her newfound emotions?

"Anyway," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "You can kill people instantly by boiling their bodily fluids now? That's a pretty brutal power."

"As if you have any right to talk," Miss Hoshizaki replied.

"Oh, but my power is so much more—how should I put it—elegant? Highbrow? Something like that."

"It's all the same in the end!"

You're equally terrifying, I thought. I knew they'd both glare at me if I said that out loud, though, so I kept my mouth shut. Miss Hoshizaki had been frightening before, and now she was even scarier. She had begun to make me slightly uneasy.

As we were reveling in our mutual survival, Magical Pink suddenly left her place next to me.

"I will kill the psychics," she said.

After seeing Type Twelve head straight for Miss Hoshizaki, Magical Pink approached the alien, brandished her wand, and asked, "Are you a psychic?"

"No. To state my name in accordance with the rules of your language, I am Independent Multipurpose Early-Model Frontier Sector-Pioneering Long-Range Space Cruiser Type Three-Seven-Six-Nine. However, this point of contact

possesses a unique manufacturing name.”

“...Early-Model...Multipurpose...Space Cruiser?”

“And when you point that stick at me, it makes my heart feel lonely.”

“.....”

Magical Pink froze up at the unexpected introduction. She was probably having trouble grasping the situation. We couldn’t handle any more fighting at this point, so I—the magical middle-aged man—decided to mediate.

“She’s an android,” I told the magical girl. “A robot. Have you seen the news recently? There have been stories of people all over the world seeing unidentified flying objects. Well, all of those belong to this girl.”

“.....”

Magical Pink seemed suspicious of my explanation but quickly asked a follow-up question. “Why would a robot look like a child?”

“This point of contact was manufactured for the purpose of communicating with humans. A survey of significant length conducted on human civilization showed that this form would be optimal in seeking out more harmonious communication.”

Type Twelve’s answer came immediately. *So that’s why*, I thought, keenly understanding her logic.

Fortunately, Magical Pink lowered her wand right away.

“Look, Sasaki,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “can we go somewhere else already? I really need a shower.”

“Hoshizaki, I would like to respect your viewpoint. I will prepare a terminal for transport at once.”

“Why only her?” grumbled Ms. Futarishizuka. “Why do you only become so brisk, so animated, when it comes to her?”

“Come on, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said. “It’s not doing any harm.”

Not only had Miss Hoshizaki given Type Twelve useful advice, but she’d even rescued her from a dangerous situation. The alien’s affection for our coworker was skyrocketing. Miss Hoshizaki didn’t know the circumstances, though, so the sudden friendliness left her at a loss for how to react.

Ignoring them, the magical girl said, “I want to kill psychics, but I’ll go home for today.”

“Actually,” I interrupted, “if it’s okay with you, why don’t you come—?”

Miss Hoshizaki had saved her again, too, and the magical girl had probably decided to spare her. Despite my attempt to get her attention, she completely ignored me. Her Magical Field appeared and expanded, showing a blackness even darker than our surroundings, and she hoisted her injured body through it.

Every time I watched her go, she looked sad and lonely. Her solitary view of the world was bleak to the extreme, and her serious, gloomy outlook pained me.

After she disappeared, the rest of us boarded Type Twelve’s terminal and left the chaotic site behind.

<Home and Family>

Leaving the mountains of Chichibu, we headed straight for Karuizawa. After explaining everything that had happened to Miss Hoshizaki, she'd told us she wanted to see her little sister first, so that's where Type Twelve had decided to take us. In a few minutes, we were back at Ms. Futarishizuka's villa.

The terminal landed in the mansion's expansive yard, after which we disembarked and headed to the living room. There, we found the sister still lying on the sofa, presumably unconscious but breathing peacefully and regularly. To the side were my neighbor and Abaddon, watching her.

"Welcome back, mister."

"I'm glad to see you're all safe."

Once we'd confirmed everyone's safety, we breathed a collective sigh of relief. Then, suddenly, we realized someone was missing.

"Wait, where's Peeps?" I asked.

"He went up to the roof to keep watch," said my neighbor.

"Oh." It seemed the distinguished Java sparrow was really working hard.

As if in response to my question, the bird appeared a moment later. No sooner had he fluttered down the hallway than he was on my shoulder again. He must have seen us return.

"It would seem your task is complete," he noted.

"Thank you for helping us out," I told him. "Everything's wrapped up now."

"Then all is well."

Everyone involved in the incident was currently in Ms. Futarishizuka's living room. Naturally, our attention shifted to the younger sister sleeping on the sofa.

“Would you mind keeping all this a secret from her, Miss Hoshizaki?” I asked.

“Nothing would make me happier,” she replied. “I want her to live in peace.”

“But won’t she be in danger if she doesn’t know what’s going on?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Next time, she could be the one kidnapped instead of you. For as lonely a life as these others and I lead, you stand out.” At this, she glanced at my neighbor and me.

She was right; neither my neighbor nor I had any kin worth speaking of. In a sense, that made us very resistant to potential hostage situations. For my part, I had no other friends or acquaintances, and I assumed something similar could be said of my neighbor as well.

“I... I’ll protect her!” insisted Miss Hoshizaki.

“While you’re at work?” countered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“But... It’s just...,” she stammered, desperately trying to hang on. You could see how much she loved her sister.

At that point, Type Twelve made a suggestion. “Then you should rely on me, Hoshizaki.”

“What do you mean?”

“In response to recent events, I will develop additional points of contact and terminals, manufacture them, and have them protect your sister in secret. It is possible to guard her on a twenty-four-hour basis wherever she may travel in her day-to-day life, such as her home and school.”

“Oh. Um, huh. That...sounds pretty nice, I guess.”

Miss Hoshizaki couldn’t hide her uncertainty toward the unilateral goodwill Type Twelve was showing her. Our coworker probably didn’t realize she’d done anything at all—the alien had suddenly grown fond of her, and she didn’t know how to handle it.

“I will begin the development process immediately,” continued Type Twelve. “Should you have any requests regarding their functionality, please inform me of each in turn.”

“In that case,” I said, butting in, “would you be able to station one point of

contact or terminal at this mansion and give it the ability to communicate with any additional ones you plan to produce? That way, should anything happen, one of us will be able to move out immediately.”

“Understood,” said Type Twelve. “I will station the terminal used for transportation at this location.”

It was reassuring to have a security system run by an advanced mechanical life-form. I doubted there’d be a problem even if a group armed with guns tried to charge in, and I was sure it could deal with most psychics, too.

Of course, if a rank-A psychic like the nerd showed up, all bets were off. Still, it was far more reassuring than hiring psychics from the bureau. Miss Hoshizaki’s sister would be able to live her life as usual now.

With that matter out of the way, Abaddon said, *“I’m worried about my partner’s lifestyle, too.”*

I felt the same way. My neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki’s sister were in similar positions. Everyone in the death game had wildly different power levels depending on if they were inside or outside an isolated space. If a group armed with guns attacked her on her way home from school, she’d be helpless.

“After all, demons can’t do that much outside of isolated spaces, you know?”

“If Type Twelve is telling the truth, then Miss Kurosu’s information is already in the bureau’s database,” I pointed out. “And if other organizations have it, too, then tightening up our own defenses might well end up harming her instead.”

“Then I am willing to protect her,” said Peeps, weighing in. *“But that may be difficult when I am away with Sasaki.”*

He was right—while we were away in the otherworld, we couldn’t participate in events here. A situation might arise where we were gone for an entire day, and I wanted to set something else up in the meantime.

As I mulled it over, Type Twelve spoke up again. “I plan to impose on Kurosu for some time. Thus, she may rely on me as Hoshizaki does.”

“Oh. Really?” I asked.

“I-impose on me? Um...” The neighbor faltered upon hearing Type Twelve’s declaration.

Ms. Futarishizuka and I both knew that the two of them had discussed some kind of deal, but we didn’t know the details. What had transpired at my neighbor’s school? I was still curious.

“Time to go digital and automate our jobs with AI!” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If the one in charge is okay with that, then I don’t have any objections, either,” I said.

“Hey, if she’s got your seals of approval, I couldn’t be more thankful,” said Abaddon.

His agreement meant Type Twelve would be looking after Miss Kurosu as well. It wasn’t clear *how* she’d protect her, but mechanical life-forms never lied, so I was sure she’d get the job done. I was a little anxious, though, given how airheaded the alien could be at times. For all her gusto when she had the advantage, her first thought was to run when the tables turned.

“Oh, and by the way,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, taking out her phone and turning to Miss Hoshizaki. “Did you know you’ve made your TV debut?”

“Huh? W-wait, what does that mean?” our senior coworker replied in confusion.

Ms. Futarishizuka started tapping the screen. After a moment, she held it out for our coworker to see. From the side, I could tell it showed a photograph of Miss Hoshizaki—the one of her face that we’d seen on TV a few hours ago. Apparently, Type Twelve’s big hijack was a hot topic on the internet.

After getting an eyeful of one such news article, Miss Hoshizaki cried out, “Wait! Wh-wh-what’s going on here?!”

“Ooh, no point getting mad at me,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “The culprit is the machine girl.”

“Hoshizaki, why do you glare at me?”

“This is my picture! And my name! And now they’re both all over the internet...”

I did a quick check using my own phone. People online had already started trying to figure out who exactly she was. Her superthick makeup was inspiring some unkind remarks here and there. They'd even thought up a nickname for her, with some going on about how cute she was.

The way things were headed, Miss Hoshizaki's social life was about to be destroyed.

"Hoshizaki, are you troubled?" asked Type Twelve.

"Of course I am! How can I ever go out in public again...?"

"I can deal with it," said the alien.

"You may not know this, but once a photo spreads on the internet, you can't take it down anymore!" Miss Hoshizaki had tears in her eyes. "You can try to erase every single one, but if you set people off, you'll only make it worse! This stuff ruins people's lives!"

She was holding her head in her hands as she tried desperately to explain. She looked for all the world like a normal high school student, a fact I found oddly relieving. It had been pretty crazy to see her out in the mountains—her face covered in blood, unfazed as she stared down her enemy.

"If they fire me from the bureau for this, how am I supposed to pay rent and tuition?"

Never mind, I thought. *She's thinking like a breadwinner, not a high schooler.* While I'd imagined my coworker's objections being a little less serious, considering her family issues again made me realize something. She was a far more respectable member of society than me for the simple fact that she had a family to take care of.

Not only was she my senior at work, she was my senior in *life*. The thought made her seem so much bigger, somehow, when I looked at her again.

"You won't necessarily get fired, dearie," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"How can you say that? The ship has sailed! There's no bringing it back now, is there?"

"The machine girl hardly saved you. In fact, you were the one who saved *her*. I

think we're owed a little more effort from such an impressive, advanced mechanical life-form, yes?" Ms. Futarishizuka turned to Type Twelve. "Could you show us the extent of this technology or whatever that's supposedly so far beyond our own?"

She's betting on the alien's superior technology, I thought. In a hacking sense.

"There is no need to ask," replied Type Twelve. "I will adopt Futarishizuka's viewpoint."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Miss Hoshizaki. "What do you mean, *adopt*?"

"I will delete all your personal information currently spread across the humans' network."

"You can do that? But isn't that illegal?"

"Within half a day, I will be able to delete over ninety percent of the data on mainstream media. I will commence deletion of the rest of the data, little by little, by deploying surveillance. Your personal information will never appear on any network ever again."

"That's a *very* fast ETA," I noted.

"One computer installed in this point of contact easily exceeds the abilities of any computer existing on this planet. The bottlenecks will be primitive forms of communication such as optical and wireless, as they are known in local terminology."

"Right," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Let's just throw our planet's entire infrastructure into the trash, I guess."

"Personally," I said, "that statement makes me curious about the future of cryptocurrency, since that technology is wholly based on computer resources."

"What? You mean you're not shorting the market?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. "During *this* once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?"

“Are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Of course I am! You’d have to be an idiot not to, in our position.”

Suddenly curious, I checked the prices, but they hadn’t changed much. Still, Ms. Futarishizuka’s excitement was unfading. Her expression literally had “Seriously, are you a moron?” written all over it.

Maybe it was best if I sold while I had the chance. Unfortunately, I didn’t have an account to make the transactions.

“Sasaki, what in the world are you talking about?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Oh, uh, nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

If I explained, we’d wind up adding cryptocurrency trading lessons to our English conversation sessions. That could only lead to disaster, so I dodged the issue entirely. Her money was for rent and her sister’s tuition—and nothing else.

“Hold on,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “If you do this and erase all my pictures from the internet, won’t that cause problems? Won’t you have to hack into other companies’ servers? I don’t want any big corporations to sue me.”

“We can ask the bureau about it,” I offered. “I don’t think Mr. Akutsu will want to abandon you, either. If you explain what happened, he could probably deal with the aftermath of Type Twelve’s actions.”

“You think so? I don’t know that our section chief cares that much about individuals.”

Our boss *had* once abandoned employees by the dozen just to get ahead. Miss Hoshizaki’s objection made sense, but things were different now. She’d evolved into Super Hoshizaki, for one. In pure combat strength, she’d rate even higher than Ms. Futarishizuka thanks to her versatility. And since she was friends with the UFO, keeping her safe should be his number one priority. I doubted even Mr. Akutsu would let her go that easily.

“Now that your psychic power has leveled up, I doubt even the chief can take you lightly. And I’m sure he already views your relationship with Type Twelve as extremely important.”

“Do...do you think so?” Miss Hoshizaki was clearly happy.

As her junior, this was my chance to seal the deal. “You squared off with a rank-A psychic and beat him, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did! My power might be kind of boring, but maybe I still have potential.”

“I’ve always thought your power was wonderful because of its versatility, personally.”

“You say some pretty good things every now and then, huh, Sasaki?”

Despite how blatantly I was buttering her up, she was now smiling ear to ear. I bet she was overjoyed that her power had improved. A pay raise was clearly in her future; high-ranking psychics were all paid very well in order to prevent headhunting by other organizations—though at the moment, her friendship with the UFO seemed even more valuable.

In any case, I got the feeling we could do whatever we wanted to the internet now that we had Type Twelve’s help. It was a dangerous thought, and one that had me shifting my attention to Ms. Futarishizuka. She had a crooked, gleeful grin plastered on her face. I could tell she was plotting to trick the juvenile mechanical life-form and exploit her for all she was worth.

“That pretty much solves all our current problems,” she said, “so why don’t we have dinner? I could eat a horse.”

“Would you mind if we joined you?” I asked.

“It’s a little late to be feigning restraint,” she replied. “You’ve already gotten more free meals out of me than I can count.”

“Could I take my sister back home while you’re getting dinner ready?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Hoshizaki, should you require transportation, I can assist,” offered Type Twelve.

“Oh, just one thing,” interrupted Ms. Futarishizuka. “Can mechanical life-forms eat food?”

“They can,” the alien answered. “This point of contact is equipped with a full

suite of features to communicate with humanity.”

“In that case, there’s one, two, three, four...five in all, plus one bird.”

After counting us up, Ms. Futarishizuka headed off to the kitchen. I assumed she’d left out the little sister and counted herself, Miss Hoshizaki, my neighbor, Type Twelve, Peeps, and me. Abaddon didn’t eat, after all.

Without anything else to do, I followed her. “Let me help.”

“Oh, then I’ll join you,” said my neighbor right away, coming after us.

Abaddon stayed at her side, floating in midair.

“You know what they say about too many cooks in the kitchen,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka, eyeing Abaddon.

“Oh, but it’s pretty big in there. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

In any case, I was enormously relieved we had all gotten back safely.



After Miss Hoshizaki got her sister back home, the girl woke up, and the two of them had a minor quarrel. According to our coworker, her sister had been distraught at first, but after seeing her elder sister safe, she managed to calm herself down.

In regard to the incident, Miss Hoshizaki explained that she’d been mixed up in a crime. She obviously couldn’t pretend nothing had happened, and she managed to spin a tale that convinced her sister while concealing the presence of psychics and mechanical life-forms. I sincerely hoped the bureau would proactively support her statements down the road.

As for the all-important report to our boss, we figured we’d write it up first thing in the morning, since it was already so late. My company phone was still sitting in the hotel. The last time our boss had contacted us, he’d told us to head for Atsugi. But that was in the past now; I assumed Captain Mason had already given him the rundown on the night’s events.

And so once Miss Hoshizaki got back, we enjoyed a late dinner.

Arriving in the villa's dining room, we all took our seats around the table. Miss Hoshizaki had slipped out of her condo and headed back in no time at all. She'd used Type Twelve's terminal to make both trips; the alien was more than happy to be her chauffeur. *Can't say I'm not concerned about our impish coworker's huge new playground.*

"After wandering around in the cold for so long, this stew really hits the spot."

The earthenware pot boiled and bubbled on the portable stove at the dining table's center. I had to agree with Miss Hoshizaki—the piping-hot ingredients were warming me to my core. *This mix of soft boiled cabbage, green onions, and enoki mushrooms is the absolute best.*

"Well, dear, you were the MVP today," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Eat as much as you like."

"I can't eat too much. My sister's at home making dinner."

"You could have invited her here," I suggested.

"That would be pushing my luck," she replied. "And after I finally managed to smooth everything over. Also, I noticed we have a lot of ingredients, but I'm not sure these usually go together. What kind of hot pot is this?"

She had a bite-size bamboo shoot clutched in her chopsticks. As she'd indicated, it was an unusual ingredient for the dish. Personally, I was happy to have them, since they were crunchy, fresh, and delicious.

"Earlier, we had to stop making dinner halfway through, remember?" Ms. Futarishizuka said. "I just wanted food in my belly, so I threw everything in. Don't you think the shrimp and shellfish are doing a fine job adding some umami?"

"They are," said Miss Hoshizaki. "It's too bad I'll have to stop early. I'd love to have some noodles or rice at the end."

"If you're pressed for time, I can make you a separate pot," I offered.

"No, it's not worth all that."

We'd prepared thin noodles for our finisher, which we'd boiled and then firmed up with ice water. I was one hundred percent certain they'd be good.

“There’s a big shrimp hidden near the bottom,” my neighbor told me. “You can have it.”

“No, no,” I said. “Feel free to take it.”

“Then would you like this crab meat?”

“They’ve been hitting it off ever since she came back, eh? I can understand your desperation.”

“Please be quiet, Abaddon.”

Personally, it bothered me that Abaddon was the only one without any food. According to him, angels and demons didn’t need to eat. He never even picked up a pair of chopsticks; he just sat calmly next to his partner with a grin on his face as he looked at the table.

Meanwhile, my own partner was head over heels for the meat. *“This thinly sliced beef is quite good,”* he said. *“I could eat this for days.”*

“There’s always one, isn’t there?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “The guest who picks out all the most expensive meat in the pot. And while everyone else is holding back, too.”

“Hmm. Was this all you had, then?”

Seeing the sparrow suddenly stop eating and act guilty was really cute. *And using his feet to slide his plate away? I thought. That’s criminally adorable. I really wish I could record this.*

Our dinner continued harmoniously, with everyone gathered around the earthenware pot.

Our bellies were quickly growing full, when suddenly Type Twelve spoke up.

“I am currently feeling a sense of fulfillment that is difficult to describe.”

She hadn’t said much after sitting down, preferring to eat in silence. As a result, everyone now stopped talking and looked at her. The lively dining room grew several times quieter. I was sure we all felt a significant degree of tension, because despite sharing a meal with us, she was still unpredictable. It was Miss

Hoshizaki's presence alone that tied us all together.

"It seems to be an emotion directly opposite to loneliness," Type Twelve continued, putting her chopsticks and serving plate down. The rest of us simply sat there, wondering what she was going on about.

"Fulfillment often follows a group accomplishment like this," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Do you mean to say that humans live sharing these emotions with one another on a daily basis?"

"That's right. Though, I suppose there is some variation."

I thought back to the Hoshizaki rescue mission in the Chichibu mountains. The chain of events seemed to have left even Type Twelve with plenty to think about. If it had given her a sense of unity with our group, then we couldn't be happier—especially if that would reduce the planet's current danger level even slightly.

Personally, I wanted to request that she go back to her home planet immediately. But if I was too forceful and got on her bad side, it would ruin everything. For the time being, it seemed best to continue building a good relationship with her and wait for a better opportunity to make the suggestion. *I'm pretty sure Ms. Futarishizuka is thinking the same thing.*

"Sasaki, Futarishizuka, the increase in loneliness I felt through my dialogue with the two of you is now trending downward. Enough, at least, for me to consider postponing the destruction of your dwelling for the time being."

"I couldn't be happier to hear it," I replied.

"For the time being, she says," mumbled Ms. Futarishizuka. "I'd rather you scrap the idea completely."

The problem that had been weighing on us for some time now had just been resolved. Type Twelve had declared she wouldn't destroy humanity. She didn't touch on the issue of the crater, but since I'd been certain we were next, I was

very grateful for the current turn of events. And it was all thanks to Miss Hoshizaki.

“It is evident,” continued Type Twelve, “that I am not in a familial relationship with you all.”

“Well, naturally,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Despite not being family, however, I have, in this short period of time, been able to dramatically soothe my loneliness.”

Type Twelve looked across at us as she spoke.

Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Hoshizaki, and I sat across from her, with Abaddon and my neighbor on her side. Peeps maintained his vigil next to me atop the table, as he always did.

“Eating a meal in this manner is more desirable than previously estimated.”

“Conversation’s the best part of hot pot, right?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “My sister and I have it sometimes, but eating with so many people is a completely different experience. And more people means you don’t have to contribute as much.”

“Ah, then you’ll take on part of the cost of the ingredients?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “They were quite expensive, if you didn’t know.”

“Oh. Um, well, I...” She began to stammer in response to our coworker’s banter.

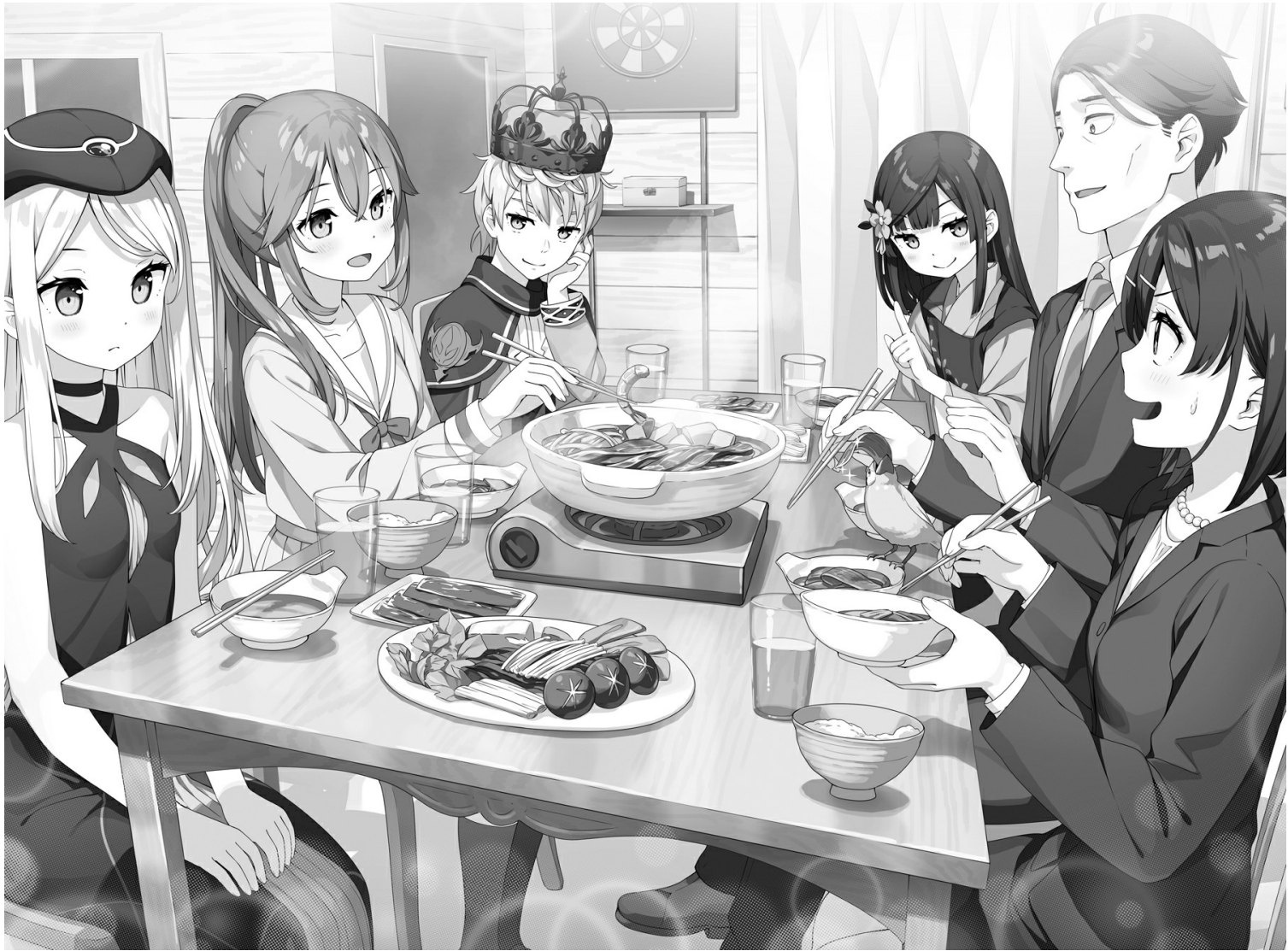
Now that I thought about it, a lot had changed in my life. The only times I ever had dinner with anyone else had been company drinking parties. But lately, it happened almost every single day.

“My point,” said Type Twelve, “is this: Were this ‘family’ relationship to be present, I could hope for even greater results.”

“.....”

I doubted my neighbor, with her family issues, would accept such a statement very easily. Her gaze was cold, but silent, as she watched Type Twelve continue.

I felt bad for her. Even Abaddon, who usually never stopped chattering, kept his mouth shut.



I was somewhat similar in that regard, so I understood where she was coming from. If the family Type Twelve observed had been the Kurosus, Earth probably would have been in a billion pieces by now.

Completely unaware of her feelings, the alien continued profoundly. “Through observing the relationship between Hoshizaki and her younger sister, I feel confident in saying that the presence of a family is still a crucial factor in soothing one’s loneliness—and that there is worth in experiencing its workings subjectively through a point of contact rather than viewing it as objective data.”

Maybe she had made additional discoveries, beyond our previous conversations, while ferrying our coworker and her younger sister home. She remained impassive as she spoke, but I could feel a tiny bit of momentum in her tone.

“Regarding the latter, I referenced the viewpoints I received recently from Sasaki and Futarishizuka.”

“What are you getting at, then?” asked our host.

“.....”

The girl in the kimono’s expression seemed to say, “You have a pretty annoying personality for a machine.” Did the alien want us to figure it out ourselves? If so, that *would* be quite irritating.

At this, Type Twelve fell silent for a few moments. But then, modulating her voice just a little higher, she looked at everyone at the table in turn.

“I will be direct,” she said. “I desire a familial relationship and to enact household dynamics with all of you.”

Ah, I thought. Another bolt from the blue. Does this mean she’s after a pseudo-family, or a fake family, or something like that?

“I shall be the daughter, and Hoshizaki shall be the mother. I will not yield on this point. I may compromise on the other roles, however.”

Wow, she didn't waste any time snatching up the best position, either.

Afterword

How did you like the sixth volume of *Sasaki and Peeps*?

The UFO has been floating right above the characters' heads for a while now, passing by without making contact. It's an element I've always wanted to put into the story, ever since the start of its serialization, and I feel a big sense of accomplishment at having finally revealed it.

I also have an announcement to make. As I'm sure many of you already know, this work will be receiving an anime adaptation. This is a first for me, and I'm very happy about it. I'm dancing madly around the room, in fact.

The voice actors for Sasaki and Peeps will be Tomokazu Sugita and Aoi Yuuki, respectively. It's been a pleasure watching the commercials and promotional videos and getting to hear such wonderful voices. I don't have the words to properly express how thankful I am.

Starting with Sasaki and Peeps, all the charming characters designed by Kantoku will be up and moving around in their new animated world. I can't wait to see them in action.

But the only reason I was granted such a valuable opportunity is the support of all those who have stuck with this series. Thank you for always rooting for Sasaki and Peeps. I'll keep working my hardest so you can continue to enjoy the series in the future.

Details about the anime adaptation will be released on the official website and Twitter in the coming months, so please check them out.

Moving right into thank-yous, I'd like to send a deep, heartfelt thanks to Kantoku, who continues to provide stunningly gorgeous illustrations despite a very busy schedule.

The cover illustration for this volume is incredible and has a different

atmosphere from the previous ones. It makes me want to go camping and lie down under a sky full of stars. The characters' fun adventures through various worlds are wonderfully depicted in the frontispiece and all the interior illustrations as well. I am overflowing with gratitude that this work has been blessed with such an amazing illustrator.

I'd also like to express a heartfelt thanks to Chief Editor O, everyone in the MF Bunko J editorial department, and everyone working on the adaptation. I know you're all very busy, and yet you always provide advice down to the most minute details. Your terrifying email response speed is something I remain ever grateful for.

I'd also like to thank the salespeople, the proofreaders, all the designers, bookstores in Japan and overseas, digital booksellers, the producer, those working on the adaptation, and everyone else who helped make this book a reality. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for providing even more generous support than before.

This has been *Sasaki and Peeps*, published by Kadokawa and MF Bunko J, originally posted on Kakuyomu. I look forward to your continued support of the series.

(Buncololi)

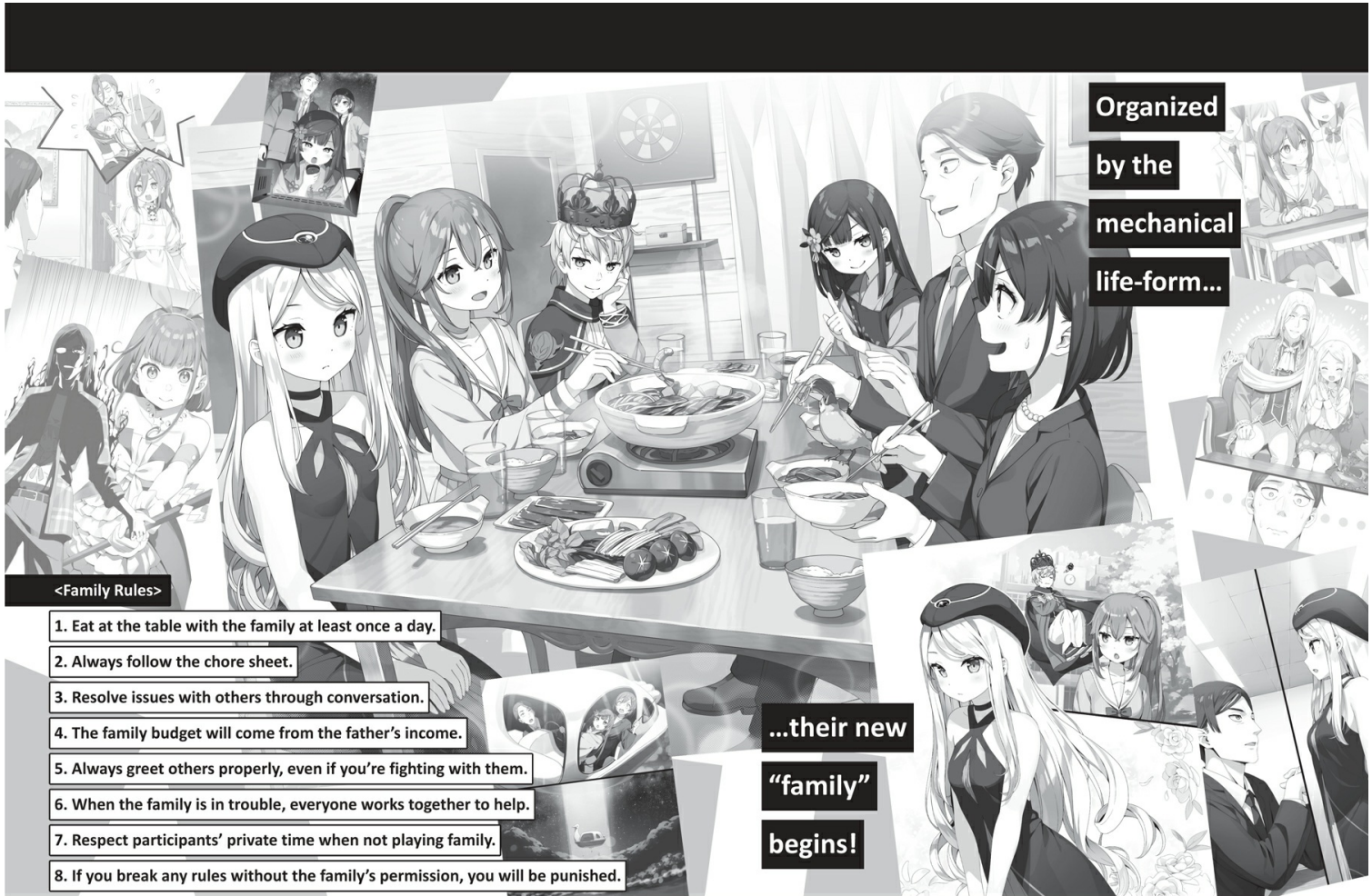
Type Twelve

"Sasaki, that information serves only to accelerate my loneliness."

Faction Sci-Fi

Hailing from a distant region of space, she is a mechanical life-form and serves as the AI overseeing the unidentified flying object. She bugged out, though, and now she's at the mercy of her own functions every day. Her most recent hyperfixation is family.

Type Twelve



Organized

by the

mechanical

life-form...

<Family Rules>

1. Eat at the table with the family at least once a day.
2. Always follow the chore sheet.
3. Resolve issues with others through conversation.
4. The family budget will come from the father's income.
5. Always greet others properly, even if you're fighting with them.
6. When the family is in trouble, everyone works together to help.
7. Respect participants' private time when not playing family.
8. If you break any rules without the family's permission, you will be punished.

...their new

"family"

begins!

Sasaki and Peeps 7

scheduled for release in Summer 2024!!!!

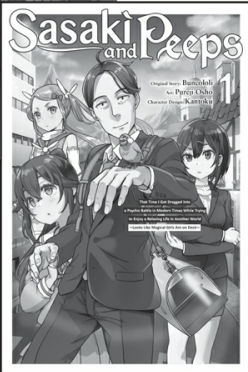
Sasaki and Peeps

That Time I Got Dragged into a Psychic
Battle in Modern Times While Trying to
Enjoy a Relaxing Life in Another World
~Looks Like Magical Girls Are on Deck~



Manga Volumes

1 and 2 now on sale!



Manga: Pureji osho
Original Story: Buncololi
Character Design: Kantoku



Sasaki and Peeps 6

*This material was originally included below the dust jacket in the Japanese version

Buncololi
Illustration by Kantoku

An Unidentified Flying Object from Outer Space Arrives and Earth Is Under Attack!

~ The Extraterrestrial Lifeform that Came to Announce Mankind's End Appears to Be Dangerously Sensitive ~



Big news, Peeps.



I've heard. This series is receiving an anime adaptation, yes?



I should have expected the Starsage himself to get wind of things quickly.



The official site and social media account kindly informed me.



I couldn't possibly be happier.



*Many more people are involved in this story now.
You will need to work even harder than before.*



I'll put all my heart into it and then some.
Please continue to support us in the future.



Indeed. We look forward to your support.



The adaptation's announcement has also saved one piece of content in particular.



*These sections, you mean?
Topics have been drying up of late.*



That's right. I think we'll have plenty to talk about for a while.



Then what do you have for us today?



In the anime, a few of the otherworld locations' names were changed from the original Japanese, though English readers won't notice a difference.



Very interesting, indeed. For what reason?



I welcome you to guess if you'd like—and it's nothing bad.



That remark makes me even more curious.

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