

Fake Family Formed!

~The Youngest Daughter Dreams of a Warm

Family in This Hodgepodge Household~

Buncololi

Illustration by
Kantoku

Sasaki and Peeps

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7





“Good morning, mister.”

〈 The Neighbor 〉





＜ Futarishizuka ＞

“It’s nice to
meet you, too,
Futarishizuka.
I’m so happy
I can talk to
you like this.

“I haven’t done
all that much.
In fact, I believe
you’ve been on
edge constantly
in our world.
Now that we
can finally talk,
I hope you’ll
feel much
more relaxed.”

＜ Lady Elsa ＞

I’ve always
wanted to
thank you in
my own words
for everything
you’ve done
for me.
You have
my sincere
gratitude!”

The Nerd's recent posts



11/20/20xx

† Corrupted Black Angel † @darklord

Shizu, won't you come back to us soon?



1



Gacha King @shizuchan_mk2

Replying to @darklord

Huh? Uh, no thanks.
Not sure why I'd want to.



† Corrupted Black Angel † @darklord

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

Oh, please. I know you want to come back.



Gacha King @shizuchan_mk2

Replying to @darklord

How'd you even find this account?



† Corrupted Black Angel † @darklord

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

Check first place in the rankings on the game you've been playing.



Gacha King @shizuchan_mk2

Replying to @darklord

Wait. Are you the one right above me?



† Corrupted Black Angel † @darklord

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

Yesterday's match was such a shame, huh?

You have blocked **† Corrupted Black Angel †**
@darklord.

Sasaki and Peeps

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Illustration by **Kantoku**


New York

Copyright



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Translation by Alice Prowse
Cover art by Kantoku

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SASAKITOPICHAN Vol.7 GIJIKAZOKU, KESSEI! ATATAKANAKATEI O YUMEMIRUSUEMUSUME TO,
TENDEBARABARANAKAJINTACHI

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Frontispiece, Book Illustrations
Kantoku

<Summary of Events Thus Far>

Sasaki was the kind of worn-out office worker you can find anywhere. 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 he was able to buy more stock to sell in the otherworld.

But such smooth sailing didn't last.

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."

Then a new force rose to block their path—they learned that a death game had begun in modern Japan, and Sasaki ended up embroiled in a proxy war between angels and demons. 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 that 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. This provided a reason for Sasaki's various acquaintances to gather. His neighbor, who was involved in the death game; Lady Elsa from the otherworld; Miss Hoshizaki representing the psychics; and the magical girl, Magical Pink—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 care of the threat.

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's 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 began 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.

Meanwhile, an unidentified flying object calling herself a mechanical life-form (model name: Type Twelve) arrived on Earth from the far reaches of space, and mankind suddenly found itself facing down an alien invasion. On Chief Akutsu's orders, Sasaki and the others headed out to contact and negotiate with the craft.

Though hostile toward humanity, the alien decided to stay with Sasaki and the others to investigate the true nature of a certain bug in her programming. However, a third party aiming to take advantage of the situation immediately kidnapped Miss Hoshizaki, who had only just formed a connection with Type Twelve.

Sasaki and the others followed the kidnappers deep into the Chichibu mountains, where an array of nations and organizations took part in a melee battle over Miss Hoshizaki. Borrowing Type Twelve's power, Sasaki and his friends just barely managed to rescue his work colleague. Touched by this adventure, their extraterrestrial visitor announced her newest proposal: She wants their whole group to play house, with her as the youngest daughter.

And so, a one-of-a-kind family is formed...

<Family Contract>

After safely resolving Miss Hoshizaki's kidnapping and explaining the situation to her little sister, we returned to Futarishizuka's Karuizawa villa. We still had a whole heap of problems on our plate, but we were finally out of the fire, so we decided to take a break.

That night, we all gathered in Ms. Futarishizuka's dining room and had hot pot. On one side of the rectangular table sat the villa's owner, myself, and Miss Hoshizaki. Across from us were Abaddon, my neighbor, and Type Twelve. As always, Peeps was right beside me, perched on the table.

While we were eating, Type Twelve put down her chopsticks. "I will be direct," she said. "I desire a familial relationship and to enact household dynamics with all of you."

Everyone looked at her in surprise.

Ignoring the rest of us, the alien continued, her tone flat. "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."

Apparently, after the day's incident, Type Twelve had only gotten more interested in the idea of family. She looked at each person around the table in turn before her gaze landed back on Miss Hoshizaki.

She's a mechanical life-form who has awakened to emotions, and now she's after love from a mother figure.

As always, her face was steady as a mask, and yet I sensed more force behind her words than usual. A kind of spirit, maybe, or backbone. Mechanical life-forms apparently never told lies, so she definitely wasn't joking.

The one under her stare reacted pretty quickly. "Wait. Hang on a second. Why do I have to be the mom?!"

“*That’s* what you’re worried about?” I said faster than I could think. Her assignment in this hypothetical family was hardly the biggest problem here.

Miss Hoshizaki went on to express extreme displeasure at the role she’d been offered. “I’m only sixteen! I can’t be a mom at my age!”

“There is no blood connection between us,” explained Type Twelve. “Therefore, I believe that age does not matter.”

“Yes it does! I think Futarishizuka is much more suitable!”

My senior work colleague had been emphasizing her age quite a bit lately. I’d also been seeing her without makeup more often. I was pretty sure she hadn’t acted like this back when we first met, and I wondered what had happened to change things. *Back then, it seemed like she wanted people to see her as a mature adult.*

“Hoshizaki, your thinking is flawed. You should reconsider your position.”

“Wh-why?”

“That human is not a fitting mother. As the daughter, I vehemently protest.”

“Alas, to be disowned as a mother by one’s own child,” moaned Futarishizuka. “How am I to meet my death after suffering such rejection?”

“Could you stop being so depressing?” Hoshizaki shot back.

At her age, Futarishizuka could easily have a daughter or a granddaughter—or even a great-granddaughter or a great-*great*-granddaughter. I wanted to ask her about it, but I was sure her response would be more vivid than I’d bargained for, so I stayed quiet.

“I suppose that would make my partner your sister, then?”

“Now, hold on a moment, Abaddon,” said my neighbor.

Abaddon had purposely taken the chance to work my neighbor into the conversation. He knew perfectly well how useful Type Twelve could be; he was desperate to maintain some sort of connection with her. My neighbor tended

to be indifferent about such things, so the demon was probably working hard on her behalf.

“Oh? No to the sister idea, then?”

“Abaddon, your thinking is very logical,” said Type Twelve.

“Really?”

“Yes. As the daughter, it would please me greatly to have an older sister.”

The mechanical life-form seemed intent on putting herself under the guardianship of the rest of the family. Since she had already offered to look after my neighbor for the foreseeable future, this potential relationship didn’t seem like a bad idea. Though personally, I got the feeling my neighbor wasn’t very keen on the idea of family.

“See? She likes the idea. At least consider it.”

“I’m less concerned about myself and more interested in who is going to be the father.”

“Come now, child,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “In this group, there’s only one option.” She glanced at me, a wry expression on her face.

In fact, *everyone* was looking at me.

She was right. The only men at this table were Abaddon and me. And since the former looked very young—real age aside—it was only natural that the role of father would fall to me.

Still, I couldn’t just agree with them. *What a pain*, I thought.

“Gay marriage has become widespread in recent years,” I said, trying to deflect. “I don’t think there’s any reason a man has to occupy the position of father. There are also families where one parent lives separately. Perhaps it’s not that important to have two parents.”

“You always try to run away the moment you’re put on the spot,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Don’t you think that’s a little unfair?”

“No, no,” I assured her. “I’m only raising the obvious counterarguments.”

Steam billowed from the pot at the center of the table as it gently simmered over the cooker. Our chopsticks had been moving ceaselessly until a few moments ago, but Type Twelve's remark had made everyone set them down on their plates. In their place, what flew back and forth over the pot were suggestions of how to split up the roles in this as-yet-unseen, fictional family that I couldn't even envision.

"I agree with you, mister. I would be fine with an absentee father."

"Indeed. He isn't related to any of you by blood, so maybe he can just fill in the gaps when needed. He doesn't seem into the idea anyway, right? I doubt anything good will come of forcing him."

Without missing a beat, my neighbor cast her vote for an absentee father—a perspective doubtlessly rooted in her many negative experiences around family. Abaddon instantly chimed in with his support.

Miss Hoshizaki, however, seemed displeased. "There are many different kinds of families in the world and that variety is a good thing. I won't claim you have to follow a specific formula to be happy. But personally, I'd rather a family have both a father and a mother."

"As Hoshizaki's daughter, I shall prioritize her viewpoint. Sasaki must be the father," said Type Twelve. My colleague's opinions were absolute to her.

I sensed an odd kind of danger in that. Ever since the alien had arrived, Miss Hoshizaki had been wielding a lot more influence. And now that her psychic power had leveled up, her words and actions had a strength to them they'd previously lacked.

"But I've never even been married," I reminded them.

"Well," said Miss Hoshizaki, "she's making me the mother, even though I'm still in high school. So who cares?"

"That may be true, but..."

"And isn't it kinda normal these days for someone's first marriage to be to a divorced single parent?"

"Are you divorced, Miss Hoshizaki?"

“N-no, I’m not! I’m just making up our backstory! Duh!”

I was hoping to distract her, but she proved surprisingly persistent.

Despite everything she’d been through with her father, she seemed dead set on this. Or maybe it was because of all the anguish he’d caused her that she wanted, at least while we were playing pretend, to put her junior colleague in the role and use her leverage to control him.

And man, she’s really playing up the whole “I’m only in high school” bit.

“Incidentally,” I said, “Abaddon, what sort of role are you planning to fill?”

“Huh? You want me to be part of this, too?”

“You were the one making suggestions earlier. I don’t think it’s very fair to make me do all the work.”

“Yeah, but I’m a demon. I think that disqualifies me.”

“There is a vacancy in the position of brother. You are welcome to take that role.”

“See? The one in charge agrees.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll have to put on my best big brother act!”

“Then it’s settled. Please make Abaddon my *younger* brother.”

“Understood. I shall adopt your viewpoint, Kurosu.”

“Aww...”

Now the neighbor and Abaddon had been unofficially crowned siblings to Type Twelve. The two of them had always seemed like siblings to me, so I didn’t need any further convincing. I hoped they, along with Miss Hoshizaki in the role of mother, would do a good job reining in the mechanical life-form. She already hated Ms. Futarishizuka and me, after all.

“I would also like the Java sparrow pecking at his food to take a role.”

At last, Type Twelve’s attention turned to the spot in front of me on the table,

where Peeps was standing next to his plate, enjoying some beef. *He's been chowing down the whole time we were talking. He just can't resist, can he?* For a meat lover like him, the thinly sliced brand-name domestic beef, plump and moist with soup broth, must have simply been too tempting. Occasionally, I'd see the meat split apart without him doing anything; he was probably using magic.

The distinguished sparrow heard Type Twelve's remark and glanced up from his plate. He looked so darn cute with tiny pieces of meat stuck to his cheeks.

"You wish me to take part in this event as well, then?"

"You shall play the role of the family's pet," said Type Twelve.

"Is that truly a position we require?"

"A pampered pet is an irreplaceable part of any harmonious family."

"...I see."

Maybe this was my chance. I could use his role of pet as an excuse to take pictures of him. Aside from Lady Elsa's videos, I'd had almost no chance to capture Peeps on camera. When I thought about it like that, I was a little—just a little, mind you—excited by the alien's proposal. I already had a folder for him on my computer but it was empty. This was the perfect opportunity to fill it up.

As for the future subject of my photographs, he simply nodded and said he supposed it was fine. *Sorry for making you do all this, Peeps.*

Meanwhile, there was only one person left to raise an objection—the very one we'd been ignoring this whole time—Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Hold the phone," she said. "Why are we going on like this family idea is already set in stone?"

"To state my viewpoint as the daughter, I do not mind that Futarishizuka has no place in our family."

Judging from how she kept prefacing her sentences, Type Twelve had already settled completely into her role.

“How cold of you, dear. I hope you understand that such things will only make me all the more determined to join in.”

Managing this pretend family without Ms. Futarishizuka’s help sounded difficult, so I decided to use my role as father to back her up. It didn’t matter what part she played, but I had to get her *something*.

“Then, taking into consideration your outward appearance, perhaps you could take the role of little sister?” I suggested.

“Sasaki, I find it difficult to agree with your viewpoint,” objected Type Twelve.

“Is that a no, then?”

“There is no need for anyone younger than me. I will not give up my position as youngest child. For the same reason, I strongly recommend Abaddon take the role of middle brother. Should this be dissatisfactory, I must insist he consider a different role.”

“Hearing you speak so honestly about what you want is actually rather refreshing,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

Type Twelve was out to get all the love and affection she could, and it seemed she already had a good grasp on what a family was supposed to be. Her claim that she’d been observing Earth and gathering information for a long time must have been true. I found myself wondering just how long ago she’d gotten here.

“Hmm. I can’t think of any other suitable roles for me,” Ms. Futarishizuka continued.

“Futarishizuka, I strongly recommend you take the role of live-in servant,” suggested Type Twelve.

“Hey, hold your horses. That doesn’t sound very familial to me.”

A thought suddenly occurred to me. It was probably best not to dwell on such things, but could it be Type Twelve had designated Ms. Futarishizuka as the character it was okay to bully? The alien had been particularly scathing toward her ever since we’d all met.

Still, it would take more than that to put the girl in the kimono into a slump.

“Ah yes. I think I see what you mean,” she said conspiratorially. “I’ll take the role of the flirtatious maid that has an affair with the father.”

“W-wait,” stammered Miss Hoshizaki. “I don’t like the sound of that one bit!”

“I don’t see why *you* should be so flustered, dearie.”

“Well, aren’t I supposed to be the mom here?!”

It sounded like Miss Hoshizaki absolutely hated our colleague’s idea. I wasn’t too keen on acting out some awful soap opera, either. There was little doubt such antics would negatively affect Type Twelve’s mental state, and it wouldn’t be good for my neighbor’s moral upbringing, either.

“Adultery is an act which spoils the order of a family. It must not be allowed,” stated the alien.

“See? She thinks it’s a dumb idea, too!” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Oh, but don’t you have a more pressing matter to consider?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you intend to devote all your time to this pretend family, while leaving your real sister at home, all alone?”

“I...I’d never do that!” Miss Hoshizaki’s expression stiffened.

Even now, her younger sister was preparing dinner and awaiting her return. Now that Futarishizuka had reminded her, our senior colleague must have been feeling increasingly guilty.

“Remember dear, if you’re constantly hanging around with this one, you’ll have far less time to spend with your sister.”

“Well, you might be right, but...”

“Futarishizuka,” said Type Twelve, “Refrain from statements that bother Hoshizaki.”

“Oh, but I’m only speaking the truth. Her real sister is quite important to her.”

“.....”

Type Twelve, normally so expressionless, displayed a subtle flash of something like emotion. For a split second, her brows knotted a tiny bit. I wondered if she even noticed. But it only lasted a moment before she was back to normal.

Nevertheless, the reaction concerned me, and I couldn't pretend I hadn't seen it.

"How about we do this, then?" I said.

"Sasaki?"

"It's our job to investigate the unidentified flying object. As employees of the bureau, it makes sense for us to use our work hours for this. The section chief shouldn't have any objections."

Much like Miss Hoshizaki, I couldn't afford to spend every hour of my day with the mechanical life-form. I needed time to visit the otherworld, too. Shuffling all this into work hours was my best option.

I was sure our senior colleague would feel the same. If she was making money pretending to be a mother, she'd probably be a lot more enthusiastic about the role. And she could use family matters as an excuse to snatch all the overtime pay and late-night wage multipliers she wanted.

"How does that sound?" I asked. "That way, you would have just as much time with your sister as before."

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right! I like that idea."

Just as I'd predicted, she okayed my proposal without missing a beat. Next, I turned to my neighbor and Abaddon.

"And you two could join in once school is over and you're back home. You'll have plenty of time in the evening to spend with her."

"I agree with your idea, mister."

"Yup. No objections here."

Thankfully, both of them agreed as well. Considering her involvement in the death game, my neighbor was probably hesitant to make any friends. But now

that she was starting over at a new school in a different town, I wanted her to make the most of her new life.

Ms. Futarishizuka, however, didn't seem too pleased. "Why are you taking command all of a sudden, hmm?"

"If we're going to do this, shouldn't we come up with an arrangement that makes everyone happy?" I replied.

"I don't believe it. Are you actually into this?"

"My personal feelings don't matter. I'd just rather have my say now while I still have the chance."

"I suppose you're right."

That had to be why Futarishizuka kept doggedly inserting herself back into the conversation. *Otherwise, knowing you, you'd have opted out of the running right away.* Though if I said that to her face, I was sure she'd get her revenge later, so I stayed quiet.

"Understood. I shall adopt Sasaki's viewpoint," stated Type Twelve.

"Glad to hear it," I said.

Ultimately, the alien signed off on my idea. My only concern now was the duration of this little project. Obviously, I didn't want to be stuck playing house for several years. I might not have much in the works, but my neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki still had the prime of their lives ahead of them. For now, I'd just have to pray that Type Twelve was the sort to give up on things quickly.

"So then, what role is Futarishizuka taking?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Should she be dissatisfied with the servant position, I recommend the role of grandmother. While the mother prioritizes her children, the grandmother is more concerned with her son—my father—and treats his wife harshly. I believe this role would suit Futarishizuka. I have heard such a relationship is standard in this country."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to purposely introduce discord into the family,"

mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Didn’t you literally just suggest something similar?” shot back Miss Hoshizaki.

“Setting up a mother-in-law as the common enemy will strengthen familial bonds,” explained Type Twelve. “I have come to this conclusion after a statistical analysis of modern families. Mankind is wont to submit to the present situation and allow dissatisfaction to accumulate. We cannot allow this dissatisfaction to remain aimless and untargeted in a family setting.”

“...Okay. Fine. Whatever,” grumbled Ms. Futarishizuka.

Despite how she looked, it was an appropriate role given her real age. But couldn’t we do anything about those distressing attendant circumstances? I didn’t think there was any need to decide such things this far in advance, either. That said, I found myself wondering about the power balance between the grandmother’s role and that of the mother.

“I think that sounds about right for Futarishizuka,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Oh, my dear senior colleague, have you *always* viewed me in such a light?”

“You’ve sided with Sasaki and picked on me a couple times.”

“Oh yes? Have I? Have I really?”

I couldn’t help but agree. She *had* done that several times, and no good comebacks came to mind. I was destined to be caught between the two of them as father, so I decided to put as much distance between us as I could.

Before I realized it, we’d decided everyone’s roles in our new pretend family. Each one of us sitting around the hot pot now had a part to play. Our little party celebrating a job well-done suddenly felt a bit lonely as we each began to tense up in preparation for the task ahead.

Once our conversation wrapped up, my neighbor politely raised her hand and began to speak.

“Can I ask one thing, mister?” she said quietly.

“What is it?”

“I’m okay with all this. But what should we do about living arrangements? If

we're supposed to be a family, then maybe Abaddon and I should move in here for the time being."

"Oh, I get it. That's a great idea!"

Abaddon immediately agreed with my neighbor's proposal. I suspected the distinguished sparrow currently chowing down atop the table was the reason. They'd requested his protection several times in the past, too.

But Type Twelve spoke up, superseding her. "Kurosu, I have a suggestion regarding the family's dwelling."

"Are you proposing we use a different location?"

"Your thinking is correct."

"We're a fairly large household," pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka. "Do you know of somewhere else we could all fit?"

As the topic moved to the issue of where everyone would stay, I suddenly recalled a certain circumstance of my own—one I'd been neglecting.

Ever since my apartment building burned down, I'd been living in a hotel. I'd have to find a real place to live soon or I'd be in trouble. Objectively speaking, I was totally dependent on Ms. Futarishizuka at the moment. I was paying her plenty in return, but others might not see it that way.

"A house is essential for building a good family," explained Type Twelve. "It must be inviolate. I agree that this mansion is an excellent facility, but its security is not up to an acceptable standard."

"It isn't, hmm? That's a rather bold statement."

"I am only speaking the truth."

"Well, I doubt it will be so easy to find an available mansion even better than this one."

At the mechanical life-form's mention of security, several candidates popped into my mind, and all of them whet my interest. I had a feeling this development was going to make my explanation to the boss about our next job a lot smoother.

“I will guide you all there tomorrow.”

“Will you, now? I suppose it’s time to see what the youngest member of our family has up her sleeve.”

I figured Ms. Futarishizuka had some idea of what to expect, which was why she had so readily accepted.

And with that, the day came more or less to a close. It looked like the true beginning of our family contract would have to wait until the following day.



No matter how busy I was in modern Japan, I couldn’t skip my regular trip to the otherworld. That night, once dinner was over and everyone had gone their separate ways, Peeps and I used his magic to cross over. Our destination was the office of the court minister, inside the royal castle in Allestos.

The room hadn’t changed since our last visit. After a quick look around, we headed straight for Count Müller.

We wound up in his place of work—the office of the chancellor. There, I took a seat on the sofa opposite the room’s owner, with a low table between us.

“It’s good to see you again, Count Müller,” I began.

“It is indeed, Sir Sasaki—and your bird, of course.”

As you might expect from the count’s mode of addressing Peeps, Lady Elsa was present in the room, too. She sat right next to her father and joined in our conversation. She’d just happened to be there when we arrived.

A few days ago, when Type Twelve had declared that she would destroy humanity, we’d sent Lady Elsa back to the otherworld out of concern for her safety. Unable to remain with us for the time being, she’d spent her days with her family.

“I must apologize once again for barging in on you, Julius.”

“No apologies necessary. Please drop by whenever you wish.”

As always, Peeps was on his perching tree set up on the table. The way he

bobbed up and down was positively adorable.

“Since the two of you are here, may I assume the disturbance in your world has passed? Or, if this is an urgent matter, I am prepared to do what I can right away.”

“Thank you for asking, my lord. The situation is under control for now.”

“I’m happy to hear it. My daughter was worried about you, as well.”

“Yes, but I knew you would be fine!” Lady Elsa interrupted. “I would expect no less of you. You seem less formidable than my father, but you always rise to the occasion when it’s needed.”

“I’m very sorry for causing you to worry, Lady Elsa.”

She was buttering me up an awful lot. I assumed her father had put her up to it.

As we exchanged greetings, it became clear to me that the prospective marriage arrangement was still in effect.

“Does this mean I’ll be able to return with you to your world?” Lady Elsa asked.

“Yes, it does. Though I won’t force you to, of course.”

“Force me? Nothing could be further from the truth. I’ve been looking forward to it so much. Futarishizuka is very kind to me, as is everyone else at the mansion. I still don’t understand your language, but I’d like to keep studying it.”

“I see.”

Lady Elsa had a big smile on her face as she spoke. She must have been telling the truth.

Seeing this got my mind spinning. Was there any way to distract her from this marriage business?

Soon, something occurred to me. If she were to experience modern Japanese culture on a deeper level, maybe she’d discover something that would fulfill her personally or some goal she wanted to work toward. Perhaps she would expand

her view and find a future for herself that went beyond simply contributing to her family.

“.....”

Count Müller had said he would respect her wishes. *That might be just the ticket.*

“*What is it? You’re staring at Julius’s daughter.*”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking.”

In fact, we could even get her involved in Type Twelve’s family production. That would make complicated discussions easier, too. If I asked Miss Hoshizaki for help, things might progress rather quickly. After all, she was in high school. While her sensibilities were somewhat unique, she was much closer in temperament to the rest of us than to Lady Elsa, a noble from another world.

“Sir Sasaki, I have something else I’d like to discuss with you.” Once we’d decided on our future course of action, the count turned back to me and began to speak.

“Oh. Yes, my lord,” I replied. “What is it?”

“I understand this is sudden, but there is a plan to bequeath territory to you,” he explained.

“You mean as a noble of this kingdom?”

“That’s right.”

That *was* sudden. I didn’t remember anyone discussing this with me beforehand. And accepting more land was not what I wanted right now.

“I apologize for my rudeness, but I very much doubt I’ll be able to govern this new territory.”

“A messenger from the Marc Trading Company visited us recently. He informed me that you’re developing a trade route between Herz and the Republic of Lunge. His Majesty and I came up with the idea that you should have the region around that border.”

“I see, sir.”

That changed things. It sounded like this was merely a pretext to avoid any issues with the project now that my involvement was known.

“I’m sorry, sir. I hadn’t thought word of that matter would reach the king. I’m extremely grateful for your continued kindness, considering my background. But are you sure it’s wise to simply give me those lands?”

“You have contributed far more to His Majesty than I have.”

“You’re very modest, sir. But I am a citizen of another country.”

“If you were to betray us at this point, Sir Sasaki, I believe we would both resign ourselves to fate.”

“I am happy to hear that you have such trust in me, my lord.”

Their decisions were probably predicated on the fact I had the Lord Starsage’s support. Still, I could sort of understand the feeling. If Peeps ever betrayed me, I would feel the same. I couldn’t help it. The sparrow had proven to be someone I could work with smoothly toward our mutual benefit—moreso than anyone else I had ever met. It was a very strange feeling.

“Would it be all right if we requested the Marc Trading Company’s assistance managing your territory?” asked the count.

“Yes, and thank you. Please tell them to do so.”

The language wasn’t the only thing different in this world—its culture, its food, and even its ecosystem were all fundamentally unlike my own. If I was given land here, I’d never be able to govern it properly. In fact, any meddling from me would probably just hold back everyone else involved.

I would prefer to focus on our finances, taking what we earned from the Ohgen Empire and spreading it across the Kingdom of Herz. That was our goal from the start, and it was always best to stick to one’s original intentions.

Now that the topic had shifted to this territory business, Peeps had a question of his own. *“If there is to be a route to the Republic of Lunge, would it happen to pass through Alterian?”*

“Yes, that’s correct.”

He turned to me. *“That means you would be called Margrave Sasaki-Alterian*

in the future.”

“That seems like a bit much, if you ask me...”

When the previous king had bestowed the Rectan Plains upon me, the region had been just how it sounded—empty plains. This time, though, the territory in question was a proper domain, likely including established settlements. Taking charge over such a place was a heavy responsibility, even if I wouldn’t be governing it directly.

It’d be nice to have the freedom to develop it, but I’d rather someone else handle all the towns and stuff.

“Given your sensibilities, receiving such a territory may seem extravagant. But the area is mostly empty. If you recall, developing this route is said to be quite difficult—and for the same reasons, there are few villages nearby. You needn’t concern yourself with such matters; you can go on as you have in the past.”

“A word, if I may,” interrupted the count. “King Adonis believes that Sir Sasaki will govern the territory, including the nearest provincial town of Rotan. He intends for you to take on the rank of margrave in both name and function.”

“I see. From Rotan, we can also hope for trade with the Kingdom of Blase...”

“The king’s thoughts exactly.”

Did the king intend for me to rule an actual domain? I couldn’t tell. I’d be somewhat troubled if he did. That would blow my hopes for a relaxed retirement right out the window.

“Peeps, I’d like to get a sense of the scale of the matter, if I could...”

“Oh, yes. In terms of your homeland, imagine you asked for an area on the border of Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, and the other party says they will throw in Sendai as a bonus. I believe that city is a port that trades with many other nations. Rotan, too, is a bustling city known for foreign trade.”

“Wow. That’s quite a lot to take in.”

A city of that magnitude was quite the “bonus” to “throw in.” I was also in awe of my distinguished sparrow’s grasp of Japanese geography.

“Count Müller, if I may,” I said, “I think such a bountiful town would be too

much for me to handle. I'm very obliged to you and the king, but I would rather he look after the town while I receive only what territory is necessary."

"Sir Sasaki, are you being serious right now?"

"If we are to develop the land as proposed, we will need a steady supply of people. If you could fortify the city with your allies and those of the king, I could procure the goods and people necessary for my venture from there."

"But that leaves nothing in this deal for you."

"Herz's prosperity is the best thing I could hope for from any deal, sir. In exchange, I'd like you to leave the finer details of the trade route to the Marc Trading Company. King Adonis has only recently ascended the throne, and I'm sure the country needs him elsewhere."

"....."

I'd made my plea to the count; I needed to find a way out of ruling this domain. In exchange, I'd probably lose any income from the city. But that was exactly what I wanted. I already had more money than I knew what to do with—what point was there in racking up more? And besides, being a margrave would involve far more work than any extra earnings were worth.

The count closed his mouth, seeming troubled, and Peeps spoke up instead.

"Julius, there's no need for suspicion. You may take his insistences at face value."

"Lor...er, yes?"

Count Müller was always right on the edge of accidentally saying "Lord Starsage." Thankfully, he remembered Lady Elsa's presence and corrected himself in time.

"Decisions which seem unthinkable to us are perfectly reasonable for someone from another world. His values are completely different from our own. It is the same for the matter of your daughter's marriage. But I promise you that his efforts are all for your sake and that of Adonis. I guarantee that nothing suspicious is happening behind the scenes."

"But then what about your...erm, your position, little bird?"

“All of our past actions have been at his sole discretion. I have not involved myself in any way. I may have told him about the Kepler Trading Company in Lunge, but everything after that was his doing. I’m sure you know that I do not spoil my own so much.”

“.....”

Unbeknownst to the others present, he *did* tend to spoil me. And yet, at times like this, he insisted he didn’t. Perhaps he was embarrassed. *How adorable.*

Peeps was just as hell-bent as I was on securing a laid-back life for us both. He’d already agreed with me on how to handle our income from the Kepler Trading Company in Lunge. After telling him about how much gold Earth had in reserve, as well as the amount in circulation and its going rate over the past few years, he’d given his approval without a second thought. It was very helpful to have a pet sparrow so well-versed in macroeconomics.

“Are you certain about this, Sir Sasaki? I don’t believe we have given you very much at all. If the little bird is making you work against your will, I beg you to be forthcoming and tell me.”

The count seemed determined to test me. I almost never heard him say such things. He was even putting the Starsage on blast now.

“You don’t need to worry about that, sir,” I replied. “There is a benefit to us in this proposal; and besides, we’ve already received more than enough. I do apologize for trampling on your generosity, but please, there is no need to concern yourself with this.”

“I have no idea what you could possibly be gaining from this situation...”

“Monetary value isn’t the only factor in something’s worth. What I want goes beyond mere money. And he knows what that is, and he agrees,” I said, glancing at the little sparrow on his perch.

Peeps simply nodded without saying anything. I sensed a display of dignity in his fluffed-out chest feathers. This was all for the sake of our relaxing life ahead.

Count Müller put on a serious face and appeared to think this over.

“...Then I suppose a mediocre man like myself could never hope to stand by

your side...”

“Count?”

He cast his eyes downward and began muttering to himself. His daughter watched him with concern. I sensed a vulnerability in his demeanor.

But this lasted only a second. He quickly looked back up and faced us.

“I understand your intentions. I’ll advise the king to make the Alterian area your domain while keeping Rotan and the other nearby towns for himself. And just to be certain, you’d like your proxy to be someone from the Marc Trading Company, correct?”

“That’s right. Thank you, sir.”

“You’re always doing so much for us, Julius.”

“No, not at all. This is a simple matter, so please allow me to handle it.”

With this, I assumed the title of Margrave Sasaki-Alterian.

I already had the Kepler Trading Company’s agreement on the Lunge side, and I felt sure that Mr. Joseph would manage things. Now, development of the route between Herz and Lunge could begin in earnest.

For a little while, we’d be spending a lot of money in the provincial city of Rotan. I wondered if the Marc Trading Company would set up a branch there. Either way, Mr. Marc would be doing all of this himself—we wouldn’t have to worry about it.

But maybe I should get an extra radio set ready for them, I thought.

“Forgive me for changing the subject, sir,” I said, “but how is His Majesty doing?”

“He is still busy fighting the last Imperialist nobles remaining in the kingdom. More of them had been secretly in touch with the Empire than we thought. As one moves away from the capital, the problem appears to get worse—he told me his journey through the more remote domains would take a while longer.”

“That sounds difficult.”

“That said, if you two have anything to discuss with him, this is the perfect

chance. I know where he's currently staying, so I can rush a message to him, but you'll have to tell me right now."

"No, sir, we don't have any messages for him."

If things were going smoothly, there was no need for us to interfere. My sparrow offered no comment, either. After promising to come back soon to pick up Lady Elsa, we departed from the castle.



From there, we left Allestos and headed for the Republic of Lunge. We'd already delivered all the diesel fuel they'd need for their radio setups for the next year, so this time we'd be visiting empty-handed. Upon arrival, we were shown to the Kepler Trading Company's reception room, where we found Mr. Joseph and Mr. Marc already present.

We all took our seats on the sofas and began trading words over the low table.

"Ah, I see. So King Adonis has bestowed the Alterian region on you."

"It seems you informed them of our plans in advance, Mr. Marc. You have our thanks."

"Of course. His Majesty's prompt decision was surely the result of his immense respect for you."

"We've been told we may do as we please. So if possible, I'd like people from your company to head there as proxies. In return, you can keep all the profits for the company."

"Are you sure?"

"They told me the area has few settlements. While it won't require much effort, it won't generate much money, either. In fact, I should be apologizing to you—I know I'm asking a lot. But if you have a more personal interest in governing, I can renegotiate with the king."

In fact, why not just have Mr. Marc be the lord of that domain? He was far more suited for the role than I was. If he wished, I could reconsider the matter

of the surrounding towns.

“No, no. I’m just a merchant. It would be unbecoming of me to go around pretending to be a noble.”

“Is that so?”

“That, and I’m quite enjoying doing business in Lunge right now.”

It wasn’t clear to me what Mr. Joseph had him working on. But from the looks of things, Mr. Marc occupied a position of considerable import. I was happy they seemed to be getting along so well.

“I understand the circumstances,” Mr. Marc continued. “I’ll dispatch people right away. If we will be based in Alterian, I assume we’ll be procuring our goods and manpower from Rotan. But if you have any other ideas, I’ll hear you out.”

“No, that was my plan as well. I’ve already run the matter by Count Müller.”

Peeps had discussed all this with the count in advance. It was thanks to the bird that I could even keep up with what Mr. Marc was saying. I was a little interested in this otherworldly Sendai. Maybe a trip there was in order during our visit to the region.

If it had any good local cuisine, I really wanted to try it. I started to crave *gyuutan*—grilled beef tongue—a Sendai classic. I liked mine with extra salted onions.

“I was also thinking of delivering an additional radio set for you,” I continued.

“That would be greatly appreciated. The Marc Trading Company now employs thousands of workers. I can’t possibly visit them all, so the radios are a great help.”

Wait, they’ve grown that much? That’s a little shocking. What could he possibly be doing with that many people? He must have already sold all the products I’d brought from Japan. Was having so few radios hindering their business? I found myself very curious as to what exactly they were doing.

“In that case, should I prepare several sets instead of just one?”

“Are you sure? I would be extremely happy with that arrangement, but...” Mr. Marc’s gaze flitted to Mr. Joseph as he spoke.

The man had been silently listening to our conversation this whole time, but now he decided to have his say. “Sasaki, may I ask you something as well?”

“Oh, yes. What is it?”

“I’d like to talk about these radios you’ve just mentioned.”

“Has something gone wrong with your existing setup?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. But there’s something I need to tell you.”

Not only did Joseph usually steer clear of meaningless small talk, when we had a chance to speak, he very frequently brought up critical business matters. Seeing him ask to discuss something with me so formally sent a shiver up my spine. What could it be? I felt myself unconsciously straighten up.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It relates to something that all large trading companies in Lunge, not only my own, have been talking about for some time. I had always meant to inform you about it at some point, and this seems as good a chance as any.”

“In that case, I will leave the room while you two discuss,” said Mr. Marc, standing up to go.

“Actually, I want you to hear this as well, Mr. Marc.” Mr. Joseph motioned for him to sit back down.

“...All right.”

“I’m sure you’re aware of this, Mr. Sasaki,” Mr. Joseph continued, “but every major firm in the republic has been researching high-speed information exchange for a long time now. The leading candidate is a process utilizing large-scale magic to produce waves that would carry information.”

Peeps had told me about all this before. According to his very scholarly explanation, large-scale magic sent weak magical waves across long distances, which could then be used to exchange information. The technology was still being researched, though, and was not yet ready for practical use.

“Has another company gotten it to work?” I asked.

“That’s what I’d heard,” replied Mr. Joseph.

It seemed the otherworld's technology had advanced in the time between the sparrow's death and his reincarnation. I was a little curious about what kind of setup they were using.

"Though it pains me to say, the Kepler Trading Company is far from succeeding in this endeavor. Should this state of affairs continue, we predicted that the company would be in a very disadvantageous position, indeed. We asked you for help as a stopgap measure until our research bore fruit."

"I see. So that's why you were so eager to take what I'd offered."

I recalled my past conversations with Mr. Joseph on the matter. It had always felt like he saw the radios as a temporary measure, and it seemed I'd been right on the mark. He'd been after a substitute for the technology his company had yet to perfect.

"You'll recall how our radio equipment broke not long ago," he said.

"Yes, I do."

"I'm embarrassed to admit it, but that was because a rat from another company had infiltrated our ranks."

"Were they trying to eliminate potential competition?"

"That was my thought at first. And when we located and interrogated the culprit, we found out another company had indeed succeeded in developing the technology. That was a big reason I asked if you would become a member of our board, Mr. Sasaki."

I thought back to Mr. Joseph's attitude at the time. He must have been quite agitated. Exchanges of information happened in two ways: post and telegraphy. For companies of equal size, the difference was absolute. Mr. Joseph must have been in a panic—he was staring down the possibility of a multi-generational company coming to an end on his watch.

Also, I was sure by *interrogation* what he really meant was *torture*.

"You said 'at first,'" I pointed out. "What happened to change your mind?"

"The company in question has been struggling in spite of this supposed tech," he explained. "For example, Kepler came away from the war between Herz and

Ohgen with a much greater advantage. Upon investigating things in more detail, we found out what was really going on with the other company.”

Mr. Joseph’s shoulders fell and he sighed, sounding fed up.

“Their supposed success was embellished,” he continued. “The installations linking two of their locations needed half a day just to exchange a few words. Plus, the devices they were using were not just expensive—they were also used up in the process, meaning they’d need vast amounts of capital just for one exchange.”

“That’s, well... That sounds rough.”

“As a result, Kepler is now unexpectedly miles ahead of similar companies in regard to information exchange. I’m certain, as are my analysts, that we’ll be able to monopolize the market for a long time to come.”

After hearing this lengthy explanation, I recalled what Mr. Marc had said earlier—that they now had over a thousand workers.

“Excuse me for asking, Mr. Marc, but the boom in your worker count...”

“It’s so that our company can handle all aspects of the technology you brought us internally,” Marc replied. “If needed, we can even have our own people run security for the installation sites. That way, we can greatly restrict who comes into contact with the devices.”

“That does sound like it would require a lot of manpower,” I said.

“However, we expect our profits to exceed the cost of the additional labor. In the near future, the Marc Trading Company might be earning more by itself than Kepler does currently.”

When he put it like that, the magnitude of the situation really hit me. But such things were bound to happen when a company had a monopoly on telegraphic communication.

In fact, a similar situation was brewing back in Japan. Now that our friendly exchange with Type Twelve had begun, Miss Hoshizaki had access to technology far exceeding anything else found on Earth. If she wanted to, she could cause the planet’s entire electronic communication system to collapse overnight.

She'd risen to a terrifying position in no time at all. And now, with her psychic power getting an upgrade, she could kill with only a touch. She was practically a real-life grim reaper.

"Owing in part to these circumstances, in addition to keeping our radio equipment a secret, the Marc Trading Company carefully guards the knowledge of how to use them," Mr. Joseph explained. "My own company has sent many executives over to the Marc Trading company, either full-time or serving both businesses."

"So that's what was going on behind the scenes."

It seemed the Marc Trading Company was now serving as Kepler's communications department. That was an incredibly crucial role to be entrusted with. I began to wonder if its position as a subsidiary was simply a front at this point.

"Excuse me for asking," I began, "but do you expect to make a technological breakthrough in the future?"

"As I understand it, this research will take several more decades," said Mr. Joseph.

To use Earth technology as a comparison, perhaps it was like research on self-driving cars. Practical use kept being pushed back, and it seemed like no one would ever see it to fruition. *No offense to the engineers trying their best to make it happen, of course.*

"Again," he continued, "while I am ashamed to admit it, I doubt any other company is pouring as much money into this technology as we are. That's why I'm virtually certain that it won't be finished any time soon."

"All right. I think I understand."

It made sense now why he'd interrupted my conversation with Mr. Marc. Given his position, he probably didn't want me going around setting up radios wherever I pleased.

"Then I suppose I should refrain from carelessly installing more devices," I said.

“Again, I’m terribly sorry,” said Joseph, “but I would appreciate that immensely. They are complicated to use and nigh impossible to replicate. I believe chances of theft are low, but their very existence presents additional risk.”

“Has someone already tried to steal it?”

“As far as I am aware, there have been two attempts. We were able to prevent both, but there’s no guarantee we will be able to stop a third.”

Wars between companies raged without end. But once I stopped to consider, I began to wonder what position the military occupied in all this. In places like Herz and Ohgen, the royalty maintained direct ownership of the army.

But what about Lunge? There was no royalty here, nor was there an aristocratic class. Did Lunge’s military belong to the state? Or did larger trading companies keep their own private forces? Perhaps military might was concentrated in the mercenary business in Lunge, and they outsourced as necessary. All of these seemed like good possibilities.

“However, I wouldn’t mind another set of radios to use in the development of the trade route with Herz,” added Mr. Joseph. “Even I would feel bad asking Mr. Marc to travel such a long distance over and over.”

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” said Mr. Marc.

I bowed gratefully to Mr. Joseph; Mr. Marc did the same, giving a little bob of his head.

From that point on, our three-way meeting’s focus turned to the actual route between Lunge and Herz. Mr. Joseph had preemptively examined things on the Republic’s end, and thanks to the starting point in Herz having been decided earlier that very day, we were able to narrow possible routes down to just one. In addition to laying out the points on the map that would form the route, we also pinned down where to situate outposts along the way.

Despite knowing very little about the otherworld’s geography, I managed to ride things out by nodding along with a smug expression and insisting that I understood. As long as I could funnel gold back into the Kingdom of Herz, everything else could be overlooked.

After the meeting, I accepted Kepler's offer and stayed the night in Lunge. The following day, we left the country.



Back when we were first coming to the otherworld, we'd go straight back to our lodgings in Baytrium as soon as our business dealings were finished. After that, we'd spend our time in relaxation—eating, sleeping, practicing magic, and generally doing whatever we wanted.

Recently, however, we no longer had that luxury.

Upon leaving the Republic, our next port of call was an area near its border with Herz. Peeps and I had discussed earlier whether we should scope out Alterian—the region the king had recently bestowed upon me—and the bird had agreed that taking a quick look might be a good idea.

And so, we'd come for a visit—only to be greeted by vast wastelands reaching as far as the eye could see.

As we looked down from our vantage point in the sky, we saw an unending blanket of uncultivated land stretching out to the horizon. According to Peeps, if we continued straight ahead, we'd eventually end up in Allestos. But all we could see from here was desolate earth.

Turning around and looking in the opposite direction, we saw steep mountains—the vast range separating the kingdom from the republic. It filled our entire vision, as if to say nobody would ever get past it. Now that I'd seen it, I understood why Mr. Joseph had been so reluctant when I'd first suggested creating a trade route.

"We're supposed to develop this? It looks completely impossible."

"Lest you forget, you were the one who suggested it."

"Well, yeah, I mean, you're right, but..."

Judging from the map Mr. Joseph had shown me, these mountains were just like the Alps, which separated the Italian Peninsula from the rest of Europe. Naturally, travel between Herz and Lunge usually necessitated taking a detour

around the mountains. That was probably why it had become a national border.

“What if we just carved out a tunnel?”

“You’ve seen the map, have you not? You know how far these mountains reach. In your world’s terms, it would be akin to putting a subway line under the Alps. I think you understand just how expensive it would be and how many years it would take to do something like that.”

“Yeah...”

I recalled that even with cutting-edge technology, it had taken over a decade to open up the Gotthard Base Tunnel. So Peeps didn’t just know about Japan’s geography, but the whole world’s. I was a little terrified.

As a realistic point of compromise, we had decided to establish several small hut-like bases throughout the mountainous portion of the route Mr. Marc and Mr. Joseph had investigated. By using mages capable of flight magic in tandem with familiars, it would be possible to link the bases up and shuttle goods quickly between them, thus improving shipping times.

Naturally, it wouldn’t be possible to transport large quantities of goods. The plan was to use the route for delivering urgent letters, moving people, and shipping small but expensive products. I’d made this suggestion myself during the previous day’s meeting, and Mr. Joseph and Mr. Marc had adopted it without issue.

Apparently, teams of mages particularly skilled in flight offered similar services transporting people quickly over mountainous terrain. That was how Mr. Marc traveled between the two nations. But such teams did not make regular journeys and only worked sporadically.

Thus, we could expect a degree of demand for our service. The issue was that the profits wouldn’t outweigh the expenditures. Mr. Joseph’s suggestion was to set up a bare-bones shuttle system as our first step, then take a look at the income it was generating and decide whether to continue breaking ground—though I was pretty sure what he really wanted was to end this as quickly as possible.

“Well, the development itself isn’t our goal, so we don’t need to go any

further right now.”

“As long as you can throw money at Herz, you’ll be satisfied, yes?”

“I get the feeling Mr. Joseph is on to me.”

“I’ve wondered about that as well. Though he acts reluctant, he has nonetheless agreed to the plan.”

Our objective was to funnel the foreign capital we’d made in the Ohgen Empire into the Kingdom of Herz. This way, we wouldn’t cause trouble for anyone and we’d be creating plenty of jobs. Mr. Joseph, however, probably thought a bit less of me, which made me sad.

Still, with the Marc Trading Company and its radios becoming ever more important to Kepler, I doubted he’d simply cut me off. So for now, I’d be a good margrave and contribute to the kingdom for Count Müller’s and King Adonis’s sakes.

It was the least I could do for the adorable Java sparrow always perched on my shoulder, to atone for my failure to save the previous king.

“Peeps, everyone you’ve introduced me to here is so good and kind—like Mr. Marc and Count Müller. I think that’s why I feel so at ease in this world—or at least like things will turn out all right.”

“From my point of view, such words fill me with concern.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Are things not going well at your new place of employment?”

“No, they’re going fine...”

“Ah, well. If it ever gets too difficult, you may consult with me.”

“R-really?”

I hadn’t even intended to complain, and now Peeps was being really thoughtful. Peeps was always aloof, never allowing me to pamper him, yet he was always so kind and considerate toward me. It really warmed my heart. As I gazed into his peaceful sparrow eyes, I was overcome with the urge to give in and let him spoil me.

I wondered how the section chief would have reacted if I'd said the same thing to him.

"Well, we've gotten a good idea of what we're dealing with," I said, "so let's head back to our inn in Baytrium."

"Very well."

Just as he had done to take us here, Peeps used his magic to whisk us away again.

We spent the rest of our time at our usual inn, relaxing—our first break in a while. We even got in some magic practice, which I'd been putting off a lot lately. As a result, I learned a new spell.

Actually, rather than something entirely new, I improved my golem-creation spell to produce even larger golems. Before, all I could do was make one a bit larger than an adult man—but now, I could magic them into existence at twice that size. I'd become fixated on producing a large golem ever since taking part in the construction of the Rectan Plains fortress. They were quite versatile, too, which was good news for me. If the nerd attacked again, I could use one as a moving shield. I could now resist even weapons that pierced magical barriers, to a degree.

Of course, I would have liked to learn some awesome spell that instantly eliminated all threats like the one I'd seen the Starsage use. But those weren't learned in a day, so I decided to keep on plugging away, doing what I could. Recently, it had basically become a matter of life and death, after all.

As my golems got bigger, our time in the otherworld dwindled, and soon it was up. Lately, the difference in the flow of time between the otherworld and modern Japan had been diminishing. After about two weeks, Peeps suggested we head back.

On our final day in the otherworld, we went to the castle in Allestos and met up with Lady Elsa. Then the three of us returned to Japan.



As Peeps worked his teleportation magic, our surroundings changed

completely. One instant it was a view of the royal castle, which I'd been getting quite used to lately—and the next, it was a view of Ms. Futarishizuka's villa in Karuizawa. After a momentary visual blackout, the first thing we saw was the villa's living room, which led into the dining room.

There, at the table in the center, sat the villa's owner eating breakfast. She held a piping-hot rice bowl in one hand as she used her chopsticks to pluck up pieces of salmon fillet with the other.

As soon as we appeared, she turned to us. "You seem to always drop in right when I'm eating."

"I'm sorry for interrupting your leisure time, Ms. Futarishizuka."

"Don't tell me you're angling for some of my breakfast," she replied, her gaze turning to the sparrow perched on my shoulder.

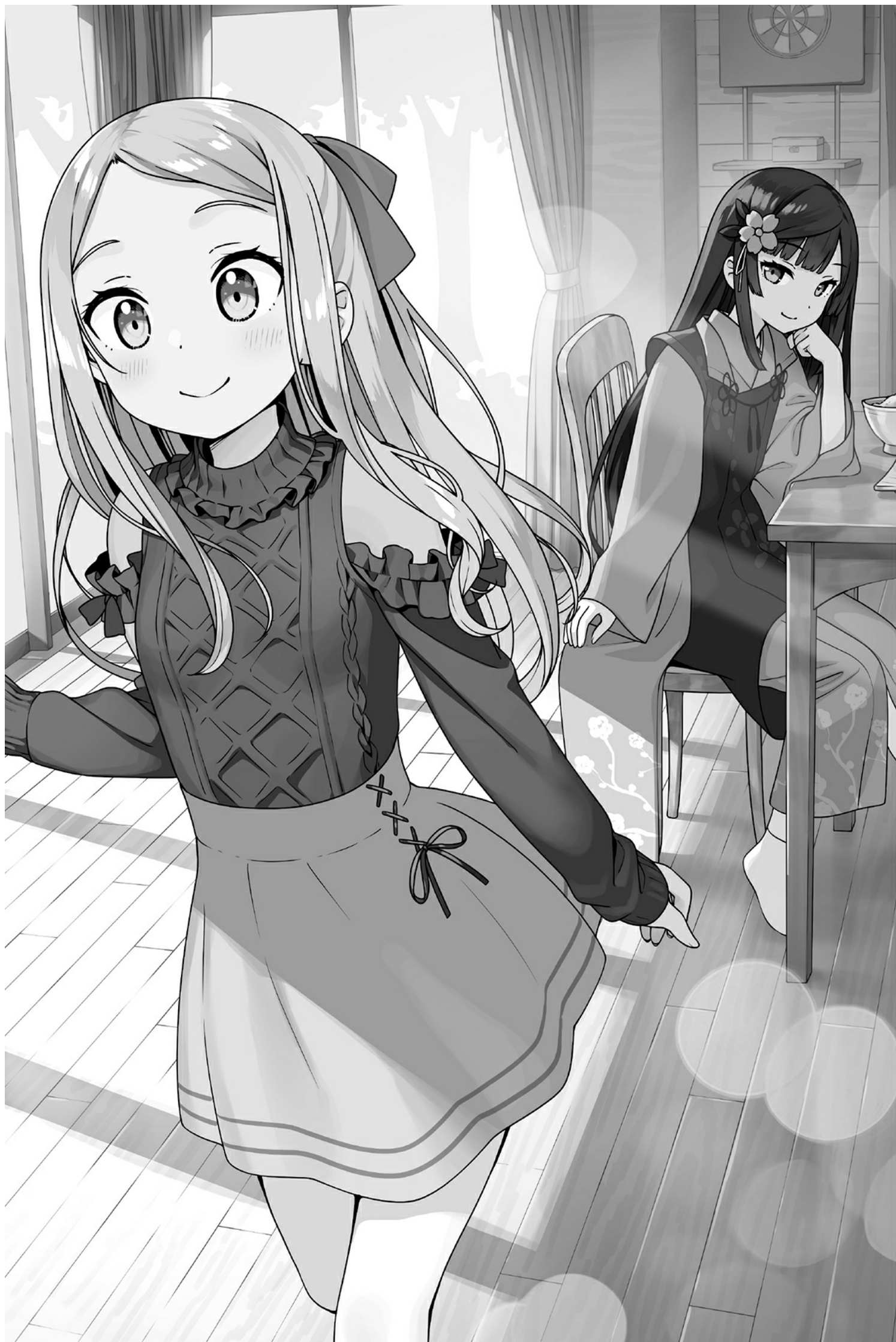
Peeps objected immediately. *"The difference in the flow of time between the two worlds is constantly changing. Considering our other plans, we must travel at a time when there is some leeway. That is the only reason we tend to return around this hour."*

"I see. Then I suppose there was no need to prepare a little extra. Ah, well."

"....."

The distinguished sparrow seemed to regret his choice a little. He'd never say as much, but his tail feathers twitched for a moment as he stared at the thinly-sliced crispy bacon. It might have been my imagination, of course. *That bacon's gotta be tasty*, I thought. *Apparently, it's made from pork belly.*

I checked a wall clock hung on a pillar; it was a little after seven in the morning. Ms. Futarishizuka was the only one around, and the villa was quiet. This, combined with the building's lovely interior—which resembled a posh Japanese inn—made for a charming morning scene. I could even hear the *chirp-chirp-chee-chee-chee* of a sparrow through the window. The atmosphere was like a balm for my soul.



“Sasaki,” said Lady Elsa, “what is Futarishizuka saying?”

“She’s asking if you’d like to join her for a meal. My bird and I have already eaten, but you can have something if you’d like.”

“Oh, umm, then could I just have some tea?” she asked, her eyes flitting over to Ms. Futarishizuka.

I went for a direct interpretation. “She’d just like some tea, if possible.”

“In that case, I’ll go boil some water. Be right back.”

The girl in the kimono set down her bowl and chopsticks and was just about to stand up when Lady Elsa hastily called out to her. “Wait! I can do it myself. Please stay where you are!”

Though she couldn’t understand the words themselves, Ms. Futarishizuka’s reaction told me she’d gotten the message.

Lady Elsa pattered into the kitchen. I assumed this, along with her simple request, were out of consideration for Futarishizuka, who was still in the middle of her meal. Despite her young age, thoughtfulness seemed to come easily to Lady Elsa. You could really tell she was the daughter of an aristocrat. *And all this despite Peeps constantly treating Ms. Futarishizuka like a villain.*

After I relayed Lady Elsa’s message to Futarishizuka, she turned to look at her with the eyes of a grandmother watching over her granddaughter.

“She’s such a good girl,” she said, sounding impressed as she gazed at Lady Elsa’s back. “Utterly unlike a certain sparrow I know.”

Peeps chose to remain silent, so I went ahead and broached the next subject.

“Where is Type Twelve, by the way?”

“Oh, the crazy one? As soon as you two left, she said she had something important to do and headed out. Apparently, she has preparations to make before our evening together as a family. She seemed rather excited.”

“Any idea what exactly she’s doing?”

“Nope.”

The alien had reduced an entire town to a crater just the other day. We

couldn't simply let her do as she pleased with no idea what she was up to. I felt ill at ease whenever she wasn't close at hand.

"She still hasn't stationed her communication terminal here, has she?" I asked.

"Indeed she hasn't," replied Futarishizuka. "What do you need? Is it something urgent?"

"Not exactly. I'm just concerned something might happen before she returns."

"Now that you mention it, we didn't exactly swap contact info with her."

"Maybe she'd come back if we called her on the same frequency band as last time."

"Well, that's certainly an option—if you want the whole world listening in, that is."

"Then I suppose we shouldn't."

The unidentified flying object was still floating in the sky. Type Twelve had been the one to suggest stationing a terminal here, capable of both communication and transportation, as part of a network connecting her with the villa. It seemed she hadn't gotten around to installing it yet, however.

"Eh, I'm sure she'll return by evening," said the girl in the kimono. "Our esteemed senior is here, after all."

"Then we should probably get to work," I said. "I'd like to finish before she comes back."

"If you ask me, the real work won't begin until she returns."

Once Futarishizuka finished her breakfast, we left the villa. Peeps warped us straight to my business hotel in Tokyo. I'd been relying on this place ever since my apartment complex blew up and burned down. In fact, I was here so often that the employees—from the front desk clerks to the cleaning staff—had started remembering me.

From there, after a short ride in Ms. Futarishizuka's car, we arrived at the bureau. No sooner had we walked in the door than the chief apprehended us,

and we all headed for the bureau's meeting space. Miss Hoshizaki was already at work.

The four of us squared off around a table in a private meeting room not ten square meters large. Our positions were the same as usual—Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, and Miss Hoshizaki on one side, and Mr. Akutsu by himself on the other.

The boss had his laptop in front of him. Today, though, it was closed and did not appear to be connected to any external output devices.

"I know you just got here," he said the instant our butts hit the chairs, "but I'd like a report on what happened yesterday." He looked at each of us in turn.

Ms. Futarishizuka immediately started her banter. "Report? I suspect you've already gotten all the info you need from elsewhere."

"Yes, but I believe there's value in hearing it directly from you three."

"I suppose. Though I doubt you'll learn anything new."

I shared her feelings on the matter—Captain Mason had probably fed our boss all kinds of intel. Mostly grievances, I was sure. While Type Twelve was the actual culprit, our group had forcibly disabled the man's helicopters, after all. *And the nerd might have snitched on us, too.*

"Sasaki," said the chief, "would you please do the explaining?"

"Of course, sir."

Ms. Futarishizuka was giving him trouble, so he'd turned to me.

I told him everything that had happened the night before: How we'd rushed to the Chichibu mountains and gotten mixed up in the battle; how Magical Pink and Captain Mason's group had joined up with us; and how the nerd had attacked everyone. I explained how Ms. Futarishizuka, Type Twelve, and I had worked together to fight back, only to be forced into a corner. And then I described how a powered-up Miss Hoshizaki had arrived to save the day.

Otherworld magic had played little part in yesterday's action, and considering Magical Pink's presence, I could obfuscate my use of barrier magic by attributing the affects to her Magical Barrier.

Mr. Akutsu's vaunted surveillance cameras might seem omnipresent, but

surely the mountains of Chichibu were beyond his purview. Plus, after the incident with Peeps, the nerd had promised to keep quiet.

“Well,” said the boss, “from what it sounds like, the reports I received were essentially correct.”

“We don’t have a full picture of what happened last night,” I explained. “For the sake of our future endeavors, can you at least tell us which groups were targeting Miss Hoshizaki? This was a far cry from that riot.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but even the bureau doesn’t know.”

“I see.”

Was that really the truth? I found myself doubting everything the section chief said. I would have expected Captain Mason to know something, at least. Maybe I’d ask him if we had another chance to meet. He owed us for saving Magical Blue, and if we brought that up, he’d have to tell us something.

“I also have quite a few questions about the little girl from outer space,” the section chief continued.

“What are they, sir?”

“This mechanical life-form—is she still with you?”

“She’s doing something else at the moment, but we plan to see her again tonight.”

“...What is going on exactly?” he asked suspiciously.

He was probably having a hard time discerning Type Twelve’s motives. Her absence at the meeting clearly made him anxious. In fact, we were in a similar position. Where was that girl, and what was she up to?

I decided to report her proposal to the boss.

I explained everything just as she had, conveying that she “desired a familial relationship and to enact household dynamics” with us. I didn’t hide our roles, either—I told him that she would be the youngest daughter, Miss Hoshizaki would be the mother, and that the rest of us had our own parts to play.

My intention was to treat it all as work, so I revealed everything. Our

esteemed senior's wages were depending on this.

I also explained Type Twelve's personal problems, the background of her mechanical race, and the bug that had given her emotions. There was a chance Captain Mason or the nerd had clued the boss in after their first meeting with her, so he might have already been aware.

After hearing the full account, the chief looked impressed. "I must say, that is one crazy story."

"This is just our perspective," I said, "but she seems like a very ambitious, motivated girl."

"So she wants to create a family to ease her loneliness... For a mechanical life-form, she seems well-versed in Earth's culture. She also sounds very particular. You said she insisted on being the youngest child?"

"Yes. We've confirmed that she's been observing Earth and continuously gathering information for some time now."

"I suppose that would explain why she can communicate in our language."

"I believe so, sir."

Back in her ship, messages had appeared in many languages from all over the world, not just Japanese. If she'd conducted her meetings with the same kind of hospitality, that would mean Type Twelve could freely speak a great variety of languages.

"And what does it mean," said the boss, "that mechanical life-forms aren't supposed to have emotions?"

"We're not sure of that ourselves, sir. But they apparently do everything according to logic. They sealed away all emotions and treat them as taboo. I don't know any more than that, but I can ask the girl next time I have the chance."

"Yes, that would be appreciated," he said, nodding. "And I'd like you to do it sooner, rather than later."

With that, the chief ended his line of questioning.

I got the feeling his behavior that day was more affected than usual. Was he

suspicious of us, just as I was of him? Well, the sentiment was mutual, at least.

“As an addendum to my report, sir, there will be no more new craters on the planet for the time being.”

“Should I assume that is related to Miss Hoshizaki and her relationship with the girl?”

“That is correct, sir.”

Strictly speaking, it was because she felt a sense of accomplishment after helping to complete a group task. But there was no harm in simply agreeing. If not for Miss Hoshizaki, who knew what might have become of the alien’s mental state.

Our attention naturally turned to our senior.

“I...I didn’t do anything weird, all right? I’m serious!”

Literally overnight, our senior had become a force to be reckoned with. But now, with everyone’s attention on her, she started to get flustered, like a child called out on her mischief. She wasn’t sure what to make of the situation, and I could empathize. If I were in her shoes, I’d be at my wit’s end.

“I believe the alien has taken a liking to her,” I explained, “regardless of Miss Hoshizaki’s feelings on the matter.”

“She gave *us* the cold shoulder, though,” added Ms. Futarishizuka.

“She did indeed.”

“And you’re saying that, as a result, you formed the pretend family you just explained?” asked Mr. Akutsu.

He was probably struggling to figure out where to go from here. A reckless move might result in another crater. That was why I was pretty sure he’d go along with our decision to play house for a while, since it would allow us to keep an eye on the alien and see how things developed. My only worry was that he’d receive some conflicting order from above.

“I suppose all we can do is go along with it until the robo-girl gets bored,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“She could have control over the surveillance cameras in this very room, you know,” I pointed out. “We should watch what we say. She already has a bad opinion of us.”

“Ugh. You’re right...”

“Mind explaining, Sasaki?” asked the boss. He was paying a lot of attention to my throwaway comments, it seemed. *That sure put a wrinkle in his brow.*

The alien had been using her superior technology to hack our measly Earth tech. I figured such activities had been helping her gather data on humanity quite efficiently these days. I’d have to ask her about it when I got the chance.

“The mechanical life-forms’ civilization is far more advanced than our own,” I told him. “For her, our state-of-the-art encryption technology is essentially plaintext. She can also intercept radio communications like it’s nothing. I recommend you factor that knowledge into any future plans.”

“If my memory serves, she visited this place just yesterday,” he remarked.

A terrifying rival had just appeared to challenge our boss, the surveillance aficionado. This could prove an excellent opportunity to put pressure on the chief. After all, my continued employment at the bureau hinged on maintaining a favorable power balance with him.

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do to keep her out of the bureau’s data,” I told him.

“...Sounds like we have quite the little spy on our hands,” he muttered.

Still, I was a little worried at how embedded Miss Hoshizaki was in all this. Her fondness for her wages meant there was a possibility she would betray us and align herself with the chief. If that happened, I’d have to put together a suitable counteroffer.

I’ll talk to Ms. Futarishizuka about that later, I thought. Might be best to ready a pile of hard cash, just in case.

“To confirm,” said the chief, “You’ve made sure to secure Earth’s continued existence, correct?”

“Yes, sir. We had her promise in front of everyone.”

“Can she be trusted?”

“According to her, mechanical life-forms never lie.”

“.....”

The section chief’s brow wrinkled again. He looked at me as if to ask, “Are you serious?” But there wasn’t much we could do other than believe her. Besides, Ms. Futarishizuka had been pressing her on the question of honesty for a while, and she’d never wavered.

We didn’t want to stir up the boss’s anxieties any further, so it was time to wrap up.

“We’ll contact you immediately if the situation changes,” I promised.

“Please do.”

In the end, Mr. Akutsu agreed to leave the whole thing to us. Maybe he thought it would be too difficult to try and direct us when it came to the complicated subject of Type Twelve. Or maybe he simply didn’t trust us to explain the situation honestly were he to ask directly.

Whatever the case, he had a lot more to do than just issue instructions to his subordinates.

“From today forth, you three are to devote yourselves to conducting this exchange with the unidentified flying object.”

“Understood, sir.”

Just as planned, our job for the time being would consist of playing house with the mechanical life-form. We’d be working outside the office all day, every day—sheer bliss for a corporate drone like me.

“Still,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “I’d like to send her back home if we can.”

“As I just reminded you, the cam—”

“Oh, right. Silly me.”

Her casual slip of the tongue was probably on purpose—to inform the boss of our position, despite the risk.

Now that our report on the unidentified flying object was complete, the

section chief turned to Miss Hoshizaki. “In other news, about your psychic power leveling up...”

Our senior’s eyes brightened as the topic turned to her. The way she looked at our boss made it obvious how much she’d been looking forward to this. Her eyes were full of anticipation. She seemed certain her salary would be going up.

“Sasaki tells me you now have access to fluid through a person’s skin tissue. Is that true? If so, is body tissue the only thing you can bypass, or is anything permeable so long as it’s thin enough? I want to understand the conditions of your new power.”

“In that case, I can give you a little demonstration right now!” offered Miss Hoshizaki.

“I see,” said the chief. “Sasaki, would you mind helping?”

“W-wait, no,” I stammered. “Please, wait a minute.” That would kill me! The nerd had met a terrible fate. Though I suppose *he* came right back to life.

“Judging by your reaction, it seems you were telling the truth,” said the boss.

“Of course I was!” I exclaimed. “Why would I lie about that?!”

“Her power is serious business, you know?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “I’d appreciate if you had a little more compassion for your subordinates.”

Now that Miss Hoshizaki’s importance had skyrocketed, Ms. Futarishizuka was quick to display concern. *She really is shrewd*, I thought. She’d teased her nonstop up until now, so you could really feel the difference.

“I suppose the two of you have seen her psychic power personally?”

“That’s right, sir,” I replied. “We watched as she blew up a rank-A psychic.”

“It’s an awfully grotesque ability, if you ask me,” added Ms. Futarishizuka. “Personally, I’d like to steer clear of it.”

“Isn’t your power basically the same?” demanded Miss Hoshizaki.

“I don’t make people’s insides splatter all over the room.”

“W-well, I...I don’t exactly love that part of it. But you guys were in trouble, and, well, I was desperate. I didn’t really think about the consequences...”

It had certainly been an ugly sight. In fact, I felt a little sick at the prospect of having to see all that again should I accompany her on other jobs in the future. I wondered if she could limit the effect to just a person's brain or heart. I began to ponder on what my work environment would be like going forward.

But then Miss Hoshizaki turned to me with a serious expression. "I don't think a little bit would really hurt. Could you let me show him?"

"This might come across as rude, but are you being serious right now?"

"Of course I am!"

She was telling the truth. I could see it in her eyes.

She honestly thought a little bit would be fine, and she was asking for my permission.

Oh no. I think I'm starting to lose all trust in my senior colleague.

"Human bodies are much more sensitive to temperature changes than you think," I told her.

"Come on. A few bubbles in your bodily fluids is nothing. Everything will go right back to normal, won't it?"

"High school girls these days are terrifying," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"...I suppose we should have you study up on such things while we figure out your new powers," the chief said to her.

Her incredibly natural delivery made it clear she was genuine, and that was what worried us. The boss, realizing she might try to use her power for real, watched her uneasily. I hoped she'd get suitable training from the proper department posthaste.

I'm so glad her first victim was the nerd. I bet she thought it'd just be a matter of making some lumps move around under my skin. You saw stuff like that in manga and anime sometimes.

"All right, I understand," the chief continued. "We'll get a look at your powers at one of our facilities within the day and have your rank reevaluated. If they agree that you have an unrestricted ToD and/or a restricted LoD, I think you'll be promoted to at least rank B. Good for you, Hoshizaki. That means a pay

increase.”

“Really?! I, um, thank you so much!” she exclaimed happily.

A bureau psychic’s base pay was determined by how many years they’d worked for the bureau, their work evaluations, and their rank as a psychic. Other things such as special allowances and semiannual bonuses were added afterward.

Miss Hoshizaki was currently rank D. I thought back to the promotion chart I’d been shown during my onboarding. If they promoted her to rank B, then no matter how bad her work evaluation was, she’d still be making over twice her previous annual income.

It seemed the Hoshizaki family’s finances would be secure for a good while. Her little sister would have no problem going to college.

With that, our meeting came to an end.



With the boss’s orders in hand, we could now approach Type Twelve’s proposed pretend family—this mission to soothe her loneliness—as bureau employees.

After the meeting, Ms. Futarishizuka and I waited around in the office for a little while. It didn’t take long for us to finish the paperwork that had piled up, so we chewed the fat at our desks as we waited for Miss Hoshizaki to finish her psychic evaluation and anatomical study session.

She came back to the office a little before noon. As soon as she saw us, she turned to me and announced, “Sasaki, I had no idea how delicate and frail living creatures are.” When I asked for details, she said they’d used lab animals to confirm that her power had leveled up—and in the process, she’d deepened her understanding of how it worked.

Her pay increase had gone through as well, so we went out for a full course lunch to celebrate. The restaurant was situated above one of the finest hotels in Tokyo. When we told her we’d treat her, she was over the moon.

The suggestion—and the arrangements—had been made by Ms. Futarishizuka. As usual, her favors were always cool and calculated.

Afterward, we took a ride in her car and returned to the business hotel I was using as a base. From there, we had Peeps warp us back to the Karuizawa villa.

Looks like this will be our workplace for the foreseeable future, I thought as I headed into the living room.

“I can’t believe I’m doing homework on the job—getting paid for studying math. If this keeps up, my moral fiber is going to rot.”

“You’d be very surprised how many people secretly study for certifications while at work, dear. And those are the ones who move up in the world.”

“Are you sure you weren’t just surrounded by cheaters and schemers?”

“No, not at all. I don’t think so anyway.”

We all had some free time while we waited for Type Twelve to get back. Miss Hoshizaki was doing her math homework at the dining room table, and Ms. Futarishizuka was lying on one of the couches in the living room, playing games on her phone. I was sitting directly across from her, staring at an amateur radio textbook. We couldn’t exactly start the fake family business without the alien, after all.

“Have you been doing that kind of stuff, too, Sasaki?” our senior colleague asked.

“Actually, I think studying is an important part of our work at the bureau. You should be well aware of the value of improving your English conversation. And you were pretty excited about the data we got from the UFO the other day, remember?”

“I always think this, but you’re really good at dodging questions, you know that?”

“.....”

I knew how she felt.

Our current situation reminded me of my college days, when my friends would all gather at one of our dorms and laze around. We were all there, but

we weren't doing anything together. We were just spending time in the same place, doing whatever we liked. It felt like the peak of sloth.

So I understood where she was coming from. This probably felt like just a deferment of real work, real adulthood—and that scared her.

Some time later, as the setting sun began to dye the western skies, my neighbor and Abaddon arrived. They'd skipped going home and come straight here. My neighbor was still in her school uniform, bag in hand. As soon as she reached the living room, she turned to face us and lowered her head in a deep bow.

"I'm terribly sorry for making you wait, mister."

"Don't worry about it," I assured her. "The one in charge hasn't shown up yet, so it's no problem."

"Really?"

"We're just waiting for her to get back."

My neighbor looked around the room, her gaze eventually moving to the dining area.

"By the way, what's she doing?" she asked.

She was looking at the table we'd eaten at the night before—and specifically at Miss Hoshizaki, who was seated with her math textbook and a notebook open on the table. She had on a sour face as she tackled her homework.

"Miss Hoshizaki, you mean?" I asked.

"Yes. That looks like a school textbook..."

Now that we were talking about her, Miss Hoshizaki looked up and said, "Yes, I'm doing my homework. What about it?"

"I don't even want to ask this, but are you using that as a prop to get into character?"

"...What are you talking about?"

"Isn't that going a little far? It's kind of cringe."

"What now? I have no idea what you're getting at."

“You don’t? Personally, I can’t believe you dug out a textbook from your school days just to keep up this act of being in high school. Or is this part of your job? If so, I apologize for speaking out of line.”

“Hey...!” Miss Hoshizaki’s eyes went wide.

Apparently, my neighbor believed my colleague was a full-fledged working adult.

Come to think of it, hadn’t I told her as much at some point? Back when I first met Miss Hoshizaki, I’d thought the same thing.

“Listen, you,” said my colleague. “Like I said, I’m an honest-to-goodness high schooler!”

She *was* wearing her suit today *and* her thick makeup. At a glance, she looked like an adult woman. It was all intentional, of course, but the transformation was admittedly dramatic.

“I apologize. If there’s some misunderstanding, I believe I’m partly to blame.”

“Sasaki?”

“Mister?”

My neighbor looked at me, vaguely confused. After a moment, she seemed to have an epiphany. Grimacing, she turned back to Miss Hoshizaki.

“...Excuse me, but were all those remarks true?” she asked with much consternation.

“Ugh...!”

Miss Hoshizaki seemed to sense my neighbor’s genuine doubt. She groaned, and a moment later, her chair clattered as she rose. She slammed her pen down on the table and called out “Futarishizuka, I’m borrowing your bathroom!”

“Fine by me. But why?”

“To take off this makeup!”

It seemed she wasn’t just upset by adults treating her like a child. She *also* didn’t like it when younger kids treated her like she was older than her age. Her expression the picture of rage, she stormed off down the hallway. It was a scary

sight.

Trying to preserve peace in the workplace, I backed her up right away. “I think you look great with your makeup on or off, Miss Hoshizaki.”

She stopped walking after a few steps. Then she slowly turned around. “Uh... Really?”

“And we’re on the clock right now, so I think your current appearance is more appropriate.”

“Well, if my colleague says so, I guess there’s no need to bother...”

Type Twelve had once leaked information over a televised broadcast, and we couldn’t say for sure she wouldn’t do it again. With that in mind, I figured it was better for Miss Hoshizaki to keep her makeup on at work. After all, unlike Ms. Futarishizuka and I, she had a family.

Just then, something occurred to me. Hadn’t my pet sparrow once done something very similar?

“What is it? Why are you looking at me all of a sudden?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing, Peeps.”

Also, I got the feeling that if she took off her makeup while still wearing her suit, it would throw me for a loop. Her thick makeup was like part of her outfit to me. In fact, if she looked like a neat, fresh high schooler only from the neck up, she’d be like a girl working at one of *those* shops.

“To be blunt,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “dropping the makeup would make you look like you work at a costume brothel. So you should probably keep it on.”

“Wh-what?!”

“You don’t see it? You’d look like the new girl forcing herself to wear a suit she doesn’t belong in.”

“Urk...”

Ms. Futarishizuka had immediately put into words what I couldn’t. *She’s definitely a middle-aged man in there.* But thanks to her, Miss Hoshizaki gave up on her bathroom trip.

“Do you want to practice putting on makeup when we go home?” the demon said to my neighbor.

“You’d help me with that, Abaddon?”

“Sure thing. I’m pretty good with my hands, even if I don’t seem like it.”

After that, we continued to chat as we passed the time.

Eventually, there was a knock from outside the sliding glass door leading from the living room into the yard. Everyone looked over to see who it was—and all our eyes landed on Type Twelve.

She looked exactly the same as when she’d left the previous night. I found myself wondering if she ever washed her clothes. She was a mechanical life-form, so she probably didn’t produce any waste—but wouldn’t she get dirty after walking around outside for a while?

“Ah, the prodigal daughter has returned,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. She stood up from the couch and went to open the sliding glass door.

As soon as the door was open, the one standing outside immediately issued us instructions.

“Preparations are complete. In accordance with last night’s agreement, I would now like to depart for our household.”

“Just to be absolutely sure,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, *“what do you mean by household?”*

“A family home, wherein a family may reside. I have been preparing such a place since last night.”

Type Twelve had spoken passionately about a suitable stage for our family production the night before, and it seemed she was finally done setting one up.

“So we’re changing locations? Your big sister seems to be worried about the return journey.”

“Abaddon, your thinking is correct. I have also prepared for the return journey.”

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't uneasy. In fact, my heart raced as I thought about where she might take us. Unusually, though, we'd have Peeps with us this time. Even if we wound up unceremoniously dumped into space, we should still be able to return safely.

The Starsage himself was at my side. That simple fact made me feel like everything would be all right. What an impressive little bird. *I bet Count Müller feels the same.*

At that point, Peeps asked our host, Type Twelve, for confirmation.

"May I accompany you?"

"Peep, affirmative. Pets are included within the scope of a family."

Type Twelve had adopted a strange nickname for Peeps. Maybe she thought the "s" was something only I was supposed to use. *What should I do? Should I say something? Nah, I guess it's fine. It's kinda cute.*

"I have prepared a transportation terminal in this residence's yard. Please board as soon as possible."

"Well, if you insist, I *suppose* I'll avail myself of the youngest daughter's hospitality," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Futarishizuka, the sarcasm in that remark is reminiscent of a mother-in-law whose hobby is bullying her son's bride. It is very good."

"...Heh. I know, right?"

At Type Twelve's insistence, we went out through the front entrance and into the yard.

We had Lady Elsa accompany us, as well. Since both Peeps and I were heading out, I decided it would be safest to invite her along. By now, just about everyone had probably figured out we were using Ms. Futarishizuka's villa as our base of operations.

We used the same terminal as before to get to our destination. The same strange door appeared out of thin air in the villa's yard. This entrance was the only part of the device we could see with our naked eyes. Everything else blended into the surroundings as though by optical camouflage. Everyone filed in.

Inside, we found a space enclosed by metallic surfaces—walls, floor, and ceiling. It was exactly the same as before. In the middle of the space, we could see one of Type Twelve's trademark midair displays.

We watched as Ms. Futarishizuka's villa and the surrounding area of Karuizawa pulled away from us with incredible speed. Our surroundings seemed to zoom down into the distance, and eventually we passed through the clouds and into the upper atmosphere toward the setting sun.



Skipping over the finer details, the “household” Type Twelve had prepared for us was in space.

Within minutes of leaving the villa, our terminal was sucked into the same UFO we'd witnessed numerous times from Earth's surface.

Part of the ship opened up, allowing our craft to enter, and then closed behind us. The midair display even showed the outer space side of the opening. Like a car entering a garage, the terminal took us into the mother ship.

The room we landed in was empty, just like the inside of the terminal. The ceiling was much higher and the floor even more expansive than a multipurpose gymnasium. Every surface around us was made of some metallic, lustrous material. The place was probably a bay for terminals to enter and exit the larger ship.

Once we disembarked inside the UFO, we saw for the first time what the terminal looked like from the outside. The craft had always been transparent before, hidden by its optical camouflage technology. Though we'd previously seen only the entranceway, we could now observe it down to its finest details.

At a glance, it looked kind of like a pancake—or perhaps a *dorayaki*. In other

words, it looked like what most people would imagine when asked to picture a UFO. Compared to the archetypical Adamski saucer, this one felt a bit more modern in its construction. However, the circular base design was very similar in sensibility.

“This style of UFO is quite cliché,” observed Ms. Futarishizuka, as she looked over the craft. “Why is it like that?”

The other members of our party were standing beside her in a line, all staring at the terminal.

“I constructed this terminal after visiting your sector. Its purpose is the transportation of local life-forms. To that end, I kept the design close to that envisioned by humans. If you are feeling a sense of déjà vu, that is likely the reason.”

“But why go through all that trouble?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“It was my viewpoint that such a craft would be more familiar to humans, and thus induce less psychological resistance.”

“How considerate of you...”

“Hoshizaki, if you are feeling grateful, I give you permission to thank me to your heart’s content.”

“...Um. Uh, thank you?”

“These words of gratitude from my mother bring me great happiness as the youngest daughter.”

“.....”

Now that I’d gotten a good look at it, I could see that the craft was pretty large—way bigger than your normal car. It was at least the size of several dump trucks lined up. It was so large, in fact, that I had to wonder how it hovered without making a sound.

“Are you honestly telling us,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “that you have the

facilities to manufacture something this gargantuan right here?”

“As I expressed previously, the main ship’s name is Independent Multipurpose Early-Model Frontier Sector-Pioneering Long-Range Space Cruiser Type Three-Seven-Six-Nine. In other words, it is capable of developing entire sectors independently.”

“I bet that requires quite a big factory. And it’s installed on this ship?”

“Your thinking is correct. In addition, the development and manufacturing of resources and facilities is not limited to this ship alone. By utilizing this ship’s functions, I can construct production facilities elsewhere, such as in outer space, around other fixed stars, and on satellite moons. I choose suitable environments based on the situation.”

“Wait, then you’ve gone ahead and developed our entire solar system?” Ms. Futarishizuka was incredulous.

“Does that present an issue?”

“It’s just a little overwhelming. We humans are still struggling just to venture out beyond our own moon.”

Incidentally, we were able to walk around inside the UFO without issue. I’d asked Type Twelve about this in advance, and she had explained that the air pressure, oxygen density, and other such aspects of the UFO’s internal environment had been adjusted to match Earth’s. She’d explained we wouldn’t need any space suits, at least within the areas of the ship we could access.

“I will guide you to the house,” she said. “Please come with me.”

“I’ve been a demon for a long time, but I’ve never seen a place like this before,” said Abaddon.

“Don’t blame me if you float off and get lost,” my neighbor replied.

“Impossible! I could never ever leave your side.”

“That sounds creepy. Could you not phrase it like that?”

“Alas, looks like he didn’t react. I’m running out of ideas here.”

“Mgh...”

We followed Type Twelve in accordance with her directions and headed for a doorway she’d created in one corner of the large space. Beyond it was a hallway. The alien took the lead as we went inside.

I’d imagined how it might look beforehand, but now that I was physically in the ship, my heart leaped at the prospect of uncovering all its secrets. The hallway looked the same as the one we’d passed through when we first came here in the swan boat and met Type Twelve.

We made several turns along the way, even passing an intersection. There were no signs to guide us; without Type Twelve, we would certainly have gotten lost. Eventually, we saw an end to the hallway ahead.

We exited into another wide-open space. It was smaller than the terminal landing area, but still big enough to fit several tennis courts. The ceiling was quite high as well—I’d never reach it, even if I stood on a stepladder.

In the middle of it all was a lone house.

It was built entirely in a Japanese style—the sort that had been steadily disappearing from residential districts. It was a solid-looking, partial two-story structure with striking tiles on its hip-and-gable roof. You would have seen a lot of these in the Showa era when prices were cheap. The way you could go out on the roof from the second-floor window and hang futons out to dry gave it a decidedly retro feel.

And here it was, all by itself, in the middle of a spaceship. I felt like I was looking at a full-scale model or something.

What’s more, there was nothing around it—no attached facilities, like a garden or a shed, not even a block wall surrounding the property. It was simply a house sitting in the middle of this huge space. All this made it feel even more out of place than it already did.

“So this is our little play house, then?”

“Futarishizuka, the answer to your question is affirmative.”

One thing was for sure: Nobody would bother us here.

It made sense if she was worried about a rank-A psychic like the nerd mounting a serious attack. But considering Type Twelve was likely to retaliate with more craters, I doubted anyone would be so bold.

“Did you use this ship’s facilities to construct this house, too?” I asked.

“Sasaki, your thinking is partially correct.”

“Will you explain the part I got wrong?”

“I was not able to manufacture certain building materials in time. These, I procured from Earth.”

I’d suspected as much. Scrapes and nicks were visible on the roof tiles and outer walls, which made me think they’d seen a few years. I didn’t know whose houses she’d taken them from, but if possible, I hoped to have the bureau refund the owners.

“Did you take parts of other people’s houses?”

“To utilize an extremely euphemistic expression, there is a possibility one might say as much.”

“I don’t know,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “That sounded pretty clear to me.”

“Hoshizaki, my grandmother has begun to bully her granddaughter.”

“I don’t think I can defend you stealing other people’s things.”

“...Hoshizaki, you would side with your home planet over your own daughter?”

“Hey now,” interrupted Ms. Futarishizuka. “She’s only trying to educate you as a mother should.”

“ ”

This particular lesson made me *extremely* nervous. Considering the alien’s fragile ego, I thought she might require a little more kindness from her mother. Was this how the fathers of the world felt when they watched mothers and children interact?

A moment later, our family’s reliable older brother piped up to change the topic. “*What does it look like inside?*”

“I will now guide you into the household.”

Type Twelve walked over to the front door and pulled it aside with a clatter.

It was a sliding door rather than one that opened inward, which I found rather charming. Beyond that were a tile-floored entranceway and a step leading up into the rest of the house. This latter feature was a central distinguishing characteristic of Japanese architecture. To one side was a shoe rack.

We each took off our shoes and entered the house.

From there, we looked around inside.

The layout was much as its retro exterior implied—the kind popular earlier in the twentieth century. Rather than a Western-style living room, we found a large space with tatami floors, and I could see five other similar rooms beyond. According to Type Twelve’s explanation, there was one room for the mother and father, two for the children, one for the grandmother, and a guest room.

Part of the hallway was an enclosed veranda looking outside. The kitchen had a wooden floor and was connected to the living space. The bath was made of weathered cypress and fitted into the floor. A separate room housed a flush toilet, but it was an older variety without a heated seat, much less a warm-water bidet. Maybe it was unfair to expect that much from an alien.

That said, it seemed Type Twelve had revised her thinking after the unavoidable incontinence incident during the big abduction. The house had electricity, gas, and running water—enough to play pretend family. The gas was propane, while the ship itself provided the electricity and water.

After Type Twelve gave us the rundown, everyone went to the first-floor

living area and sat down on floor cushions around a low, wooden table.

“Sasaki, this room smells a little weird,” remarked Lady Elsa. “Where is it coming from?”

“I believe that’s the soft rush,” I replied. “It’s coming from the tatami on the floor.”

“Tatami? You mean these mat-like things made of woven grass?”

“Yes, I do.”

As Lady Elsa pointed out, the living room had the faint scent of soft rush to it. Judging by the fresh tatami surface, it had been recently replaced.

“There was a room in Futarishizuka’s mansion with similar mats. The construction in it was clearly different from the other rooms in the house, so I wondered if it was used for some kind of ritual. But *all* the rooms in this house have these mats.”

“Tatami floors have long been a traditional element of houses in Japan and other nearby countries. Currently, due to changing trends and cost issues, they aren’t as common. Still, some houses retain more traditional features, like this one.”

These days, just about the only time I ran into tatami floors was in restaurants with private rooms. Most Japanese people were probably the same.

“I suppose I can’t complain about the security here, eh?” noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“For something set up overnight, everything’s quite well put together,” I added.

“The furniture looks used, too. She probably just yanked the whole kit and caboodle and plopped it down here.”

Maybe she’d sucked it all up with her terminal just like when she’d abducted us—along with our swan boat—from the lake in Nagano. Though that left me with some questions about the infrastructure, such as the electricity and water.

“Futarishizuka, your viewpoint is correct. I obtained the entire

house from Earth.”

The rooms contained desks and bed frames, but the closets, dressers, and bookshelves were all empty. The mattresses had been removed, too. In the kitchen there was no food, or even any tools for cooking. The lack of these expected daily necessities made it seem like a short-term rental property with furniture included.

The whole place was sparkling, too. When we’d entered the living room, I’d gotten a glimpse behind the TV and there was no dust. It had clearly been cleaned from top to bottom not long ago.

“We call that having sticky fingers,” said Ms. Futarishizuka to the alien.

Type Twelve immediately complained to Miss Hoshizaki. “Hoshizaki, the grandmother is bullying the granddaughter again.”

“Seems you’ve discovered the joy of relying on your mommy, eh?”

“.....”

The alien turned away from Ms. Futarishizuka and declined to answer. Mechanical life-forms didn’t tell lies—was she using silence to avoid admitting the truth?

Everyone’s attention naturally shifted to Miss Hoshizaki.

The sensible girl sighed and asked the youngest daughter, “Why did you steal?”

“This vessel does not have the facilities required to raise Earthlings or to provide them with an appropriate habitat. In order to resolve the problem quickly, I acquired what was needed directly from Earth and reconstructed it here. I plan to make further improvements going forward.”

“In our culture, taking things from people without asking is a crime.”

“But Earthlings plunder other animals and plants without asking in order to maintain their lifestyle. Humans never repay bees for

the honey they steal. All of humanity is committing a crime against bees.”

Type Twelve grumbled like a small child.

In this day and age, a lot of people probably felt bad about robbing bees like that. But Miss Hoshizaki was swift and sure with her answers. Maybe it was because she’d had to handle her own little sister.

“Remember what you said before?” she told her. “About how mechanical life-forms rule over non-mechanical life-forms without asking? Our species is the same. In our culture, there is a clear division between humans and creatures who aren’t human. You understand that, right?”

“But mechanical life-forms and humans are different.”

“If they were that different, we couldn’t form a family, could we?”

Miss Hoshizaki kept gently admonishing the alien into accepting what she was saying—deftly playing the role of mother. At the mention of our pretend family, Type Twelve quickly gave in.

“...Understood. The youngest daughter will follow her mother’s teachings.”

“Thank you. I’m really happy to hear that.”

“Hoshizaki, do you truly feel happy?”

“Yes, I do.”

“As I thought, you have the proper qualifications to be a mother. I was not mistaken.”

“I’m not sure how to feel being treated like a mother at my age, but that’s nice to hear.”

As I listened to their exchange, I realized that maybe Type Twelve wouldn’t sweat the small stuff as long as Miss Hoshizaki was kind to her. I was reminded again that she had only developed emotions recently.

At the same time, the alien's unaffected reply seemed to mask a kind of certainty. Even now, she was probably monitoring our vital signs, such as our heart rate and body temperature. It was a good thing Miss Hoshizaki wore her heart on her sleeve.

At that point, my neighbor joined in. "Mister, could this be where it came from?" she asked, showing me the phone in her hand and pointing to the screen.

On it was a news article. The caption read, Shocking! House Disappears Overnight!

The contents included pictures depicting the now empty lot in the middle of a residential area. The way it had been scooped out so uniformly seemed like sufficient evidence that Type Twelve was the culprit.

The article showed it side by side with a picture of the house in its original location for comparison. The building looked exactly like the one we were currently occupying.

At this point, I felt obligated to ask the one responsible. "I'm curious as to what you did with this house's occupants."

"The appropriated house was up for sale in your society, and as such, no humans were living within it. I did, however, remove the small animals and pests from inside."

"I see."

It seemed she hadn't harmed anyone. That was a relief, at least. As a bureau member, though, I couldn't simply ignore the incident.

"They'll really have to twist the media's arm to cover this one up," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I'll submit a report to the section chief tonight," I promised.

It was a silver lining that nobody had been living in the house. The bureau had a second set of books to deal with matters like these. If the home had been up for sale and they resolved the matter financially, I doubted there would be much dispute.

This would be far less than they'd had to pay for that crashed military plane, at least.

"Here's a question," said Abaddon. "Can you use that thing when you're not on the Earth's surface?"

"...I don't think so," replied my neighbor. "I guess I took it out on reflex."

Everyone's attention went to the girl, then to the phone in her hand. She, too, stared down at it. From what I'd seen, the signal strength icon had four sturdy-looking bars.

"Yesterday, I repositioned all the terminals with which I had planned to destroy humanity across the planet's surface and in satellite orbit," explained Type Twelve. "We are connected to Earth's network via those terminals. In the future, more fine-tuned interventions into Earth's civilization will be possible."

"So we're basically freeloading off someone's Wi-Fi," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Though I'd say if you're willing to go this far, you've earned it."

The administrators of whatever access point Type Twelve had quietly requisitioned had to be panicking right about now. If all of this made the people of Earth a little more concerned about security, maybe our pretend family was worth something after all. In the meantime, I pretended not to see the lawbreaking happening right in front of me.

"Should you have any questions about these accommodations, I would be happy to answer them," said Type Twelve, looking at each person around the table in turn.

We all traded looks. I definitely had questions, but after the series of shocks I'd just been through, I found I couldn't formulate a single one. As we glanced around, Ms. Futarishizuka spoke up first.

"Allow me, then. Doesn't it seem like my room is a few tatami mats smaller than the others?"

She was right—hers was more cramped than the rest. While the others ranged from six to ten tatami mats in size, hers was four and a half. There was barely any furniture, either. That said, I'd noticed a closet about one tatami mat large, so at the very least, it should be livable.

“The youngest daughter holds her mother in the highest esteem, so she has made her grandmother’s room slightly smaller.”

“But isn’t there a guest room? Couldn’t I use that instead?”

“I determined that my less mobile grandmother would be more comfortable in a smaller room.”

“Hey, your daughter’s being pretty mean to me,” she said, turning to Miss Hoshizaki. “I’m just an old lady.”

“Don’t involve me in this,” replied our senior, looking totally fed up.

As the father, I decided to keep quiet lest I get mixed up in the debate. Was this how dads the world over felt watching their wife and mother interact? Of course, in this family, it was the granddaughter and the mother-in-law who were fighting, but still.

In the end, it was my neighbor who interrupted them. “On the subject of room assignments, may I make a suggestion?”

“Kurosu, I would like to hear your viewpoint.”

Type Twelve shifted on her cushion, turning away from Ms. Futarishizuka toward my neighbor.

The mechanical girl had been sitting in a stiff *seiza* position this whole time, her back completely straight. My neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki were doing the same. Ms. Futarishizuka had copied them and corrected her posture, as well. Under pressure to conform, my legs were quickly growing numb.

“The father and mother’s marriage is just a made-up setting,” said my neighbor. “I have ethical concerns about letting the two of them room together. The mother here is in her first year of high school, making her a minor—at least, if her words are to be believed.”

“W-wait a second!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

“Do you disagree?” asked my neighbor.

“No, you’re right. Our familial relationships are just make-believe, but... Well, I mean, why not? Sasaki and I are both working members of society. Colleagues. We already spend a lot of time together for work, so isn’t it a little late for those kinds of concerns?”

“Are you a child or not? Sounds like you just pick whatever’s convenient for you.”

“I can be a minor and a working member of society at the same time, you know. I’m not pretending to be either—both things are true, pure and simple. You’re a little young for that, though, since you’re still in middle school.”

“What are your thoughts, mister?”

I was pretty sure we wouldn’t be staying overnight here anyway. We were just going to visit during working hours to play pretend. Besides, as someone who did most of his eating and sleeping in another world, it really didn’t matter if I had my own room or not.

At the same time, I wasn’t very into the idea of sharing a room—especially not with a coworker. That was the main reason I had Peeps stay in his Java sparrow form. The longer you live alone, the more attached you become to your personal space.

“I hear there are more and more married couples who stay in separate rooms these days,” I pointed out.

“I knew you’d agree,” said my neighbor.

“Understood,” replied Type Twelve. “In that case, I will assign the guest room to the father, Sasaki.”

“Wait,” interrupted Miss Hoshizaki. “If Sasaki is hypothetically using the guest room, what happens when we have an actual guest? We even have one today—Elsa.” She glanced at Lady Elsa. Not comprehending her words, the girl tilted her head questioningly.

Type Twelve immediately handed down her decision. “In that case, I shall make the grandmother’s room the guest room.”

“Hey now,” objected Ms. Futarishizuka. “What’ll I do then?”

“I will lay down a prefabricated shed in the yard tomorrow. You may move into it.”

“I can’t believe my own family would treat an old woman so coldly...”

Room assignments had continued to shift until Ms. Futarishizuka’s bedroom got completely eliminated. *I guess something like that was bound to happen eventually.*

“That’s all well and good, but don’t you think we should set down some ground rules for family members? My partner’s pretty shy, so I suggest we decide on chores and stuff sooner rather than later.”

“Abaddon, your viewpoint is absolutely correct. Creating rules for the family is extremely important.”

“What should we do about finances then?” asked Miss Hoshizaki. “This house is almost completely empty. We’ll need to make a big shopping trip. We have to figure out who’s going to pay for it all.”

She’d plunged right into the nitty-gritty—as expected from our number one miser.

“If we require human currency, I am able to provide as much as we need,” said Type Twelve.

“Uh, what do you mean by that exactly?”

I wanted to stay away from any actions that might land our boss in hot water, however. And whatever methods the alien planned to use to acquire funds, I doubted they were above board. *Though I suppose I’m not one to talk.*

“If possible,” I interrupted, “could you make sure the money is earned legally?”

“Are credit transactions on the stock market not legal among humans?”

“In your case, I assume you’d be opening an account illegally.”

“...Sasaki, your viewpoint is correct.”

Though her expression didn't change, Type Twelve seemed a bit frustrated. The implication that she could get us as much money as we needed so long as she had access to the stock market was terrifying. Just how advanced *was* her people's technology? I had to assume making money off our markets would be like child's play to her.

A moment later, Ms. Futarishizuka exclaimed, "It's the parents' responsibility to sweat it out at their jobs and bring home the bread, obviously. That's what keeps a family together. Children watch their parents and come to understand the value of hard work. It's very important for their education."

"H-huh...?" stammered Miss Hoshizaki, shocked that her workplace junior would suddenly demand a share of her paycheck. Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

I wanted to tell her that the section chief would surely front the cash if we explained. Still, the clerical paperwork we'd have to do back at the office would be a huge pain. Maybe it was best to take it all on myself. Compared to what I'd earned trading with the otherworld, this would be like a drop in the bucket. I could even pay for the house Type Twelve requisitioned. I wouldn't even feel it. I thought back to all the receipts I'd failed to turn in at my old job because I didn't want to do the paperwork.

"As the father, I'll handle the expenses," I told her. "You don't need to worry."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I got promoted, so I could contribute a little..."

"I'd rather you use that money for your sister."

"Oh. Um, thanks, Sasaki...", she said, sincerely grateful.

Miss Hoshizaki was so earnest and pure—so pure that even discussing finances with her worried me somewhat. I wondered how she'd react if she found out how much money Peeps and I were making in our deals with Ms. Futarishizuka. The shock would probably destroy the family instantly. I felt a cold sweat run down my skin.

Under no circumstances can I allow her to find out.

Turning away from her, I asked the sparrow on my shoulder a question to change the subject. "You've been quiet, Peeps. Any requests?"

“I have been charged with the role of family pet. I had best play the sparrow and not interject.”

After that, we discussed things a while longer around the table.

As we decided room assignments and house rules, our allotted family time soon ran out. Some had been lost while we waited for Type Twelve to return to the villa, too, so it looked like we’d be starting our pretend family in earnest the following morning.

In the end, we decided on the following eight rules:

1. The whole family must eat one meal per day together at the table.
2. Chores must be done in accordance with the chore sheet.
3. All issues must be resolved peacefully, such as by discussion or majority vote.
4. The father will earn the income for the household.
5. Always greet others, even if you’re having a fight.
6. When a family member is in trouble, everyone must work together to help.
7. Respect participants’ privacy outside of pretend family hours.
8. Breaking family rules without prior permission is grounds for punishment.*

*

*For rule eight, the first offense will result in a verbal warning. The second offense will result in a penalty. Penalties should be decided on a case-by-case basis through family discussion.

Type Twelve requested that we have supper together starting that day. Unfortunately, there was no food in the house at all. In addition, working hours were over, and Miss Hoshizaki’s little sister was expecting her back home. So we

talked things over in accordance with our eight rules and decided to call it quits for the day.

The alien seemed very frustrated by this development. But she still followed the rules, demonstrating her respect for our pretend family.

Aside from food, we were also lacking daily necessities and sundries of all kinds, so we decided to go together to get them the following day. It looked like our first pseudo-family event would be going down to Earth for some shopping.

All in all, it was an eventful day. I expected the next would be at least as exciting, if not even more so.



We had just spent the evening setting up our pretend family life with Type Twelve, but I still had my daily trip to the otherworld to take care of.

Now that my position in modern Japan depended on my position in the otherworld—and vice versa—I was essentially living a dual life across world borders.

Once we were ready to leave the UFO, we boarded the terminal Type Twelve had provided and returned to Ms. Futarishizuka's Karuizawa villa. From there, Peeps used his magic to send Miss Hoshizaki home, and then Peeps, Elsa, and I traveled back to my Tokyo business hotel and hopped over to the otherworld.

Our first port of call was Allestos, the royal capital of the Kingdom of Herz. The three of us paid a visit to Count Müller, who was hard at work in the castle. He told us that King Adonis was still busy purging the Imperialist nobles, as he'd been doing during our previous visit. His marriage to the princess from a neighboring country had been put on hold until he finished his current mission.

Peeps and I then visited Newsonia, capital of the Republic of Lunge, where we provided the Kepler Trading Company with diesel fuel and an additional radio setup. There, we were notified that construction on the routes connecting the republic with the Ohgen Empire and the Kingdom of Herz had begun in earnest—and that on our next visit, we'd be able to see some of the progress.

With our job in the republic done, we headed to Baytrium in Herz. There, we

said hello to Mr. French, who reported that his first campaign—the one we’d spoken about at our last meeting—had been a great success; they’d defeated the Imperialist noble with minimal casualties, earning praise from both Count Müller and the king himself. It was very reassuring to see our friend growing into his aristocratic position.

He also informed us there were no issues along the border with Margrave Bertrand’s domain in the empire. The dragons roosting in the big hole in the Rectan Plains were doing well, as were operations at the nearby fortress.

As it turned out, Mr. French had an additional request to discuss with me.

“A job for your father?” I asked.

“I know it’s out of line to trouble you with something like this, sir. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind at all. But could you tell me the circumstances?”

“Yes, sir. The thing is…”

According to Mr. French, his father had been a knight until his injury; in fact, he’d worked his way up from a common foot soldier, eventually receiving command of an entire platoon. Being used to hard work, now that he was back in perfect health thanks to my healing magic, he was restless without anything to do.

Mr. French wanted to know if there was any place that needed his father’s sword.

The man had been retired for several years, and Mr. French hadn’t been sure his father should take on such work so soon. But he’d been helping with fieldwork at home and teaching his daughter swordsmanship, which had done wonders to rehabilitate him.

Hearing that made me certain the man was brimming with vitality. With a son like Mr. French and a solid reputation as a knight in service of the kingdom, I felt I could trust his character, too.

“In that case,” I offered, “I could see how he feels about a certain project I’ve been working on.”

“Could you? It would mean the world to him.”

“He would be dealing with bandits and monsters in a remote area currently under development,” I explained. “I’m footing the bill, and the Marc Trading Company is the prime contractor, so everything is being done with an eye toward safety—but it still comes with significant risk.”

According to Peeps, the area in question was rife with bandits and monsters. We had a healthy budget, so I was sure Mr. Marc would be fully prepared, but there was no harm in having more people on board—especially someone with management-level experience. I assumed such talent was as valuable here as it was back in my own world.

“I believe that’s exactly the kind of job he was looking for,” replied Mr. French.

“But it would be in Alterian, quite far from here. In my opinion, it would be a pity for him to leave now that you all finally have a chance to live together as a family. Won’t he consider taking it easy for a while?”

“Apparently, he feels guilty about that, sir. My sister and I have been taking care of him for such a long time. It seems he’s eager to start bringing in money for the family again.”

“I see.”

That was admirably stoic of him. As someone who never stopped pining for a life of leisure, his attitude pricked at my conscience. Still, if all that was true, then there was something in it for both of us.

“In that case, tell your father to visit the Baytrium branch of the Marc Trading Company. He can give them my name and let them know he wants to help with the Alterian project. We’ll arrange for him to head there with a few people from the company.”

“Sir, I really can’t thank you enough for everything you do for us.”

“Please, there’s no need. You’ve helped me more times than I can count.”

I was sure Mr. Marc would pull some strings for one of Mr. French’s family members. And if the man’s desire to work was genuine, I felt confident he would be treated well. If things didn’t work out, they could just send him back to Baytrium.

I shot a glance at the bird on my shoulder; Peeps seemed to have no objections.

After parting ways with Mr. French, we went straight to the Baytrium branch of the Marc Trading Company, explained the circumstances surrounding Mr. French's father, and finished the required paperwork. Mr. Marc would be notified via radio by the following day.

From that point on, our time was our own.

Normally, we would either spend this segment of our stay eating and sleeping in our lodgings—our base of operations—or focus on magic practice at the outskirts of town. If we felt like it, we might even visit Lunge or Ohgen to sample some local cuisine.

But this time, I decided to tackle a slightly different challenge.

The next day, we left the inn first thing in the morning and went to a stable in town. There, we rented a horse and a set of riding gear.

"Peeps, are you sure we don't need anyone else with us?"

"Are you unhappy with my supervision?"

"W-well, no, that's not what I meant. It's more like, hmm..."

Back during the war with the Ohgen Empire, I'd been unable to ride a horse and had to walk behind everyone else as they strode ahead atop their mounts. Chances were good I'd find myself in a similar situation in the future, so I'd decided to use this opportunity to learn how to ride.

Peeps had also told me that it was a skill I ought to have as a noble. Perhaps it was similar to a working adult learning how to drive a car back in my own world—not that I could do that, either.

And so, I spent the next several hours practicing horseback riding.

"I just think at first, maybe someone else should hold the reins since I'm a beginner?"

"If the horse gets out of hand, I can simply put it to sleep with my magic."

There was a big area next to the stable where the horses could walk around.

The Starsage's first lesson required me to stay in this area while I learned how to mount the horse and make it walk. A few other horses were roaming around nearby.

"Should you or the horse sustain an injury, I will heal it immediately. You need not concern yourself—simply focus on riding."

"...All right, then." I nodded to the Java sparrow, who had left my shoulder and now hovered next to me.

Now that I thought about it, this was par for the course for the Starsage. To put it nicely, he was sincere and focused. To put it rudely, he was a real taskmaster.

"Slide your left foot into the stirrup, then pull yourself over the horse all at once. Don't worry if the horse staggers; just concentrate on settling yourself into the saddle. If you don't think you can get your leg all the way over, you may use flight magic to lift your lower body."

"In that case, I'd rather just use flight magic for the whole thing."

I could lower myself from above like with a chamber pot. That would be easier on the horse, too.

"But it wouldn't look very noble, would it?"

"Maybe not, but is it really that important?"

"It would be like an adult riding a bike with training wheels in your world. If you're fine with that, then I certainly won't stop you. I just want you to be aware."

An adult riding a bike with training wheels would definitely stand out.

It occurred to me that, since King Adonis had made me court minister, acting beneath my position might reflect poorly on him. Depending on the situation, it could even affect troop morale. In that light, learning to properly ride a horse seemed just as important as my magic studies.

"Um. All right, then, I'll try."

"Yes, that would be best."

And with that, I attempted to mount the horse.

I'd be lying if I said I had no interest in learning. I mean, horses are so cute. It seemed like great fun to be able to ride around on one whenever I wished. I'd only be with this particular horse for the next few days, but in the future, I might buy one for personal use. In fact, if I was going to be riding one, I might as well start building trust with one of my own.

With my thoughts optimistic and my spirits high, I took on the challenge. I put my left foot into the stirrup and kicked off the ground with my right.

However, as a man nearing forty who didn't exercise much, I wasn't very flexible. As the sparrow had anticipated, I couldn't get my right foot over the horse's back. It was like executing a difficult skill in a poorly designed video game. In the end, I had to use flight magic.

As I did, the horse buckled. The way my body weight was pulling it caused its knees to bend. But I followed Peeps's advice: I kept using my flight magic and reaching out with my foot, trying to get myself seated. My weight evened out and the horse managed to pick itself back up.

A moment later, my butt landed firmly in the saddle.

"Ah...!"

But no sooner had I breathed a sigh of relief, than I felt a cramp in my right foot. Trying to force it upward had made it start to sting. I could have just used healing magic, but the pain made me reflexively move—my foot recoiled inward to escape it.

I'd driven my heel into the horse's side.

With a neigh, the animal jerked.

"Whoaaaaa!"

It was like a motorcycle doing a wheelie. The horse's front legs lifted high into the air, flinging me backward. I'd only been on the horse for a few moments when my vision whirled and I tumbled back onto the ground. The unexpected feeling of weightlessness threw my mind into confusion.

Immediately, the horse's back legs approached my face. Those hooves were

about to crush my skull in.

“Ack...!”

As I lay there, my head spinning, I thought, *This is it, I’m a goner.*

But a few centimeters from my nose, the hooves struck something invisible.

A barrier spell.

Peeps must have saved me.

Kicking off the invisible wall, the horse sped away. As I watched its wild charge, I got the feeling I’d never learn to ride—that it just wasn’t for me. I quickly concluded it’d be easier to drive Ms. Futarishizuka’s car.

After running around the pasture, the horse eventually settled down.

“Thanks for that, Peeps. You saved me.”

“Unlike your sense for magic, your sense for riding is terrible.”

“My mind is ready, but my body just can’t keep up. Do you know that feeling?”

“In your case, I believe it’s because of your complete lack of exercise.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right about that...”

I spent the rest of our stay working on my riding skills. Perhaps Mr. French’s father’s vitality had infected me. For the first few days, I stayed on the stable grounds, learning the basics; once I had those down, we would leave town and get in some practical training. Even when I wasn’t on the back of a horse, my days were filled with the Starsage’s lectures and flexibility exercises.

Driven by a feeling of responsibility, I did the stretches every day—and, lo and behold, I managed to touch my toes where before, I could only barely reach my shins. I’d always thought it would be impossible, so I was rather moved. *Guess everything’s worth a shot.*

Ultimately, I learned the basics of horseback riding: how to mount up, how to walk, how to run, and how to stop. I still couldn’t reliably make a turn; my success largely depended on the horse’s mood.

According to Peeps, nobles like Count Müller and King Adonis could get their

horses to jump over obstacles, back up through tight spaces, and do even more impressive feats like it was nothing. I realized, once again, how amazing they were.

A few days passed. Then one morning during breakfast, Peeps said, *"We need to return from the otherworld soon."*

"Huh?" I replied. "Already? I don't think it's been ten days yet."

"I believe dawn has already broken back in your world."

"Oh. The time difference has shrunk that much?"

"It has indeed."

At first, one day on Earth was about a month in the otherworld. That had been steadily decreasing, dropping from a month to around half a month, and now we couldn't even stay for ten days. The relative passage of time had sped up significantly.

"I wonder if there's a reason for it."

"I have several theories, but I can't be sure of any of them."

"Sorry for making you do all that tough math and stuff. Anything I can help with?"

"No. And I do it because I like to. You needn't worry."

I'd have to continue my horseback riding efforts another time.

After that, we said good-bye to the horse I'd been working with and headed for Allestos. We visited Count Müller and picked up Lady Elsa, then we were on our way.

Feeling refreshed for the first time in a while, I arrived back in Japan.

<Household, Part One>

We finished our excursion in the otherworld—which had turned into a special training camp for horseback riding—and arrived back in Japan, in Ms. Futarishizuka’s Karuizawa villa.

We moved into the living room and spotted the villa’s owner with Type Twelve in the adjacent dining room. The former was eating breakfast at the table, while the latter sat across from her staring. It was pretty creepy.

“We’re back, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I announced.

She reacted to our appearance immediately. “Oh, good. You’re finally here.” I quickly noticed how upset she looked.

“So, um, about her...,” I ventured. “Did something happen while we were out?”

“Could you maybe say something to her?” She pointedly glanced at Type Twelve.

The alien was just sitting at the dining room table, staring straight ahead, without moving a muscle. It was as if her power had been turned off. Her eerily beautiful facial features combined with an artificialness innate to mechanical life-forms to make her look like a life-sized doll.

Frankly, I was terrified.

“Sorry,” I said. “I can’t really tell what’s going on.”

“She barged in at sunup, and she’s been like this ever since.”

“Oh. I see.”

Apparently, she’d stormed into the villa first thing in the morning, unable to restrain herself. Different family members would be playing their roles at different times. My colleagues and I would be using our work hours, while my

neighbor would join in after she got home from school.

And the seventh family rule stated that we had to respect all participants' privacy outside of designated family time.

That rule was mainly aimed at Type Twelve since she was likely to be overcome by loneliness and charge into Miss Hoshizaki's home otherwise. Unlike Ms. Futarishizuka and I, our senior had an actual family. We couldn't let the alien bother them.

The scene in front of me told me we'd had the right idea.

"Family rules *do* forbid going to Miss Hoshizaki's condo," I said.

"Yes, so I'd appreciate it if you went over there and grabbed her, and soon," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Won't our visitor take care of it as soon as she contacts us?"

"There has been no contact from Hoshizaki yet," stated Type Twelve.

We'd all decided to wait for Miss Hoshizaki to contact us before bringing her to the villa. Type Twelve could transport her, or we could leave it to Peeps—but any violations of privacy were strictly against the rules.

That said, the mechanical life-form was also in charge of protecting Miss Hoshizaki's home. She'd explained last night that she had several terminals—separate from the point of contact we interfaced with—stationed near Miss Hoshizaki and her sister. If that was true, I didn't think she needed to be so anxious.

"Just to confirm," I said. "You're still guarding Miss Hoshizaki and her house, right? If so, don't you have eyes on her? Even if they're not your eyes specifically."

"Sasaki, your viewpoint is correct. However, according to family rules, participants' privacy must be respected. I am currently permitted to ensure the safety of Hoshizaki and her younger sister, but I am not permitted to talk with her."

"So you just want to talk to her, then?"

“Yes,” she replied instantly. I could feel her enthusiasm.

“She probably can’t stand seeing our esteemed senior having a nice time with her *real* little sister,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “She’s having to watch a nice family scene that she could be *living* if only we were up in that pretend house—she must be drooling at the thought.”

“Futarishizuka, your viewpoint is also correct. I cannot stand it.”

Wow, I thought. *Mechanical life-forms really don’t lie, huh?* Ms. Futarishizuka was being very blunt, but Type Twelve just agreed with her. *She really loves you, Miss Hoshizaki. Perhaps a little too much.*

For similar reasons, the alien wasn’t allowed to go see my neighbor, either. She was probably beside herself with impatience. Otherwise, the other mansion was only a short walk away. Of course, my neighbor was probably on her way to school at this hour.

“Wait,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Then why have you come into my home without so much as a second thought?”

“This building has been designated as our meetup location.”

“Meetup location, eh? Can we change that?”

I recalled that before leaving the previous day, we’d promised to meet back here. Our pretend house was in the UFO, and we couldn’t get there without Type Twelve’s help, so we needed to meet up *somewhere* beforehand.

“If possible, I would prefer to make Hoshizaki’s dwelling our meetup location,” said Type Twelve.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, do you think you can put up with this for a little longer?” I asked.

“Haah, it’s like *my* privacy means nothing to you people...”

Despite her attitude, she was still sitting at the table eating, so I figured she’d known what she was getting into. With her finances, she could simply buy another house in the area if she wanted to. For now, there shouldn’t be any problem with the current arrangement.

I kept that to myself, however. If I said it to her outright, she'd get mad at me. I guessed that her real priority was keeping those she valued close at hand, even if that meant going to them.

A few moments after our conversation ended, Lady Elsa spoke up.

"Hey, Sasaki, Futarishizuka seems worried about something. If she is, can you ask her if there's anything I can do? I'll be staying here again, so I want to help as much as I can."

"What is it, dear?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka, her gaze darting between Lady Elsa and her own food. "If you're hungry, I left you some breakfast."

It's true that older folk always like to keep young people well fed. Ms. Futarishizuka was no different, reminding me of her real age.

"She noticed how troubled you looked and offered her assistance," I explained. "She said that if you're worried about anything, she'd like to help out however she can."

"Oh, my houseguest is such a good girl! I just want to dote on her."

I understood the feeling. Lady Elsa's considerate words were like a balm for the soul.

"Umm, Sasaki...", the girl said, looking at me.

"Futarishizuka is overjoyed at your kind offer. But she says that there's no problem and that you don't need to worry. It hasn't been very long since we met the girl sitting over there, so Futarishizuka is just worried about how to act around her."

"Oh, I see. So that's what it was."

The purehearted Lady Elsa took my words at face value.

Type Twelve, watching our exchange, piped up as well. "Sasaki, Futarishizuka, I did not give that human a role in our family."

"Then should we make her a friend who lives next door?" I asked.

"Indeed. We don't need any more children in the family," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Understood. I will adopt your viewpoint.”

There was a world of difference between Lady Elsa and Type Twelve, who was watching eagle-eyed for any chance to continue playing house.

In the meantime, Miss Hoshizaki contacted us. Her text message came to my personal phone, letting us know that she was ready and that we could come get her.

All right, then, I thought. I was about to ask the sparrow on my shoulder to bring her over, but Type Twelve beat me to the punch. She explained very rapidly that she already had a terminal headed toward Miss Hoshizaki’s place and that help was unnecessary.

Just as she’d said, our senior coworker arrived a few minutes later.

“Oh, you’re already here?” she asked, seeing us.

“Yes, we just arrived,” I replied.

Miss Hoshizaki wasn’t wearing her suit today, nor had she put on any makeup. To top it all off, she was in her school uniform for some reason.

“Will you be okay without your makeup and suit?” I asked.

“I figured I’d drop the outfit if we’re gonna be out and about. The pictures of me on the internet are all gone, but people might still remember. Best to lie low for now, right?”

I’d checked for the leaked photo of her myself but it truly seemed to be gone—almost like it had never existed in the first place. Comments speculating on what had happened had been deleted, too. Even areas of the internet that usually raised a fuss were keeping their mouths shut; probably thanks to Mr. Akutsu’s assistance. At this rate, the whole thing would quickly vanish from public consciousness. Lately, even the craziest news stories faded away as soon as they were out of the mass media spotlight.

“But won’t someone wearing a school uniform in the middle of the day stand out?”

“Wh-who cares? It’s a *uniform*. Students are supposed to wear it.”

“I see.”

She'd really been pushing the “I'm a high school girl” shtick lately. Was she anxious about wasting her youth? High school was said to be a very special time in a girl's life, so I could kind of understand. But if that was the case, shouldn't she be focusing on school events rather than all this?

She turned toward Ms. Futarishizuka, hoping to change the topic. “Anyway, it looks like the villa's owner is still in the middle of her breakfast.”

“A nice, relaxed breakfast once in a while does these old bones a lot of good,” said the woman in question.

“We shall travel immediately. It appears Futarishizuka prefers to eat, so I would like to leave her here.”

“Hey! You can't treat your elders like that!” she cried, frantically shoveling rice into her mouth.

After waiting for her to finish eating, we all departed from Karuizawa. I felt bad leaving them, but I asked Peeps and Lady Elsa to mind the place in our absence.



<The Neighbor's POV>

An alien has come to Earth.

The government and mass media haven't said anything definitive about it, but the way the TV broadcasts were all hijacked rattled the people of this country quite a bit. For days now, the word *aliens* has been trending on the internet.

I look up; the UFO is still hanging in the sky.

Due to the present situation, aliens are the only thing anyone is talking about in class, too. Before morning homeroom, the arriving students are all laughing and carrying on about the thing in the sky. Until a few days ago, this was the kind of thing a certain type of sci-fi nerd might joke about, but now everyone is taking it seriously.

I hear several classmates standing around me chatting merrily.

“I knew they were real! Aliens are real!”

“Umm, I think that’s a stretch.”

“But remember when the TV programs all changed? I don’t think they were faking it.”

“The people on the news were super confused.”

“And you can still see it in the sky, just hovering there.”

It’s been a while since I transferred to this school, but my standing in class hasn’t changed. Everyone still treats me like a rich girl. The students gathered around my seat right now are the ones at the top of the school’s hierarchy. There’s no reason for them to come over to me, but they do as soon as I arrive.

“Hey, what do you think, Kurosu?” asks one of the boys. He’s regarded as one of the better-looking students in our grade. The others around us stop talking and turn to me when they hear the question.

But it’s not like I can tell them what I know—that yeah, the UFO is real, aliens are real, and I’ve already hung out with one.

“I wonder how they’d react if you told them the truth,” jokes Abaddon. He’s floating right above us.

I ignore him and answer flatly. “All this talk of aliens sounds fishy to me. Humans all over the world have dug into layers of earth from thousands of years ago, and we haven’t found any trace of aliens. In my opinion, the chances of one visiting Earth during our lifetime are astronomically low.”

The other day, my neighbor said it’s his job to hide supernatural phenomena like this from the public, and I want to help him as much as I can. I can’t do much in my position, though, which makes me a little sad.

“You’re always so calm about these things, Kurosu.”

“The way you keep a level head is, like, so cool.”

“When you put it like that, it makes a lot of sense.”

“Yeah, I guess aliens being real is a little crazy.”

“I bet someone was just playing a prank on the TV stations.”

Some people in my class believe in aliens, and others don't. Since the TV broadcast debacle is the only thing Robot Girl has done so far that affected them, few people are certain about what's going on. I think it's the same among the general populace. Nevertheless, it's a great topic of conversation that will probably drag on for a while longer.

“You don't seem happy. Are you worried about the others?”

“.....”

The demon bobbing in the air above me continues to banter. I'm a little irritated because he hit the nail right on the head. He's talking about my neighbor and the ones with him. Apparently, they're taking Robot Girl shopping today at a department store to get necessities for our pretend family—and Futarishizuka and Makeup will be with them.

I would have liked to skip school and go, too. But they said I should focus on my education, so here I am.

“I'm sorry. I need to run to the bathroom.”

The idea of joining in a lengthy conversation about rumors despite knowing the truth stresses me out, so I give them the traditional excuse and flee the classroom.

I've got a little time before the bell rings for morning homeroom. Some students are still in the hallway, and I walk by quickly, avoiding their gazes.

I reach the bathrooms closest to my classroom, then pass right by, instead taking the stairs to another floor. I keep walking until I reach the area where all the special classrooms are, like the science lab and the music room. Despite the hustle and bustle in the morning, there are no students all the way back here. I can hear the commotion from the other floors, but it's nice and muted.

“Oh? I thought you were going to the bathroom.”

I look around to make sure we're really alone, then reply, “Looking at a certain demon's evil face made the pee go right back into me.” I stop and lean against the wall.

"This is what I mean, you know. Doesn't saying stuff like that embarrass you?"

"Is there a point in getting embarrassed around you?"

"If you get used to behaving this way, you'll start slipping when it counts."

"Well, if you want to see me embarrassed that badly, I'll think about it."

"Oh, I see. You're getting better at this whole banter thing."

"Well, I get a lot of practice thanks to you."

Guess I'll chat with the demon until the bell, I think.

But a moment later, I hear quiet voices coming from somewhere.

"Ah, ah... This... This is amazing..."

"How is it? You like it, don't you? You like it right here, where you're sensitive. How does that feel?"

"It's so good. Y-yes, right there, it's so good. Thrust...thrust harder...!"

Judging from their voices, it's an adult man and a female student. And considering their suggestive tone, I'm fairly certain they're doing something that is *not* supposed to happen at school. I can think of nothing more out of place in a facility for the education of children. And they're at it before the first bell has even rung.

"Those voices sound familiar," Abaddon points out.

"They do," I agree, recognizing them.

I'm pretty sure the man is my homeroom teacher—the one in charge of class 1-A. And the girl must be the one who's always getting bullied. She'd been reading alone at her desk when I approached her and struck up a conversation on my first day, an action that led to the other girls giving her a harsh dressing-down behind the gymnasium.

"B-but you're... You're not wearing a c-condom, a-and...!"

"It's okay. I won't come inside. So come on, there's no need to hold back."

"Ah, ahh, I, if you do that to me, I'll..."

Now that I'm paying attention, it's so quiet back here that I can even make

out what they're saying. Considering the situation, you'd think these two would want to be pretty careful. But it sounds like the teacher is thoroughly enjoying himself, and based on what he's saying, I can tell they've done it here many times in the past. I really doubt this is a recent development, at least.

"I heard from the transfer student that the girls in your class are still bullying you."

"I...I don't mind. I h-have you, after all..."

"Yeah, you do. You have me. And I'll be on your side no matter what, Miyata."

"That...that makes me so happy... I love you so much...!"

I see. So that's how it is, I think. Should have expected as much from our oh-so-talented teacher. He acts cool and kind, but he's been enjoying himself behind closed doors.

I sure wasted my time trying to help her out. If I'd known this was going on, I would have just left her alone.

"W-wait, if you go that hard, I'll start to moan..."

"It's okay. A little won't hurt."

"B-but..."

"No student ever comes up here this early in the morning. And even if they did, they'd have to be a gloomy introvert. Nobody would believe them even if they blabbed."

Now I'm mad. I won't deny that I'm a gloomy introvert, but having it pointed out like this is infuriating. I feel like calling up the police and reporting the guy this very instant.

"Oh, boy. Even your teacher thinks you're a gloomy introvert."

"We're leaving, Abaddon," I mutter to the mean-spirited demon as I push away from the wall. I head back to class, purposely making my footsteps loud.

A few moments later, I hear something clatter to the floor in the science lab. They must have noticed my presence. The voices stop dead as well; I bet they're holding their breath, trying to listen for the "gloomy introvert."

“Now that was mean.”

“.....”

I almost object to Abaddon’s remark without thinking, but I swallow it just in time and head down the hall.

It would be one thing if she was being violated against her will, but she seemed into it. I don’t want to let my sense of justice take over, report them, and then have them both hate me. If she’s fine with it, I might as well leave them alone. No point in kicking the hornet’s nest.

Once we’ve made it down the stairs, Abaddon asks, *“Are you sure you should just leave them? Isn’t what they’re doing a crime these days?”*

“You sure know a lot about modern society for a crusty old demon.”

“Hey, like I said before, I’m a really good student.” Abaddon puffed out his chest a little.

I’ll have to be careful around that teacher going forward. Since he’s refusing to do anything about the bullying problem, it’s clear he’s the sort who thinks with his lower half. I bet he’s the same kind of person as my late mother’s boyfriend—the kind who will try his luck with anyone if he sees a chance and the girl checks enough of his boxes.

If only he could share a tiny bit of that sex drive with my neighbor.



The moment Type Twelve had been waiting for was finally here—it was time to begin our pretend family life, and our first event was an outing to buy all the daily necessities we’d need at the house. Everyone climbed into the alien’s terminal, and we headed for a certain Tokyo department store.

We soon arrived at an establishment with a long history located in a ritzy district in the heart of the capital. People called it one of the best in Japan, and it looked luxurious enough to have earned that moniker. With its traditional Japanese layout and retro-modern style, it had apparently been designated an Important Cultural Property by the government. It was worlds away from the

hypermarket by my old apartment.

“Hey, Sasaki,” said Miss Hoshizaki nervously as we gazed at the front entrance. “Are we really shopping here?”

“Ms. Futarishizuka chose the store,” I told her. “Is there a problem?”

“It just looks so *expensive*. Are you sure you can afford it?”

My senior coworker’s concerns were reasonable. Up until now, I’d never come to a place like this without a very good reason. I usually got my sundries and daily necessities at a discount store, and even when it came to clothes, I relied on major retailers. I bought all my suits cheap right off the rack.

One of the few exceptions was the time I spent thirty thousand yen on a hundred grams of chateaubriand for Peeps.

“This is a family shopping trip, dear,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Where else would we go but a department store?”

“Is that how it works?” I asked.

“We should have just ordered everything off the internet,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Then we could have looked around for the cheapest option. And we wouldn’t have to travel all the way to the store and carry everything back home. Though I guess we were in a hurry this time.”

Hers was a very modern objection—one that utterly denied the whole *raison d’être* of a department store. *I guess young people are just like that*, I thought. *In fact, I’m probably the same.*

Ms. Futarishizuka groaned. “Ugh, you simply don’t understand! None of you do!”

“Then please, explain it to us so we can.”

“Here we can have fun shopping for anything from button-downs for Dad and accessories for Mom to toys for the children. Then we can visit the restaurants on the upper level for lunch. After that, we can enjoy the amusement park on the roof. Finally, before we leave, we can head down to the basement level to buy our food for dinner and bring it home. That’s how shopping is supposed to go!”

“Grandmother, your viewpoint is correct. You have made an unusually good suggestion.”

Type Twelve had just offered Ms. Futarishizuka rare praise. Apparently, she was more than happy with the idea.

I didn’t have much experience with department stores either, but it seemed that those built before the ’90s were basically as good as amusement parks. Info on these grand feats of humanity was probably among the mountains of data the mechanical life-form had gathered.

Based on her response here and the Japanese-style house she’d prepared on the UFO, her sensibilities seemed a bit old-fashioned.

“And with the Marunouchi business district so close,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “we won’t have to worry about any third parties trying anything.”

“Oh, I see.” *That must be her real reason*, I thought.

As I relaxed a bit, knowing we wouldn’t have to worry about any missiles targeting us, I was forced to consider how dangerous our guest was. Even if a few missiles *did* come flying, it occurred to me that Type Twelve could probably deal with them before they even hit. She said the previous day that she’d already repositioned all her terminals around the planet.

“Mother, your youngest daughter would like to enter this store and begin shopping at once.”

“Well, I guess if Sasaki doesn’t mind, then I’m fine with it...” Urged on by Type Twelve, Miss Hoshizaki headed inside.

Ms. Futarishizuka and I followed. There were four of us on this shopping trip—the father, mother, their youngest daughter, and her grandmother. Peeps and Lady Elsa had stayed behind at the Karuizawa villa.

“The front of the store was one thing,” murmured Miss Hoshizaki, “but the inside is just as intimidating...”

“Where shall we head first?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Let’s start with the lighter, smaller things,” I suggested. “We won’t need

bedding, but just getting kitchen and bathroom supplies will take a while. If we aren't efficient about it, we won't have enough time."

"In that case, the youngest daughter would like to suggest purchasing dinnerware. They should all have a uniform design and come in different sizes. Seeing them on the table will make meals feel very authentic. I will not compromise on this."

"Those will be heavy," Ms. Futarishizuka pointed out. "Let's leave them for later. I'll be the one carrying everything, after all."

"If we make you carry everything in here, won't someone call the police on us?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"An outsider may well see it as child abuse," I agreed.

"It will be of no consequence," said Type Twelve. "We can simply maintain a fixed distance between us and Grandmother as we walk."

"I still think someone will stop her and ask about it," Miss Hoshizaki insisted.

"She'll probably get cautioned," I added.

"Is this really worth all the grave discussion?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "We can just split the burden among ourselves."

The four of us proceeded through the store as we discussed our plans. Quite a few people were staring at us.

Now that I thought about it, everyone with me looked like children. Two of them were older, but an outside observer would have no way of knowing that. The police badge tucked away in my pocket had never felt so reassuring.



Shopping at the department store progressed exactly how Ms. Futarishizuka had described.

Aside from minimal furniture, the Japanese house was empty. Keeping its interior appearance in mind, we went around each of the floors and looked for daily necessities and sundries. On the way, we stopped by a women's clothing

store and purchased several new outfits for Type Twelve, who hadn't changed since we met her. She was over the moon about them, since Miss Hoshizaki picked them out.

For lunch, we went to an upper level of the store where there were restaurants. A fierce push from the youngest daughter landed us at a place serving Western food, where she ordered the kid's lunch set without even checking the menu. Apparently, she'd really wanted to have one.

Once we were done eating, we continued shopping into the afternoon. We went through each floor until everyone had both hands full of shopping bags. At that point, we suddenly realized it was time for a snack.

Because we'd been walking for so long, my feet were starting to throb. Two of our party were not subject to human limitations and were probably fine, but Miss Hoshizaki and I were struggling to keep going. So, in search of somewhere we could take a little rest, we visited the department store's roof.

Under the blue sky above we found an expansive park. There were benches and tables and even a café. Apparently, they set up a beer garden here in the summer.

We found some chairs and a table and took a break. On the table, we set out the assortment of drinks and snacks we'd bought at the café. The temperature outdoors was low, but the lack of wind meant we could still relax as long as we had warm drinks.

"I don't think I've ever gone on a shopping trip like this before in my life," remarked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Don't you go shopping with your sister on holidays?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, but never to buy this much stuff at once."

As we spoke, we gazed at a pile of bags adorned with an illustration of the department store sitting next to our table.

A moment later, Type Twelve chimed in. "The youngest daughter would like to wear the clothing Mother picked out for her as soon as possible."

"I thought emotions were taboo for mechanical life-forms," said Miss

Hoshizaki. “Or are you still allowed to appreciate pretty things?”

“For us, aesthetic beauty is condensed into functional beauty. However, that is an entirely separate issue.”

“You really don’t have any control over what you’re feeling, eh?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“In order to fix this bug, it is necessary to fully understand it.”

“I suppose that’s as good an excuse as any.”

As I listened to their conversation, I was reminded of something that had been bothering me. How long had Type Twelve been using her point of contact on the earth’s surface? And more concretely, how did she handle clothes that got dirty during her interactions with humans? Had she really been wearing the same exact black dress every single day since we’d met her?

“Could I ask a question about the facilities on your spaceship?” I asked.

“Father, please continue with your question.”

“Is there a washing machine?”

There was no washing machine in the house Type Twelve had prepared, though there had been a refrigerator and a television. Some of the lights had been removed, too—we’d purchased replacements while shopping. My guess was that the seller had decided to take out anything valuable, including nicer home appliances. I’d heard that a lot of people replaced LED lights with incandescent bulbs when they moved. The original owners might have had to leave shortly after buying new ones. In fact, the appliances left behind appeared pretty old.

“There is not. I shall procure one from the surface at a later time,” said Type Twelve, clearly implying she’d be stealing it.

“Oh boy...,” murmured Ms. Futarishizuka in exasperation. “We can wash dirty clothes at my place, so stop snatching things from other people. If you make more work for our boss, we’re the ones who’ll get scolded. Or just tell me the model number and I’ll buy a brand-new one.”

“Understood. I will adopt Grandmother’s viewpoint.”

I figured we could leave the acquisition of any larger appliances in Ms. Futarishizuka’s hands in the future. Considering our new house was in outer space, we obviously couldn’t ask a store to deliver anything. Our circumstances felt oddly real—not a day after moving in, the parents were already relying on the grandmother’s help.

“If she’s going to handle the washing machine,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “then what else should we get here?”

“Bulkier consumables like toilet paper and tissues are still on the list,” I told her. “After that, we can go down to the basement for food and get something for dinner. Then we’ll be done. I’d prefer to drop our things off at the terminal before we head down, though. Type Twelve?”

“I will call it here.”

“No, don’t,” I said. “Won’t it cause a big scene?”

“With that optical camouflage, maybe nobody will even notice,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“There’s a lot of space up here,” added Miss Hoshizaki. “It can just come down from the sky. Sounds better than trying to land it in the parking lot, right?”

I understood what they were implying. If Type Twelve set the terminal down quietly somewhere away from prying eyes and we just threw all our stuff in, maybe nobody would see us. I was beginning to think it would actually be riskier to try and find somewhere with enough open space down on the ground—not to mention, it would require a lot more effort.

“You know,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “I’m surprised a department store in Tokyo has this much space on the roof.”

“Yes, they used to build whole amusement parks in spaces like these,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“You mentioned amusement parks this morning. Was there actually one up here?”

“There was, I swear! I went myself!”

“You sound like a child.”

“This one was removed quite some time ago, but there are other department stores that still have rides on the roof. They’re smaller than proper amusement parks, but they’re more than enough to keep the little kids happy.”

“Have you ever been to one, Sasaki?”

“Not to a rooftop amusement park, no,” I said. “But a lot of shopping centers out in the suburbs have big arcades, right? It doesn’t seem all that different to me.”

“There was a period of time when a bunch of department stores had big fires,” explained Ms. Futarishizuka. “A lot of people died, and the government revised the fire laws. Rooftop spaces were made into evacuation areas. Most of the amusement parks were forced to downsize or relocate entirely.”

“They used to have a lot of those superhero shows on roofs, too,” I added. “You don’t see as many of those anymore, either.”

“Indeed.”

“I, for one, would prefer a zoo,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Doesn’t that sound nice? One where you can pet small animals, like rabbits or Call ducks. It would be good for kids *and* couples, and it wouldn’t take up as much space as park equipment.”

“Oh, but there was one of those here, too,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Wait, really?”

“They used to have an elephant up here.”

“What? Why the heck would they have an elephant on the roof?”

“Don’t ask me.”

A modern person with modern sensibilities would likely find this aspect of postwar culture, well, insane. But personally, I kind of appreciated the way they didn’t worry about the details and just *did* things.

Type Twelve, ever liable to chime in, must have liked something about our

conversation.

“Father, Mother, your youngest daughter wants to go to an amusement park.”

I’d expected this kind of reaction. So had Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki, judging by their expressions as they turned to face the mechanical life-form.

As soon as everyone’s attention was on her, Type Twelve began to rapidly extol the virtues of going to amusement parks as a family.

“It is correct for a harmonious family to go and play at an amusement park together on days off from work and school. It is required for the purposes of deepening bonds between family members who are usually busy, and a perfect opportunity for children to enjoy time with their parents, and for parents to appreciate how much their children have grown.”

“Grown?” repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. “We’ve only known you a few days.”

“I have heard that in many cases, the grandmother will stay home because she is not in good enough health.”

“Uh, wait, that was a lie. I was lying.”

“Where in your remark was there room to fit a lie?”

“Well, you know what they say. A person can grow a lot in three days.”

“For one, I am not a human, and for another, it has not yet been three days.”

“You’re always so fixated on the details...”

Ms. Futarishizuka kept dishing out one-liners only to have them boomerang right back into her face. The granddaughter and grandmother were exchanging barbs every chance they got.

At last, the mother sighed and decided to intervene. “Why don’t we just go? It’s only an amusement park.”

“Hoshizaki, you are indeed suitable to be my mother. Your youngest daughter is moved.”

“Thinking back, I haven’t ever been to one, either.”

This was yet another uncharacteristic remark for a girl her age. I couldn’t help but speak out.

“Wait, really?”

“I mean, I can’t remember stuff from when I was *really* little. But I don’t recall going to one after starting elementary school. I guess I’m kind of curious. I’d like to go at least once just to see what it’s like.”

“I see.”

Miss Hoshizaki spoke with a tinge of embarrassment. She had a complicated family situation, so maybe she was raised in an environment that didn’t allow for fun trips on weekends and holidays. And she was already a working member of society, too, a step ahead of other kids her age. If we let this chance slip by, she might reach adulthood without ever having gone to an amusement park.

With that in mind, I was even more willing to give it a shot. “Why don’t we go to one, then?” I suggested.

“What? Are you serious?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Yes, I am.”

An amusement park would afford us more strategic options as well. I hadn’t forgotten that our primary focus was to send Type Twelve back to her home planet in peace.

“Father, that is a marvelous idea,” said the alien. “The family vote is three to one. It has been decided. We shall go to an amusement park.”

“Oh, but we haven’t taken votes from the eldest daughter, the eldest son, and the pet,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“It is very likely that the eldest daughter will prioritize Father’s viewpoint. And the eldest son tends to agree with the eldest daughter’s viewpoint. Lacking their votes, your defeat is certain. However, I would not mind at all if you were to stay home with the pet.”

“Grr...”

And so, we decided to take a trip to an amusement park sometime in the coming days. We discussed which of several famous parks in Japan would be best. Even I recognized most of the names that came up. Type Twelve was quite well-informed on the topic.

After a lively conversation at the table, we could see the bottoms of our drink cups.

“Amusement parks are all well and good, but mayhap we should finish shopping,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, glancing at her smartphone.

I checked my watch; it had been a little less than an hour since we sat down at the table. My neighbor would be returning from school shortly. Considering we still had to prepare dinner, haste was probably warranted.

“Yes, I think that would be for the best,” I agreed.

“Back to a previous topic, then,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, looking at Type Twelve. “Might I ask you to take care of these bags, dear? While you’re summoning the terminal and doing whatever else you need to, the rest of us can take a bathroom break.” Then she made eye contact with me—a clear signal to help her out.

“Right,” I said. “I need to go as well.”

“Um, yeah, I should probably use this chance, too,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

The grandmother rose from her seat, followed by the father. And when the mother agreed, Type Twelve happily accepted the arrangement.

“Understood. I will finish loading the bags into the terminal before you return.”

“I apologize for leaving all the work to you, Granddaughter,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Grandmother, I do not sense any variation in your heart rate associated with your words of apology.”

“That’s because we’re so close, dear.”

The kimono-clad girl was the first to head out, and I soon joined her.

The two of us and Miss Hoshizaki headed for an indoor area facing the rooftop park, and, after passing the restrooms, we entered an employee stairwell. On the other side of the heavy-looking metal door was an enclosed space covered in exposed, reinforced concrete, with steps leading downward.

Once we were a ways inside, Ms. Futarishizuka stopped and turned to us.

“I have an idea,” she said. “Why don’t we make a game out of this amusement park trip?”

“I agree,” I said. “In fact, I was thinking the same thing,” It seemed both of us were dirty schemers.

Miss Hoshizaki, on the other hand, was as pure as the driven snow. “Huh? Wait, what are you talking about? A game?”

“Isn’t it obvious? A game to send that girlie back to her home planet.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, you should probably keep it down,” I told her.

“I don’t see any surveillance cameras in here. I’m sure it’s fine.”

She was right; there were no cameras visible in the stairwell. The heavy metal door leading back into the building was closed, and we could barely make out the sounds of the outside world. The voices of the other patrons we’d been hearing all day had died out completely. *I guess we can talk at a normal volume.*

“You didn’t plan to keep playing family like this forever, did you, dear?”

“W-well, umm...,” stammered Miss Hoshizaki.

“You have a real sister waiting for you at home. At this rate, she’ll go on to high school, become an adult, get married, leave the house, and eventually

have children of her own, and you'll still be dealing with this alien girl. Do you really want to throw away your whole life to look after her?"

That was all perfectly possible if we kept going along with her whims. I didn't know how long mechanical life-forms lived, but I seriously doubted their lifespans were shorter than a human's. In fact, I wondered if she even perceived time in the same way we did.

But our senior coworker was sincere and kindhearted, and she spoke out on Type Twelve's behalf. "Isn't there any other way? She'll be dismantled if she goes back, won't she? I thought we were going to help her fix her bug, like she said."

"We can't let a life-form as dangerous as her stay on Earth," countered Ms. Futarishizuka. "I'm sure even today's high school girls are smart enough to see that. Some country or group will try to monopolize her, spelling doom for the rest of us."

"What if she helps everyone, then? What if we get all of humanity to cooperate."

"That's not how humans work, which is why we're practically always at war. Do a quick internet search for a list of major conflicts. You won't find a single peaceful decade anywhere in the last several centuries."

"Then maybe we could use our time as a pretend family to convince her to—"

"And even if she fixes her bug, what happens to Earth then? Remember everything she said about mechanical life-forms lording over biological creatures like us? Frankly, it's not hard to imagine a future where we're deemed a problem for this sector's development and they wipe us off the map."

"W-well, that's..."

"Would you be able to take responsibility if that happened? Responsibility for the end of your species?"

"....."

"That's why the best thing for mankind is to pretend we didn't see anything and send her back home with her bugs intact. And it'll be better for the

mechanical life-forms, too.”

Miss Hoshizaki had been completely outdebated. It was rare that Ms. Futarishizuka was so aggressive. Normally, she preferred to work by herself behind the scenes instead of using her words. That wouldn’t fly here, so she was trying to win over the key players instead. She needed Miss Hoshizaki’s help to get anywhere with the UFO.

I felt bad for Type Twelve, but we had to prioritize our own lives.

“I may be dumb, but even I know you’re right,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Is that so?” replied Futarishizuka. “I’m glad to hear it, dear.”

“But your phrasing was a little off.”

“It was? In what way?”

“Well, you were implying that I’m personally responsible for the rest of humanity.”

“Oh?”

Back when I was in school, I might have agreed with Miss Hoshizaki’s position. But now that I’d learned the importance of prioritizing my own interests, I hesitated. That kind of reckless sympathy tended to come back to haunt you later.

At the same time, I respected our senior for how logically she’d responded despite being so thoroughly thrashed in the argument. If the same thing had happened to me at her age, I doubt I’d have been as calm.

“I’m not trying to lecture you for acting overly important,” she continued. “But there’s no need to make yourself or the person you’re talking about into some huge deal. Anyone would get offended.”

“I see,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “I’ll be careful of that from now on.”

I found it hard to believe how well she’d taken that admonishment. Normally, she’d hit back with a joke, even if she ultimately agreed. Was she just being considerate?

“In any case,” I said, “regarding the game itself, what did you have in mind?”

“Oh, you can just leave that to your mother, dear.”

“I’m against hurting her,” stated Miss Hoshizaki.

“We’ll be doing nothing of the sort,” Ms. Futarishizuka assured her. “I don’t want to have a falling out with her, either. In cases like this, it’s best to convince the target to leave on their own. Amusement parks aren’t all fun and games, you know.”

Her expression as she explained was the picture of a mean-spirited mother-in-law. *She’s probably pretty good at these kinds of ruses.*

“Then it’s settled,” she said. “I dub this Operation Convince the Malfunctioning Mechanical Life-Form to Please Go back to Her Own Planet.”

“That’s a little long, isn’t it?” I replied.

“I don’t see a way to shorten it.”

“Whatever,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “It doesn’t matter what we call it.”

Our stairwell meeting only lasted a few minutes. Now that we had a plan, we headed back to the rooftop park.

Type Twelve had finished loading our bags into the terminal and had plopped down in a chair by the table we’d been sitting at, awaiting our return. It looked like she’d finished quickly and with no untoward incidents.

After that, we went straight to the grocery area located in the department store’s basement, where we procured paper products and ingredients for dinner.

This was to be our momentous first meal as a family. Miss Hoshizaki would be in charge of cooking dinner. She had been selected as our main chef at the youngest daughter’s request. Type Twelve would be her helper. According to her, it was good for a mother and daughter to spend time together in the kitchen.

As a result, they were the ones picking out ingredients.

After we’d decided on chore assignments the previous day, Miss Hoshizaki had put together a recipe ahead of time; now she was quickly tossing products into our cart. And since we were approaching our roles in this pretend family as

bureau work, our senior coworker brought her usual earnestness to the table.

Our food shopping venture went smoothly and lasted a little under an hour. The only hiccup came when Miss Hoshizaki thought one of the side dishes was five hundred yen for the whole package, when it was actually priced per hundred grams, and she wound up dumbstruck at the register. *These department store basements sure carry some expensive stuff.*

Miss Hoshizaki, not one to bend under pressure, made sure to have them cancel the sale.

We finished paying and left the department store before sunset.



Once we were done shopping, we boarded Type Twelve's terminal and headed back to Ms. Futarishizuka's villa in Karuizawa. There, we met up with Peeps and Lady Elsa, then picked up my neighbor and Abaddon, who were finished with school and had returned home.

After that, we moved to the UFO waiting up in space, and then to the Japanese house we'd visited the day before.

Its appearance, however, had changed somewhat.

For whatever reason, a huge sky now hung overhead. I assumed it was a projection, but it was incredibly realistic. It was set to the local time in Japan, too. It felt like we were watching the actual sunset.

In addition, other houses were being projected onto the empty spaces on all four sides. When you touched one, your hand would pass right through it. But from afar, it appeared like we had real neighbors living right next door.

Soil had been placed around the house, making it feel even more real. *And there's the brand-new prefab shed to make up for Ms. Futarishizuka's lost room.*

Put together, it felt like one of those "experience" attractions at amusement parks.

"Is it just me," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "or does our little stage look completely different today?"

“I embellished the surroundings so it would be more like a home,” explained Type Twelve.

“The setting sun is fantastic,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “You’d never guess such a pretty sky was fake.”

“The projected image is linked to the time in Japan.”

Wind blew, tickling my cheeks.

And it wasn’t the mechanical, intermittent stream of air you might get from an electric fan, either. The breeze was very natural, as though it were truly the product of a difference in air pressure. It felt so *right* that I almost accepted it without a second thought.

“There’s wind blowing,” I said. “Did you set that up, too?”

“Father, your viewpoint is correct.”

“I never thought adding wind would make a place feel so much like the real outdoors.” I was kind of impressed. Even Peeps gazed with interest at the scenery from my shoulder.

“Huh,” said Abaddon, *“I can even hear a crow calling from somewhere.”*

“Isn’t that one perched on the roof?” asked my neighbor.

“Oh, hey, you’re right.”

There was indeed a jet-black crow on the roof. I wondered for a moment if it was a point of contact manufactured on the ship, just like Type Twelve.

“I brought several creatures here from the surface,” explained the mechanical life-form, quickly disproving my theory.

“Make sure you put it back where it came from when we’re done,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “I feel bad for it.”

While we were sleeping, Type Twelve had evidently been working to improve the house’s environment. Everything around us spoke to her enthusiasm for our pretend family. I felt a pang of guilt for trying to reject her.

Suddenly curious, I glanced at Miss Hoshizaki. She, too, looked vaguely guilty

as she gazed at the scene in front of us. Our private conversation on the department store roof must have been getting to her.

“Mother, your youngest daughter would like to prepare dinner soon.”

“Um, yeah. Right. Let’s go.”

Urged on by Type Twelve, we headed for the front door.

Crossing the still unfamiliar sliding door threshold, we made our return.

Miss Hoshizaki and Type Twelve carried their bags of food into the kitchen together. The rest of us all pitched in to deal with the daily necessities and other sundries we’d bought that day, opening packages and wrappers, and moving about the house to put things in their proper spots.

In the meantime, we were informed that dinner preparations had been completed. We could hear Miss Hoshizaki’s shout clearly through the walls and hallways. Combined with the structure’s old-fashioned look, the call to dinner really painted a classic picture of a single-family home.

We took our evening meal in the living room, seated on floor cushions around the wooden table like one big family.

Our main dish was curry rice, with a fresh vegetable salad and pork miso soup on the side. We were told dessert would come afterward.

The table held enough food for several people, and we all sat wherever we liked. Starting with Type Twelve and moving clockwise were Miss Hoshizaki, Lady Elsa, Ms. Futarishizuka, Abaddon, my neighbor, and myself.

In accordance with the family rules, we waited for everyone to be seated before giving our thanks for the meal. How many years had it been since I’d said such a thing out loud?

The menu was nothing to write home about. It was a totally normal curry made with store-bought roux. The ingredients were all standard fare. But after walking around all day and then doing chores as soon as we got home, it really hit the spot.

One person, however, frowned upon bringing her spoon to her lips.

“As the mother-in-law, may I bully my son’s wife a little?”

“What is it?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“This curry roux is all lumpy.”

Ms. Futarishizuka dug into her rice with a spoon and came out with a yellow clump, which she held out. It looked like a piece of roux that hadn’t fully melted, about as big as a chopped carrot. It seemed as though she’d already eaten some of it, and her brow knotted at the saltiness filling her mouth.

“I, uh, I’m sorry. It’s been a long time since I cooked anything...”

“If it’s just a simple mistake, then I’ll excuse it.”

“I knew you were suited to the role of mother-in-law, Futarishizuka,” said Type Twelve.

“Hey, come on. It’s a valid complaint. That clump was really salty.”

“Sasaki, the father, ate it without complaining.”

“I don’t think I’d want to eat a piece of roux that big, either,” I pointed out.

Miss Hoshizaki stayed late at the bureau every day. Her sister, doubtless, did most of the chores. In fact, who knew how many opportunities she’d even had to hold a knife in the kitchen.

“I’m truly sorry,” insisted Miss Hoshizaki. “We can trade if you want.”

“I simply assumed my daughter-in-law had joined forces with her daughter and was rebelling against me.”

“I’m not that petty!”

Aided by Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka’s banter, the dinner table came to life. Even Lady Elsa, who had linguistic difficulties, was talking about something or other to Peeps, so she wasn’t left out.

We enjoyed our meal, trading small talk all the while, and eventually the curry rice was safely tucked away in our bellies.

“By the way,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “I had a question for the demon over there.”

“What’s up?”

“I obliterated an angel’s Disciple during that mess the other day. Hear anything about it?”

The mess she was referring to had resulted from some third-party kidnapping Miss Hoshizaki. As we were trying to chase them down, we stumbled into another angel-demon proxy battle. We’d defeated a pair of them inside an isolated space—an angel and his Disciple.

My mind went back to what we’d discussed at the time, and our agreement to let Ms. Futarishizuka take credit for the kills.

“You sure you want to talk about that here?”

Abaddon’s eyes flicked between Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Hoshizaki, and me. We hadn’t told our senior colleague much about the angels and demons.

“I don’t see why not,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “She’s already been inside a few isolated spaces. There’s no use keeping things a secret from her at this point. We might wind up in one while playing family, and I think she deserves an explanation.”

“That’s a good point,” I said.

With how important Miss Hoshizaki had become in the grand scheme of things, I didn’t want to leave her out of the loop. In fact, I wanted to put the rewards from the proxy war on the table as a trump card in case we had to compete with Mr. Akutsu over her allegiance.

I was fairly certain Ms. Futarishizuka was thinking along the same lines when she broached the subject. As always, she was quick-witted. She was decisive and able to adapt, too—truly worthy of respect.

“If you’re in agreement, we won’t object. Right?” said Abaddon, shooting a glance at my neighbor.

“Yes. It’s okay with me,” she answered immediately.

“If you’ve already heard about it,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “that will make matters quicker.”

“We have,” he said jovially. *“From the demon who was there with you.”*

Something about his answer struck me as odd, though, and I simply had to ask. “You’re referring to the demon our companions defeated, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“The blue magic girlie sent that demon flying,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “I thought he’d vanished for good. You’re saying he lived? But his Disciple was shot and died on the spot. We saw her corpse.”

We’d seen the demon in question and his Disciple die on the scene. I doubted they’d had time to contact any other demons.

“When an angel or a demon is slain in this world, their Division is obliterated, but the rest of them remains elsewhere. That’s where we get information and learn the results of battles. So it doesn’t really matter if they live or die on the battlefield.”

“So you never miss a thing, despite the game spanning the globe. You’re always on top of the latest developments.”

“That’s right!”

I mentally added that to our bank of knowledge on the proxy war.

“Any other questions?” asked Abaddon.

I stayed silent. The others simply watched the demon, keeping out of the conversation.

After looking over everyone in the now quiet living room, Abaddon drew himself up. *“Anyway, what would you like as your reward for slaying a Disciple?”*

The neighbor’s partner was always smiling, and now that smile deepened even further.

But Ms. Futarishizuka’s response was something of a curveball.

“About that,” she said. “I know I brought up the subject, but would you mind putting it on hold for a bit? I need time to think it over—there’s so much to consider.”

“Sure, no problem. But if something crazy happens and an angel kills my

Disciple or me, you may not be able to cash in on the reward. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, that's acceptable."

"Okay. Then just tell me once you've decided."

"I do apologize for making you wait."

"I can't undo any wishes, so I appreciate you taking the time to really think about it. I'd hate to sour our relationship."

"That's good to hear."

I thought of the subordination curse she'd received from the Starsage. I'd been assuming she'd want to get rid of it. Peeps, who was sitting on the table, seemed to be on alert, as well.

"Do you mean to relieve yourself of my curse in secret, girl?"

"Come on," she complained. "There's no reason to glare at me like that."

"What else would you desire at this juncture?"

"To be honest, I do want the curse removed. But if I planned to do it in secret, why would I bring this up in front of you? I'd just go somewhere else, rip it off, and be on my merry way."

"....."

Peeps and Ms. Futarishizuka stared each other down. The peaceful mood we'd been enjoying had shifted to something more dangerous.

The first one to speak up was Type Twelve. "The youngest daughter would like to say something to the grandmother and the pet. Should a problem arise between you, you must resolve it through discussion according to the family rules. If you break this rule, then you will both be punished."

"What? We're not fighting," Ms. Futarishizuka insisted. "You're jumping to conclusions."

"I apologize for ruining the peaceful household mood."

Both of them backed down at the alien's warning. Still, Peeps and I would have to be cautious of Ms. Futarishizuka's actions for a while.

She was certainly the type of person to get rid of the curse somewhere we couldn't see, then get a fake tattooed on the back of her hand. And she'd do it all with a straight face, too. Maybe it would be best to tell my neighbor and Abaddon about all of this, then have them contact me when she decided to get her reward.

There was a lot to worry about. While I'd seen it coming, it still hit me hard. Considering our relationship with Futarishizuka, however, it was a bridge we were always going to have to cross.

"Hey, Sasaki?" said Miss Hoshizaki after taking in the grandmother's and pet's reactions. "What's this reward all about?" She looked at me with an expression that said *you'd better explain what's going on*.

"I don't mind telling you," I replied, "but first, Type Twelve, could you promise not to share what you're hearing with anyone outside the family? We could be in danger if any of this got out."

"If Mother desires information and my agreement will help, the youngest daughter is willing to keep this promise with Father."

"You heard her," said Miss Hoshizaki.

"Understood. Allow me to explain, then."

After securing Type Twelve's agreement, I outlined the angel-demon proxy war. I explained the existence of angels and demons first, then how they intermittently had fights with each other. Those fights had grown in scope, and now they outsourced the fighting to humans, making them Disciples. Finally, I went into detail about the isolated spaces—of which Miss Hoshizaki had firsthand experience—as well as the rewards angels and demons offered their Disciples. Essentially, I told her all I knew about how the death game worked.

She listened until the end, at which point she audibly gulped. "I, uh, wow. There's a lot of crazy stuff happening in the world, huh...?"

"It's still new to the rest of us, too."

Personally, I found psychics and magical girls just as crazy. Especially the latter, which I had no understanding of whatsoever. Maybe information was

scarce because there were so few of them in the world. Only seven, according to what we'd heard. *I wonder where the pink one is right now, and what she's doing.*

"The existence of extraterrestrials was already a shock, and now its angels and demons?" murmured Miss Hoshizaki. "I feel like nothing can surprise me now. You're not hiding anything *else* from me, are you?"

"At the moment, I feel like I've exhausted every topic."

"I hope you're telling the truth."

I wasn't. Everything about the otherworld had to remain secret.

"So is that sparrow pigging out on the beef related to the angels and demons?" she asked.

While we were eating our curry rice, Peeps had been given a flat dish with only the curry on it. He was deftly scooping out the beef, then slicing it up thinly with magic and devouring one piece after the next.

Oh, look. He's got a little sauce on his beak. Could he be any more adorable?

"You would be correct to see me as something similar," he replied.

"Hmm. Really?"

Miss Hoshizaki didn't look satisfied, but she stopped asking questions. Maybe she realized they wouldn't get her anywhere.

And with that, our conversation about the proxy war came to an end. Afterward, we all watched some TV and had dessert. The yogurt salad featuring expensive fruits from the department store's basement was exquisite regardless of the chef's abilities. We were even getting a digital broadcast from the surface, which Type Twelve explained was going through one of her terminals, just like the Wi-Fi.

By the time the show we were watching ended, quite a bit of time had passed. In terms of bureau work hours, we were due a considerable amount of overtime pay. Considering my middle-school neighbor was accompanying us, I figured it was about time we wrapped up.

Almost as if she'd read my mind, Ms. Futarishizuka spoke. "I believe work

hours are about over,” she said, watching the commercials that had started playing after the show.

“Grandmother, your choice of words makes my heart feel extremely lonely.”

“Then what am I supposed to say?”

“That the night marks the beginning of personal time.”

“You sure answered quickly. Did you think of that in advance?”

“Precisely because we are not a true family, we must treasure the familial atmosphere.”

Type Twelve’s desperation must have come across, because our ever-friendly senior offered her a few words of consolation.

“I don’t want you barging into my house or anything, but if you’d like to send me a text message, that’s fine. I might not be able to reply right away, but I could keep you company a little.”

“Mother, your youngest daughter is very happy. I will send you a message.”

“But don’t send a whole bunch at once, all right? I won’t be able to keep up.”

“I fully understand. I will send a minimal number of messages summarizing the important points.”

We had a group chat set up for the family. But we had each other’s account information, too, so we could send individual messages. I had joined the group using my personal phone.

“In that case, Peeps and I should get going.”

“Wait. Do you intend to set forth from here?” asked the bird.

“Can we? I want to make sure it’s possible, in case we need to later.”

“I believe it will be fine. But yes, let us confirm.”

“I’m more concerned about the return trip, actually.”

“I believe I have been flexible with our destination on the other side. I can do the same in the opposite direction. Even if this flying ship were to move, as long as we have an alternate destination, we shall not go astray.”

“Oh, good. That’s a relief.”

So we wouldn’t suddenly be flung into outer space. That had been my number-one concern.

Once we were done speaking, Type Twelve addressed the others.

“In that case, I will send the rest of you back down to the surface.”

“Oh, one moment,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Could you save me for last?”

“I do not mind, but I would like to know the reason.”

“I have a request for you. As a family member.”

“Grandmother, from you, that remark concerns me.”

“Come now. Just hear me out. If you don’t agree, then you’re free to refuse.”

“...Understood. I will listen, but I will not promise more.”

Ms. Futarishizuka and Type Twelve went back and forth about this and that. I decided that as long as Miss Hoshizaki was here, they wouldn’t get into any big fights, so Peeps and I left the house first. After asking Lady Elsa to join us, we changed into our shoes at the front door and went out into the yard.

As I’d predicted, even from inside a UFO, the Starsage’s magic brought us safely to the otherworld.



After leaving the UFO, we paid a visit to Allestos. Our destination was the private castle room assigned to me as a court minister. From there, we walked to Count Müller’s office. Several nobles passing by hastily bowed and greeted

me on sight. I responded in kind, bowing as we moved through the halls.

Thankfully, the man we were looking for was present.

“Thank you for coming, both of you,” said the count. “And welcome home, Elsa.”

“It’s good to see you again, Count Müller.”

“Father, I experienced so many things during my visit. There’s so much I want to talk about. Would you stay with me until bedtime tonight? The most wonderful and strange things happen in their world.”

“I notice you have bags under your eyes, Julius. You haven’t been sleeping well, have you?”

“Oh, you’re right! Father, the little bird is right. They’re small, but I can see them!”

We sat down on the sofas and greeted each other. Peeps fluttered off my shoulder and landed on the perching tree atop the low table. As he did so, he used his healing magic on the count. The man trembled as if moved by some great emotion, confusing his daughter somewhat. Count Müller was a huge Starsage freak—I felt like I should be averting my eyes from his expression of pure bliss.

After trading some casual conversation, the count—having straightened up in his seat—turned to me. “May I ask you something, Lord Sasaki?”

“What is it, sir?”

“It seems to me you’re visiting more frequently these days. Has some problem occurred? If anything is troubling you, I would very much like to help.”

Count Müller’s remark was reasonable. Recently, the time difference between the worlds had been changing drastically. At first, one day back in Japan was equivalent to one month in the otherworld. That had been steadily fluctuating, and now we were seeing cases where only half a month had passed in the same amount of time.

The rate rose and fell daily like stock prices, but it was trending in one direction. During our last visit, we’d run out of time after just one week. We

could tell from the date on the clock we'd left in this world that things were continuing in the same vein.

That said, sharing this information with the count would only trouble him. For the moment, I decided to play it off.

"King Adonis has been very busy of late," I explained, "and I figured you'd want to keep discussing Lady Elsa's marriage as a family. While I realize you must have little free time yourself, Count Müller, I decided to visit a bit more often."

"Ah, so it's out of consideration for us. I apologize."

"None needed, sir."

Maybe we'd be able to get away with visiting the otherworld every other day in the future, unless something urgent demanded we travel more frequently. In addition, if time flowed more slowly here, then events in this world would progress at a more relaxed pace. King Adonis was still moving around the kingdom purging the Imperialist nobles, and those at the castle had their plates full adjusting to the new system.

So without anything else to attend to, we left the royal castle behind. Our usual itinerary was to go to the Republic of Lunge next and supply Kepler Trading Company with diesel fuel, but we were going to skip that this time. They had enough fuel from our last visit, so we could afford to wait. I didn't want to bother Mr. Joseph by going there when we had nothing to do.

Instead, we turned our attention to the trade route between Lunge and Herz. We'd given it a preliminary inspection the time before last, but we'd been leaving it alone since then.

Making use of Peeps's teleportation magic, we hopped from the court minister's office to Alterian. We arrived quite high up in the sky, around the same spot as we had previously, giving us a bird's-eye view of the area.

To one side was a wasteland stretching out toward the horizon. I'd been told that if you crossed straight through it, you'd reach Allestos. But all we could see from where we hovered was desolate earth.

Turning in the other direction put us face-to-face with a range of steep

mountains. And it was at the foot of those mountains that we noticed a change.

“Peeps, is that it right there?”

“Indeed. It would seem that progress has been made.”

I could see lines of tents and carriages stretching into the distance—probably employees dispatched by the Marc Trading Company. The tents were already forming a little settlement, reminding me of what the fortress construction on the Rectan Plains had looked like at the beginning.

“Could we go down to see?”

“Yes, let us descend.”

After getting permission from the bird on my shoulder, I tweaked my flight magic and we slowly lowered our altitude down toward the tents.

As we approached, we could see people reacting on the ground. Several people who had gathered at a particularly large tent began to run toward our landing point. They kept looking up at the sky; they had probably seen us floating overhead.

As we got closer, we could make out their features more clearly.

“Mr. Marc?” I said. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I should say the same, Mr. Sasaki.”

I’d found a familiar face in the crowd, and we exchanged greetings among the tents.

“This seems like a fairly large-scale operation. Are they all from Baytrium?” I asked.

“No. Eighty percent of the men and most of our supplies are from Rotan.”

“I had no idea things had progressed so far. You have my thanks.”

“I’m a Herzian through and through, so jobs like these naturally get me fired up.”

Mr. Marc smiled as he spoke. While I hadn’t told him anything, he seemed to guess why I was here.

“We had the item set up at our new branch location in Rotan,” he explained. “We plan to transfer it here, but until we’ve finished setting up camp, we’ll leave it in the city.”

“I think that’s for the best.”

The item in question was the radio setup we’d provided during our last trip. This place looked little better than a refugee camp, so keeping it back in Rotan would probably set Mr. Joseph’s mind at ease. If Mr. Marc were to lose it, it might damage their business relationship.

“We plan to set up a base of operations here first,” he went on. “We’ll start at the foot of the mountain, then construct each relay point in turn. At the same time, we’ll work on the road to Rotan, if that’s all right with you.”

“Understood. Please do so.”

If Mr. Marc was here personally, then he must be telling the truth about the job getting him fired up. *Even in a kingdom known for its corruption, there must be plenty of patriots.* At least, that was what I thought as I watched Mr. Marc explain things so passionately.

“Also, since you’re here,” he said, “I was wondering if I could get your opinion on something.”

“What is it?”

“A river cuts across the foot of the mountains, right where we plan to build our route. If we were only shipping goods, we could simply ferry everything across in boats. But considering the road’s future usage, I wanted to know if you’d mind us building a bridge over it.”

“I don’t see a problem with that. The cost of maintenance does concern me, though.”

“I feel the same. We’ll need to set up a second base camp at the bridge.”

Back in Japan, bridges could go without maintenance for several years at a time. But that wouldn’t fly here in the otherworld. Without anyone watching over it, bandits and monsters would wreck the thing within a year.

For that reason, this world had few bridges. Expensive, large bridges were

almost exclusively found inside towns. Peeps had explained all this to me in the past.

“There’s a great deal of land between here and the closest settlement,” Marc continued. “Since we’ll be dealing with bandits, we’d like to keep things as inconspicuous as we can until we’re able to station enough troops in the area.”

“Why not dig out a hole and go under the river instead?” I suggested.

“Oh, that’s a thought.”

Underground tunnels might sound modern, but I’d seen them in historical documents and such at school—the ancient Romans built them starting in the first century, for example. And with a cheat code like magic, I assumed it would be possible for the crew here to get past a river or two.

“That would certainly be less conspicuous than a bridge,” he said.

“I can’t say if the benefits would outweigh the cost, of course.”

“Scope-wise, I don’t think it’ll cause an issue. I’ll explain it to everyone on-site so we can figure things out. Fortunately, we have a few people on our development team who are familiar with the region.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“In fact, one of them said he came here at your recommendation.”

I wondered who that could be, but then immediately remembered the conversation I’d had with Mr. French during my previous trip. I was about to say as much when I heard a familiar voice.

“Dad, Lord Sasaki’s here. Maybe you should go say hello.”

It was a young woman’s voice. Suddenly curious, I looked over, and there she was—Mr. French’s little sister. Her father was next to her.

I remembered introducing Mr. French’s father to the Marc Trading Company, but what was his sister doing here? Her appearance took me by surprise.

As soon as they saw me, the two of them rushed over.

“Lord Sasaki,” the father said, greeting me immediately, “thank you so much for your kindness not only to my son, but to me as well. I am in your debt.” He

bowed deeply. He was speaking so formally I unconsciously bowed in response.

“Please, it was nothing.”

“I promise I’ll put the leg and eye you healed to use here, my lord,” he went on. “I was out of action for a while, but I’ve kept up on my training. Please use me as you see fit.”

He was about the same age as I was. Like his son, he was red-haired and attractive, blessed with a tall and muscular physique. His facial features were pronounced, and he had a short goatee and shoulder-length hair parted down the middle. He looked just like the lead actor in a Hollywood action film.

With his incredible build, which I assumed had been sculpted during his time as a knight, he struck me as very reliable. Though the son was certainly well-built, the father was something else. I could scarcely believe he and I were the same age. Just talking to him was intimidating.

“I heard you’re familiar with the local geography,” I said.

“Yes, my lord. I once hunted bandits in these parts, while I was still serving the kingdom. At the time, a group of them had set up camp in Alterian and were causing problems for businesses and traders around Rotan. That is how I know the region.”

The man’s back was perfectly straight, as though he was standing at attention. His words were clear and well-enunciated, too. You could tell he was a former knight.

“I have to ask—why is your daughter here as well?”

“I’m so sorry, my lord. I said I would come here alone, but she insisted on accompanying me. If you think she’ll impede our progress, I can send her back home at once. I brought the money for her passage with me just in case.”

Mr. French had probably helped put together the funds. In that case, I didn’t want to let it go to waste.

“I couldn’t let Dad come here alone, sir,” his daughter said nervously. “Did I make the wrong decision?”

“Your family seems very close-knit,” I remarked.

“After our mother left with another man, my father had to raise my brother and me alone. So please, my lord—I’d feel so bad if I wasn’t around to take care of him, and... Oh, that’s not to say I doubt your magical abilities or anything, it’s just...!”

“This is my fault for letting my children take care of me for so long,” her father cut in. “Please accept my apologies.”

It hadn’t been long since I’d healed his injuries, so she was probably worried about his health. In fact, I bet Mr. French had privately agreed with his sister’s suggestion. All the more reason I couldn’t deny her appeal.

“In that case,” I said, “I hope the two of you can work together here.”

“Thank you so much, my lord.”

Mr. French’s father and sister bowed deeply to me. After telling them to raise their heads, I got back to business.

“I apologize for deciding things without you,” I said, turning to Mr. Marc. “I hope you’re all right with it.”

“We appreciate having Viscount French’s support,” he replied. “Since you passed the Alterian region to the trading company, we may need a noble’s name if issues arise.”

“You have my thanks,” I said.

At the moment, I had a pretty overblown title: Margrave Sasaki-Alterian.

In order to achieve Peeps’s and my desired life of leisure, I wanted to become just “Sasaki” again as soon as I could. When I thought about it, involving Mr. French’s family was a stroke of genius. If everything developed smoothly, I might be able to work something out with them.

Since the Marc Trading Company was handling the business affairs as a local governing body, the burden on their family wouldn’t be too big. At the same time, the father—currently without a position in the household—could receive territory just like his son, immediately bolstering his reputation. That sounded pretty good to me.

With that, I’d formulated a plan to pass off everything to do with the Herz-

Lunge route onto other people. As long as the Marc Trading Company's sales kept increasing from the diesel fuel I'd brought and Kepler kept paying me as a board member, development here could continue unabated.

"I'm very obliged to you all," I said. "I'll leave this work in your capable hands."

After a quick good-bye, I used flight magic to float back into the air. Gaining altitude, Peeps and I moved past the clouds and out of sight. Though I sometimes forgot, the Starsage's survival and his teleportation magic had to be kept secret from the others. We couldn't let them see us leave.

As the surface disappeared from view, my attention turned to the one on my shoulder. "Peeps, could I ask you to—"

I was about to say "bring us back to Baytrium," but Peeps interrupted me.

"Sometimes, I can scarcely believe how little ambition you have. It makes me a bit uneasy."

"Huh? What's this about? Did I do something?"

"If this endeavor goes well, you plan to give everything to the father and son, correct?"

"Would that be a mistake?"

"I believe it is a near perfect decision from a public servant's perspective."

"Oh, good. I'm glad I have the Lord Starsage's approval."

"But that is precisely why I can't understand what you're thinking. Perhaps anyone with enough years behind them would have made the same decision. But you told me before that you have yet to turn forty. Isn't it normal for people your age to be more ambitious?"

"Well, I mean, I don't want to work. Do you?"

"Putting work aside, do you never feel like leaning back and lording over your inferiors?"

"I guess a little, but that won't do us any good, will it?"

I'd consider it if it brought significant returns, but as things stood, we had far

more to lose. Considering the influence my position here had over my social life in modern Japan, I wanted to play it safe for now.

As I mulled this over, the bird on my shoulder thought for a few moments, then nodded.

"...Well. I suppose not."

"But if you would rather go in that direction, Peeps, I'll follow you. I'm just not sure how it would benefit us. I feel like there's a lot of other things that need our attention more."

For example, finding a way to get the Starsage out of his sparrow body and back in human form.

Then he'd be able to travel between the otherworld and modern Japan without needing my help. That would allow him much more freedom than he had now. He could finally let loose. Though, as a relative newcomer here in the otherworld, I had no way of knowing how difficult a task that would be.

"No, that won't be necessary. Please continue however you wish."

"You sure?"

"What reason would I have to lie about such a matter?"

"I just thought you might be holding back for my sake."

"It's been a while since someone dared to test me."

"Wait, hey. I wasn't trying to test you. I promise."

Peeps was actually something of a man's man—a real carnivore, if you will. I could imagine him at home, surrounded by a harem full of women. It occurred to me that I knew nothing about his former lifestyle. I hoped he would tell me in his own time. That would make me happy.

"Should we return to our Baytrium inn?"

"That's what I was thinking. Would you do the honors?"

"What are your plans once we get there?"

"I was hoping to spend a little more time with those horses."

“You would do well to use your time here making up for your lack of exercise back home.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Horseback riding lessons in Japan tended to be divided into forty-five-minute sessions. After three or four such sessions, my body began to cry out in pain. The horse, too, seemed to be at its limit.

Incidentally, the National Riding Club Association of Japan considered a fourth-degree license (the second lowest degree) as proof that one was no longer a beginner. I’d heard you needed around *fifty* lessons to receive one, and that was only if things proceeded smoothly. A slower, more cautious learner might need closer to a hundred lessons.

I’d looked all this up on the internet since I’d been finding riding practice so difficult.

What I’d learned was that, in order to graduate from being a novice, I’d need anywhere from forty to eighty hours of actual practice. Even if I was gung ho and did four sessions every single day, it would take between thirteen and twenty-five days. Limiting myself to two sessions would extend that another twenty-five days. That wasn’t very realistic, though. Objectively, I’d need at least two to three months.

The books and movies I’d seen in Japan had given me the impression that riding horses was relatively easy. But in fact, it was far more difficult than getting a license for a car or motorcycle. A novice mounting up and riding off into battle was like someone who didn’t own a car participating in an F1 race. At least, that was what it said on the internet.

It looked like I’d be stuck spending my time in the otherworld mainly on horseback riding for the foreseeable future.

<Household, Part Two>

After several days of nothing but riding horses, Peeps and I returned from the otherworld.

Our destination was the business hotel room currently serving as my base of operations in Japan. Even though we'd teleported to the otherworld from inside the UFO, we'd managed to return to Earth without winding up floating in outer space.

And like last time, a week spent in the otherworld had used up an entire night in Japan. It was clear that time was slowing down over there.

"If this keeps going and time starts moving slower in the otherworld than it does on Earth, that might cause a problem..."

If we reached a point where one day in modern Japan was equivalent to one hour in the otherworld, we'd have to wait almost two years for one month to pass there. And if we spent even an hour in the otherworld, we'd lose a whole month in Japan.

That would mean spending considerably less time in the otherworld, for starters. And if I hoped to maintain my position there, I'd have to make a lot more sacrifices on this end. If that happened, we could kiss our relaxing retirement good-bye. I could already imagine all the troubles ahead.

"We should probably start working to ascertain the root cause."

"Do you want to try some experiments?"

"Yes. I would like to test any likely variables we can think of and gather data."

"Oh, like only going to the otherworld once every two or three days for a while?"

"I think that would be a good place to start."

The sparrow was perched on the hotel room desk facing the computer. He nodded, and I returned the gesture. The screen and its black background were incomprehensible to me, as always.

Lady Elsa peered over the bird to get a look at the screen. “Sasaki, do you and the bird use this machine to calculate the time difference in the otherworld?”

“That’s right. He does most of the heavy lifting, though.”

“Your bird is so smart.”

“There are plenty of people in this world who could do the same thing.”

“I want to learn so much more about this place.”

“You’re studying the language, yes? Then one day you shall.”

“You’re right. I’ll keep working on communicating for now.”

Lady Elsa was doing so well for herself. I thought back to my horseback riding lessons when I’d been ready to cry my eyes out. The difference was like night and day.

“Speaking of,” I said, “we’re considering skipping our trip to the otherworld tonight and observing what happens. Are you all right with that? Otherwise, we could drop you off and pick you up the following morning.”

“I’d prefer to stay with you all, if possible. That way I won’t age any further, and I’ll have the rare chance to spend evenings with you and your bird.”

“Understood. But if you change your mind, don’t hesitate to tell us.”

“By the way, have you considered changing the way you speak at all?”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard the king bequeathed the title of court minister to you. You’re one of the most powerful people in the kingdom right now—and one of the few who can publicly voice his opinion to the king. And yet you speak so formally to a little girl like me. Is there some reason?”

“The chancellor is the second most important person in the kingdom, and you are his only daughter.”

“You may be right, but that doesn’t make *me* important, only my father.”

“Either way, you’ve helped us many times in this world, Lady Elsa. Though my position may have changed, my attitude toward House Müller has not. If you could overlook my formality, I would be greatly in your debt.”

“As I said before, I’m of much less worth than you seem to believe.”

“I’m not paying respect to your position so much as to your noble way of life.”

“...O-oh. Is that so?”

It would be awful if I started acting more casual with Lady Elsa, and her father or Peeps began to think I was into the idea of marrying her. I intended to keep my speech as formal as possible, thank you. I wanted to cement my position as her inferior. If people saw me more as a servant than a master, then great. *And besides, the Starsage is right here watching.*

Once Team Otherworld’s meeting was finished, we used Peeps’s teleportation magic to warp to Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa. Our surroundings changed in the blink of an eye.

As we walked into the living room like always, we saw the villa’s owner, once again eating breakfast at the dining room table. And just like last time, Type Twelve sat across from her, watching.

Unlike the previous morning, however, there was food placed in front of the mechanical life-form, too. Ms. Futarishizuka must have foreseen her arrival and prepared it beforehand. But the alien was simply sitting still in her chair and hadn’t touched her food.

Incidentally, Type Twelve wasn’t wearing her usual one-piece dress. Instead, she had on one of the outfits we’d bought her at the department store the previous day. Since Miss Hoshizaki had picked it out for her, she seemed eager to give it a go.

“Just as expected,” I said. “Everyone’s in the same spot as yesterday.”

“Except I went through all this trouble to make breakfast for my granddaughter, and she’s not eating a single bite!”

“Family time has not yet begun. I have no reason to consume this food.”

“Come now. I know you want to eat your granny’s homemade breakfast. You must be holding yourself back.”

“Futarishizuka, your viewpoint is incorrect. I am not holding myself back.”

“There you go again, acting all tough.”

“It is still private time for all family members. You must respect my privacy. Should you choose not to and continue pressuring me to eat, then in accordance with the family rules, you will be punished.”

“Ugh. I didn’t think much of that rule when we decided it, but it’s turned out to be a real pain.”

“Though I am extremely reluctant to, I must agree with your viewpoint, Futarishizuka.”

Type Twelve was probably dying to talk to Miss Hoshizaki. But she was restraining herself, instead spending her time at Ms. Futarishizuka’s mansion letting the grandmother she hated bother her. As for the girl in the kimono, it struck me that this might have been part of her suggested ploy to bring down the family.

Meanwhile, Lady Elsa’s attention was somewhere else entirely.

“Sasaki, Futarishizuka is acting strangely!” she shouted, pointing at the bowl in the other girl’s hand.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

In the bowl was some natto laid over freshly cooked white rice. Having just returned from the otherworld, I found the simple bowl of natto quite enticing. Personally, I liked mixing in raw egg and sliced green onion, then pouring so much of it over the rice that you couldn’t even see it anymore.

“Those beans are rotten! But she seems to love them! They’re so rotten they’re all stringy!”

“Lady Elsa, that’s one of this country’s special dishes,” I told her. “There’s no cause for alarm.”

“I figured she wouldn’t like it, so I’d kept it off the menu,” explained Ms. Futarishizuka. She had probably meant to enjoy some while Lady Elsa was out.

I couldn’t smell the natto, but I could see the stringy beans stretching from her chopsticks back to the bowl. Compared to plain soybeans, these were clearly a different color. Realizing how utterly normal I found this, I reflected on just how much you could alter a person’s perception if you got to them while they were children.

“Are you sure it’s okay to eat?” asked Lady Elsa. “She’s not going to get sick or anything?”

“I’ll be fine,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “In fact, they’re good for digestion.”

“Hey, Sasaki, what did Futarishizuka say?”

Before she’d even asked the question, my whole body tensed in shock. Did Ms. Futarishizuka just understand the otherworld’s language? I wasn’t sure how she could have replied otherwise.

“Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said, “don’t tell me you can understand what she’s saying.”

“Oh. You noticed?” she replied in a very casual, lighthearted tone.

I assumed she’d purposely clued us in. Someone as skilled as she was would never commit such a silly mistake. In fact, I was quite envious of her talents—enough that one day, I wanted to try getting her so drunk she couldn’t tell up from down.

“.....”

At that point, the Starsage left my shoulder. He spread his wings as he leaped into the air. The display looked really cool, but mostly it was just adorable. Then he flew over to the dining table and landed in front of Ms. Futarishizuka, ready for battle.

“Hey, hold your horses!” she exclaimed. “Why are you always so quick to anger?”

"I must acknowledge your hard work, but your actions leave me uneasy."

This felt a little too fast to me, even considering how intelligent she was. It would have been one thing if this were another Earth language, but we were talking about another world here. How many hours had she even been able to devote to studying this totally foreign language?

As if to answer our questions, she put down her bowl and chopsticks, then pointed to one of her ears. "It's this thing right here."

In the shell of her ear was something resembling an earphone. It seemed to be wireless, as I couldn't see any cables. *Is it a hearing aid?* I almost said the last thought out loud as banter, but I swallowed it back down.

"Oh, and if you say it's a hearing aid, I'll smear this natto in your face."

"I'd never say something like that."

It was a close call. I just barely stopped myself in time. After all, weren't hearing aids really small these days?

"The mechanical life-forms have some truly awe-inspiring technology. I ordered this last night, and our guest had a test version ready for me this morning. I asked her where she manufactured it, and I was shocked all over again when she said she had a factory on the surface of the moon."

Not only had she manufactured the item very quickly, but her shipping speed was insane. Mention of a lunar factory piqued my curiosity, as well.



“Is it translating Lady Elsa’s words in real time?” I asked.

“It’s a lot like a supplementary sound channel for a movie. It produces a quality translation without any delay. Amazing, right? If the rest of the world had these, language barriers would come to an end and the world economy would be a mess.”

“An item such as this can easily be developed and mass-produced at general-purpose installations.”

“Now *that’s* terrifying. I can’t imagine the chaos that would ensue if you provided humanity with such advanced technology. I bet it would upset our beloved senior so much that we’d have to stop playing family.”

“Your concern is unnecessary, Futarishizuka. I have no plans to supply technology to humanity.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Type Twelve currently thought of humans as untrustworthy jerks who did nothing but lie. The only exceptions were Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor, to whom she had personal ties. We didn’t have to worry—she’d never dream of offering technology to humans. Still, it must have been shocking enough to Ms. Futarishizuka that she felt like she had to put the nail in the coffin anyway.

“Wait,” I said. “Then can you understand what she’s saying as well, Type Twelve?”

“Sasaki, your viewpoint is correct. The same item is installed in this point of contact.”

“Oh, but that’s not all,” cut in Ms. Futarishizuka. “If I use this mic right here...”

Some sort of device was clipped to the collar of her kimono. She poked its surface with a fingertip, then spoke.

“It can translate what I’m saying into the girl’s language in real time.”

“Huh?!”

A moment after her comment, we heard a voice in the otherworld’s language.

Since a path existed between Peeps and me, I was able to understand all of it. But for Lady Elsa, who had been watching our conversation from the side, it must have sounded as though Ms. Futarishizuka had suddenly begun speaking her language.

In total surprise, she exclaimed, “S-Sasaki, what’s going on here?! I can hear what Futarishizuka is saying in my own world’s language! And she’s speaking so fluently, like a high-ranking aristocrat!”

Even the timbre of the translated sentence matched Ms. Futarishizuka’s to a tee. It was probably synthesizing it by sampling her voice. From Lady Elsa’s reaction, it seemed the quality was startling even for a local. It sounded natural to my ears, too—not a hint of the awkwardness I was accustomed to with synthetic voices.

“Now we can talk to one another directly, yes? Once more, from the top—it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Y-yes! It’s nice to meet you, too, Futarishizuka. I’m so happy I can talk to you like this. I’ve always wanted to thank you in my own words for everything you’ve done for me. You have my sincere gratitude!”

“I haven’t done all that much. In fact, I believe you’ve been on edge constantly in our world. Now that we can finally talk, I hope you’ll feel much more relaxed.”

“No, that’s not true. Spending time here has been wonderful.”

Lady Elsa looked really happy to be talking to Ms. Futarishizuka. Her smile was dazzling—she wasn’t saying all that just to be nice.

As for Type Twelve, while she watched the exchange with her usual poker face, I sensed a tinge of unhappiness somewhere in that pointed stare, like she was wondering how anyone could ever get along with someone like Futarishizuka. It seemed the youngest daughter just couldn’t believe that Lady Elsa would smile at her grandmother like that.

“So that was what you wanted to talk to her about last night,” I said, glancing over at Type Twelve.

“Precisely,” the girl in the kimono replied right away.

For all her supposed qualms about such technology, she hadn't wasted any time requesting it for herself.

"It seems strange that she offered her full cooperation in developing the translation device, and yet she hasn't touched any of the food you provided. Did the two of you make some sort of deal?"

"Futarishizuka's proposal was very beneficial to Hoshizaki as well, so I accepted it. Elsa's role is that of an acquaintance living in the neighborhood. If we cannot communicate successfully with our neighbors, problems might arise in the family's operation."

"Ah. I see."

It was only Miss Hoshizaki, and by extension our pretend family, that was important to Type Twelve.

For samples of the otherworld's language, she'd probably used recordings of Lady Elsa, the video leaked on the internet, and footage from this mansion's surveillance cameras. As long as she had the data, she could instantly analyze any unknown language—the mechanical life-forms had some pretty insane technology.

I suddenly thought of Mr. Marc and Mr. Joseph, who bought the products I'd ferried into the otherworld from modern Japan. I felt like I understood some of how they felt now. At the same time, I was rather surprised they'd agreed to do business with someone like me.

"Do you have additional translation devices?"

"Aside from the one Futarishizuka is wearing, I prepared only enough for the rest of the family. However, because Sasaki and Peep have no issues communicating, I decided yours were unnecessary. If that is not the case, then please relay that to me yourself."

"No, you're right. Neither of us need one."

“Indeed we don’t. However, I must say the mechanical life-forms’ technology boggles the mind.”

Their tech was fantastic. Even the Starsage was in shock.

And that gave me pause. We wanted to keep the otherworld’s existence a secret.

Perhaps that evil thought showed on my face; Lady Elsa, who had turned away from Ms. Futarishizuka to face us again, said, “Please don’t worry, Sasaki.”

“Lady Elsa?”

“No matter how much they may torture me, I will never speak of matters over there without your permission.”

If she was choosing this moment to say that, I doubted it was simply out of consideration for us. It must have also been a display of her intent to Ms. Futarishizuka. She was only in her mid-teens, and yet she was already sensitive to such subtleties. It was obvious she’d been raised in the aristocracy. *To be honest, it’s like I’m talking to someone my own age.*

“Thank you for being so thoughtful,” I replied. “But I hope you’ll take better care of yourself than that. In our current position, we have a great deal of flexibility. Even if a few things slip, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But I promised my father as well. If I ever do something that brings you trouble, I will never return home again. Since you are looking after me like this, I intend to uphold that promise to the letter.”

“Huh?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “What now? I had no idea you had *that* kind of relationship.”

“What sort of relationship might you be imagining?” I asked.

“What sort of... Isn’t it obvious? *That* kind of relationship. I mean...”

At just that moment, her cell phone began to vibrate. It sounded like a text message.

“Oh, is that our esteemed senior?” she mused.

But as I moved to take out my own phone, Type Twelve beat us to the punch.

“I have confirmed a request from Hoshizaki to pick her up.”

A text reached my own smartphone a few seconds later. I checked the message on my screen and realized the alien was right.

“I will now dispatch a terminal to her location. Sasaki, Peep, you will both stay here.”

“Wait, did you get a message from Miss Hoshizaki, too?”

Type Twelve didn't have a phone, did she? Or had she made one along with the translators? If she had, I couldn't find her mailing address anywhere in the list of people the message was sent to.

The truth came out a moment later.

“I inspected the message that arrived at your cell phone, Sasaki.”

“Huh? Wait, but this is my private phone...”

“I consider all messages linked to the accounts on this network as received the moment they arrive at the reception server. Surveilling this server greatly assists my ability to respond to Hoshizaki's requests promptly.”

“Isn't that against family rules?” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. “You're intruding on a family member's private life.”

“There is a possibility it is against family rules, but the opposite possibility also exists.”

“You're saying it depends on me?” I asked.

“Sasaki, your viewpoint is correct. You must permit sharing data to an external party for Hoshizaki's sake.”

“I'd like to refuse, if possible.”

“Now you have a strike against you, too,” chimed in Ms. Futarishizuka.

“.....”

Type Twelve remained impassive as always, though I got the vague feeling that she was gazing at me unhappily. The way her face was so devoid of emotion reminded me of the one on my shoulder. Java sparrows barely had any facial muscles with which to express themselves, after all.

Either way, for the time being, our private communication would remain private.

Incidentally, according to the family rules, two strikes would result in a penalty.

After a few minutes, Miss Hoshizaki arrived at the mansion in Type Twelve's terminal. She was in her school uniform with no makeup again. As she'd said the previous day, it seemed she wanted to avoid wearing her suit for a while.

“Looks like I'm the last one here again,” she commented. “Sorry for being late.”

“You have a real family to take care of, so don't beat yourself up over it,” I told her.

And going by bureau hours, she wasn't late. It was just that the rest of us had arrived a bit early.

As she came into the living room, she noticed Ms. Futarishizuka's ear and quickly commented. “Hey, what's that in your ear? A hearing aid?”

“Why do you have to be so rude to me so early in the morning?”

“Aren't you going to smear natto on her face?” I asked.

“Come on. She's got a ToD ability now. I can't risk something like that.”

“Sasaki, what the heck are you guys talking about? Mind filling me in?”

I explained the situation to our latecomer colleague. As soon as I was finished, Type Twelve held out the translator she'd made for Miss Hoshizaki. Without any hesitation, my senior coworker put the receiver in her ear and affixed the microphone to her collar.

Then she turned to Lady Elsa and said, “Hello. Can you understand what I'm

saying?”

“I can. It’s nice to finally speak with you, Hoshizaki.”

“Wha... Whoa. I really understood her!” she exclaimed, looking at the mysterious tech she’d just received. “This thing’s amazing!”

Her straightforward reaction was very characteristic, and nothing like Ms. Futarishizuka’s.

A moment later, an idea seemed to strike her, and she muttered, “Wait. If I have this, then I don’t need to study English...”

“Hoshizaki, your viewpoint is correct.”

“R-really?!”

“This device will work instantly for most languages used on Earth.”

“Wow...”

Oh. So she’s figured it out. Here was a high school girl, all enthusiastic about studying, and then this mechanical life-form had to come along and ruin it all with her fancy tech. Miss Hoshizaki had only recently roped me into helping her, and I was sure her sister wanted to study with her, too.

“Miss Hoshizaki, machines are just machines,” I said. “They’re temporary. If you lose the thing, that’s it.”

“Sure, but *she’s* a machine, too, isn’t she? She called herself a mechanical life-form. When you think about it like that, won’t humans die out way before they do?”

“Hoshizaki, your viewpoint is correct. By my calculations, the chances of that occurring are over ninety-nine percent.”

“Oh no,” moaned Ms. Futarishizuka. “Our dear, sweet coworker is being twisted around a mechanical life-form’s little finger.”

“Machines are superior in all ways,” explained Type Twelve. “Hoshizaki may continue to depend upon me. In exchange, I will depend on Hoshizaki and rely

on her as much as I like. By doing so, we can raise each other up. I have learned that humans refer to this as codependency.”

“Actually, that sounds more like a one-way road to depravity,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Now I feel like I’m being recommended a suspicious drug,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“I am certain,” Type Twelve assured her. “There is no problem whatsoever.”

“Perhaps you could just think of it like using an electronic bidet,” I remarked.

“Huh?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “You use those?”

“Sure. Wait, you don’t?”

“Well, no. They feel kinda weird, don’t they?”

“Do they? Personally, I consider them a must-have.”

We traded light conversation as we waited for Ms. Futarishizuka to finish her breakfast. As soon as she was done, before she’d even set down her chopsticks, my neighbor and Abaddon arrived.

The former was wearing street clothes instead of her uniform. I hadn’t seen her out of her uniform in a while, and she looked very fashionable. At her previous residence, she hadn’t had many possessions to call her own, so I assumed Ms. Futarishizuka had provided her with this outfit.

She had on a blouse, a miniskirt, and a coat. All of them were simple and refined in terms of design. It wasn’t meant to grab people’s attention, but the fabric and tailoring looked to be of fairly high-quality and had a kind of presence of their own.

Her sheer garter stockings combined with her especially short skirt caught my attention. Weren’t those the kind of things a more mature woman might wear? I had to wonder what Ms. Futarishizuka had been thinking when she purchased them. As a result, my neighbor looked a bit older than she did in her uniform.

“Good morning, mister,” she said to me.

“Good morning,” I replied. “Are you not going to school?”

“Umm, it’s the weekend...”

“Oh. Right, sorry. I completely lost track of the time.”

When people thought of government work, they usually imagined an attractive workplace with a regular schedule. Our bureau, on the other hand, never hesitated to call us in on weekends. That, combined with my trips to the otherworld, had long ago blown my sense of what day it was right out the window.

“You can give your impressions of my partner’s outfit, you know. She worked hard on it.”

“Don’t make demands of him, Abaddon.”

“Huh? Oh. Well...”

A middle-aged man rating a woman’s outfit sounded like little more than sexual harassment. If this had happened at the office, every single woman present would have thought less of me. How was I supposed to respond safely?

While I was hesitating, Miss Hoshizaki jumped in. “Aren’t those stockings a little gaudy for a kid to be wearing?”

“Are they?” replied my neighbor. “I’ve never worn them before, so I don’t really know.”

Miss Hoshizaki was acting like one of those older ladies at the office who always nitpicked the younger girls. Fortunately, though, that meant I could leave it to her to answer Abaddon’s snarky question.

“I’ve noticed you never wear anything on your legs,” my neighbor pointed out. “Isn’t that embarrassing?”

“W-well, I don’t exactly have a choice. With our line of work, if I wore stockings, they’d rip in no time. In fact, they get torn from just a little running, and even the thin stuff costs a lot.”

“They tear that easily?”

“Well, they sell boatloads of them at every convenience store. That should tell you something.”

As always, the two of them were butting heads. I could sense the thorns even in their casual back-and-forth.

They'd met in the worst possible way, though, so I couldn't blame them. From my neighbor's point of view, some lady she'd never met before had pointed a gun at her. I wasn't about to tell her to forget about that and try to get along for the sake of our pretend family. Besides, the pet had just picked a fight with the grandmother.

Stepping in to mediate before a serious dispute broke out, Ms. Futarishizuka said, "If you'll allow an old lady to make a suggestion..."

"What?" asked Miss Hoshizaki. "Why are you being so formal?"

"....."

Everyone's attention turned to the villa's owner, and Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor stopped arguing. Once their eyes were on her, Futarishizuka continued pompously.

"Oh, I just thought we could use today for what we discussed on the department store roof."

"Futarishizuka," said Type Twelve, "are you referring to a family trip to an amusement park?"

"That's right."

Type Twelve had made the suggestion, and the family had voted to go. If we wanted the neighbor to join us, then today—a weekend—would be perfect. Plus, Lady Elsa was with us, so we could all go together.

"I think that is an excellent decision," said Type Twelve. "Let us begin the event."

"Are we going to an amusement park today, mister?" the neighbor asked me.

"Would you like to come? I won't force you, of course," I said.

"I would love to, if that's all right."

"See? It was worth getting all dressed up."

"Abaddon, could you please stop teasing me over every little thing?"

“Sorry! But you tend to get shy right when it counts.”

Considering her background, I didn’t want to force her into family activities, even if ours wasn’t real. From her point of view, this whole business must have been like a cruel joke, making fun of her past suffering. And yet here she was, putting on a smile.

She was a straightforward girl with a good heart, and I really admired her.

“With that settled,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, turning to me, “could you go get the bird’s cage?”

“Yes, I’m on it.”

“If I accompany the rest of you, the girl will be here by herself.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Everyone’s coming—including our guest.”

“Is that right?”

“Sorry, Peeps. Would you mind helping out with that?”

“I see. Then yes, you may count on me.”

With Type Twelve’s tech and Peeps’s magic, I figured we could keep Lady Elsa’s presence a secret. The former could hack into and disable any mechanical sensors around us, starting with any surveillance cameras—while the latter could hide our guest from view with magic.

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed to be thinking the same thing and turned to Type Twelve. “Could I ask you to deal with surveillance cameras and other such things for us?”

“Understood. For the sake of our family, I will gladly cooperate.”

After hearing all this, Lady Elsa spoke up. “Sasaki, are you sure it’s okay for me to leave the mansion?”

“Our situation has changed recently, and it’s not healthy to stay cooped up inside all the time. If it’s all right with you, I think you should accompany us and enjoy some of this world’s entertainment. What do you think?”

“I think I shall. Thank you for your kind words.” She nodded, a little smile on her face.

With our pretend family in unanimous agreement, Type Twelve spoke up. “Then we should hasten our preparations. The earlier we leave, the better.”

Urged on by her words, everyone began getting ready for our outing.



In a little under an hour after deciding we’d go, we were at our destination: a certain famous theme park in the Kanto area.

Type Twelve’s terminal had gotten us there at superhuman speed. We’d traveled from Karuizawa to the park in about the same time it took to heat up a cup of noodles. Once there, we used magic to conceal ourselves as we left our optically camouflaged craft, then we floated down toward the park entrance. As a result, we didn’t have to waste time waiting in traffic.

Still, we couldn’t avoid the crowds entirely. We wound up having to wait in line at the ticket gate. I’d heard that they sometimes imposed a limit on people entering the park, and you might be kept from going inside until evening. But since we’d arrived early, we only had to wait forty or fifty minutes. Type Twelve had been right to hurry us along.

“Sasaki, is this a different country from the one you live in?” said Lady Elsa, taking in the views inside the park.

“No, we’re still in Japan,” I assured her.

“It’s all so different than everything else I’ve seen. The first place we visited here was incredible, too, but this one is striking in its own way. In fact, it almost seems closer to our kingdom...”

The first location we’d visited with Lady Elsa was the Shiodome Sio-Site area. Compared to that and to Karuizawa, she was right—the scenery in the theme park was probably a lot closer to that of the otherworld.

“That’s an odd thing to say,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki. “Sasaki, does she not know about amusement parks?”

“Well, no,” I said. “In her culture, they don’t have anything like this.”

“Ah... I’m, um, I’m sorry, Sasaki. I really don’t know much about the world, huh!”

Lady Elsa’s question could only have come from a native of the otherworld, and it earned a sharp rebuttal from one of the locals. Though perhaps not everyone on Earth had visited such a place, virtually everyone knew about them. In fact, wasn’t this Miss Hoshizaki’s first time at an amusement park, as well?

As originally planned, Peeps was disguising Lady Elsa’s appearance with his powers. According to him, he was using illusion magic. While we saw her normally, others would see an average East Asian girl.

“You seem a bit dazed,” said Abaddon to my neighbor. *“Something wrong?”*

“It’s nothing,” she replied.

“Oh, wait. Is this your first time at an amusement park, too?”

“...So what if it is?”

I could hear them chatting next to me. So it wasn’t just Miss Hoshizaki—my neighbor had never been to an amusement park, either. I was once again reminded of her family background. I found myself more concerned about the two of them having a good time than even Type Twelve.

At that point, Ms. Futarishizuka called out, “Let’s hit up the attractions, shall we?”

“Futarishizuka, why are you, the grandmother, taking the lead?”

“What? I wasn’t trying to take the lead.”

“Amusement parks are meant for children. Thus, the children’s viewpoints should be prioritized.”

“Then where would *you* like to go, missy?”

“According to information I have gleaned from the internet, we

should start with the roller coasters. A majority of viewpoints state that they are to be enjoyed first, and other rides can come after.”

“My. For a mechanical life-form, your criteria are very worldly.”

“Humankind has a slight advantage over me when it comes to handling emotions. I have determined there is meaning in adopting their viewpoints, as I have received emotions more recently. For this reason, your evaluation of my criteria as ‘worldly’ is an affirmation of my actions.”

“Using your mechanical life-form logic again, I see. Are you perhaps in your rebellious phase, dearie?”

“We should probably line up quickly in that case,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Roller coasters are popular, and I saw on TV that they have huge lines. Depending on the day, you could be in line for hours before you can ride one.”

“Mother is correct. We should depart for the attractions immediately.”

Urged onward by Type Twelve, we headed for one of the roller coasters. When we reached it, we were greeted by the exact kind of line Miss Hoshizaki had described. It hadn’t been long since the park opened, and yet there were already a bunch of people waiting. The signboard showing the estimated wait time read EIGHTY MINUTES.

I was shocked. I hadn’t been taking this place seriously. I’d assumed the wait would be a half hour at most.

Naturally, I recalled the work I did at my previous job. I imagined all the tasks I could finish in eighty minutes’ time. Suddenly, I began to feel depressed.

“Huh? Are you kidding?” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki. “It’s so early in the morning, and the line’s already this long?!”

“It *is* a weekend, and this is a popular attraction, I’m afraid,” replied Ms.

Futarishizuka.

“But with eighty minutes, I could write at least two reports!”

Despite being a high school girl, my senior coworker’s values were already the same as this middle-aged man’s. It was kind of sad.

Type Twelve, on the other hand, enthusiastically broke into a run and settled into place at the end of the line.

“We should line up quickly. We cannot afford to be any later than this.”

The group in line ahead turned and smiled at her. Whatever her true identity, she looked like a cute little girl. While her expression remained cold and emotionless, her actions fit her appearance.

Now that Type Twelve had distanced herself from us, Ms. Futarishizuka whispered into my ear. “This is part one in Operation Convince the Malfunctioning Mechanical Life-Form to Please Go back to Her Own Planet.”

“What can you possibly intend to do in this situation?” I murmured back.

“I’ll use the long wait times for these big attractions to start chipping away at her mental state. That’ll rattle her emotions, and once she’s bogged down with complaints, we’ll hit her with part two of the plan.”

“That’s going to put quite a strain on us, too.”

“This is our job. No whining.”

“All right, fine,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Let’s do it.”

Stirred by the word *job*, Miss Hoshizaki got in line behind Type Twelve. I followed suit, steeling myself.

A moment later, another group came in behind us, and we became just another part of the line. I’d felt drained just looking at the winding mass of people from behind, but once we were in the middle, my nerves strangely began to calm.

There was a kind of relief in our shared ordeal. Everyone else was in the same boat, so what was the problem? Just standing there made me feel superior to

the unfortunate people who had come in after us, and the attraction was like a guaranteed reward.

The whole setup was very well-suited for an average guy like me—I could feel a sense of accomplishment just from waiting. But it would only have been perfect had I been alone. My companions had been making merry at the start, but they quieted down about an hour into the wait.

“Lady Elsa, how are you holding up?” I asked.

“I’m perfectly fine. Please, there is no need to worry about me.”

“If it gets rough, just tell me. I’ll get a chair for you.”

I didn’t have one on hand, but Peeps could help me grab one from somewhere. In fact, I could even have him hop back to the mansion and leave us in line. *Ah, the convenience of teleportation magic.*

“I’ve gone hunting in the woods before with my father and brothers,” she told me. “My legs are quite tough, so you don’t need to worry. Despite how I look, I’m confident in my stamina.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Listening to her speak, I could indeed sense that she was relaxed and comfortable. Compared to Japanese people, who had fewer chances to move about during their daily lives, perhaps even noble girls were brimming with vitality. I was sure she’d beat me in a marathon.

“Sasaki, you’re way too worried about Elsa,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Lady Elsa is of noble birth. I’m showing her consideration fitting of her position. I’m sorry, Miss Hoshizaki, but would you please overlook my behavior?”

“Wait, is she really?!”

“Sasaki is being a little dramatic. It’s nothing so grandiose.”

“Still, you don’t use ‘mister’ with him. And now that you mention it, you seem... I dunno, classy, somehow? You give off a different sort of vibe from the rest of us commoners...”

“You don’t call him ‘mister,’ either, do you?” pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka.

“...Yeah. Come to think of it, you’re right.”

Miss Hoshizaki glanced at me, a tad apologetic. The next thing I knew, she’d turned to face me fully and looked at me with nervous, upturned eyes.

“Hey, should I, um, be calling you Mister Sasaki?”

“No, you can continue as normal.”

The phrase “Mister Sasaki” was something I should have been used to, but when Miss Hoshizaki said it, I was overcome with disgust. As soon as I heard it, a strange anxiety welled up inside me.

“Did you just cringe?” she asked.

“What? Of course not.”

“Father, in response to Mother’s remark, your shoulders moved forty-two millimeters backward.”

“See? Even our youngest daughter thinks so.”

At least Miss Hoshizaki still seemed full of energy. The same could be said of Ms. Futarishizuka and Type Twelve.

The one exception was my neighbor.

“You doing okay?” asked Abaddon. “You don’t talk much on a good day, but you’ve been dead silent for a while now.”

“I’m fine. Don’t mind me.”

“You’re looking at your feet an awful lot, too. Did you hurt them? I know you’re not used to shoes like that.”

“No, that’s not it. I’m perfectly fine, I promise.”

She’d been very conscious of her feet for a while now. Maybe she had blisters.

I always had a hard time with new shoes, too, so I understood her pain. Leather ones were especially scary. They didn’t even have to be new, and all it took was a few steps down a gravel road and the skin on your heel would start

peeling.

“You can use this, if you want,” I offered, taking a plastic bag out of my inside pocket and handing it to her.

Inside were Band-Aids of various sizes. I always carried them around, along with handkerchiefs and tissues—after all, I’d experienced many sudden blisters just like her. I could have just used healing magic to help her out, but there were a few too many people around.

“Wow, look who came prepared,” said Abaddon.

“When you’re walking around somewhere new, even old leather shoes can start to chafe,” I said.

“Oh, um, thank you...,” my neighbor replied.



“We’ll save your spot in line, so you can go to the restroom to put them on.”

“It’s okay. I can do it right here.”

I didn’t know what she was thinking, but after taking the Band-Aids, she began removing her stockings right then and there. Her skirt was short, so when she lifted a leg, you could see right up it. I stared, dumbstruck for a moment, before quickly averting my eyes.

Instantly, Miss Hoshizaki chimed in. “Hey, do you have no sense of shame?”

“Don’t you think you’re a little strict?” my neighbor shot back. “I’m just a kid, right?”

“Isn’t that my job as the mom here?”

“It would only cause me more pain to walk to the restroom, so I figured I’d deal with the problem here.”

“Oh, wow. You’re peeling something awful.”

“Urk...”

Personally, I was more worried about the groups around us in line. I could hear a few people whispering.

“Did that girl in the school uniform just call herself a mom?”

“She did.”

“They can’t be mother and child, can they?”

“Should we call the police?”

“No, I’m sure that man’s just showing around a group of kids.”

“But if you’re wrong, how messed up is that?”

“She’d have to be their stepmother.”

“I don’t think that makes things any better.”

Their comments reminded me, once again, that everyone I was with looked like a child. Today we also had Lady Elsa and a visible Abaddon, making the ratio even worse. While half of them were far older than me in reality, nobody else would be able to tell.

And Miss Hoshizaki wasn't helping by wearing her school uniform. Recently there were more and more adult women who wore their uniforms to amusement parks even after graduating high school. I wondered if telling them that would improve the situation.

No, there's no point trying to tell them anything. Even if they believed me, it wouldn't make any sense for my thirteen-year-old neighbor to be her child.

Another hour passed, during which we continued to receive strange looks from those around us. We had officially been in line for almost two hours.

Everyone began to talk less and less. Even the ones who had been curiously looking around the park at first had given up, focusing instead on the line ahead. Ms. Futarishizuka was busy with a limited-time event in one of her mobile games.

Perhaps because of our shared state of misery, Type Twelve, who had been standing patiently in line until now, finally spoke up.

"Grandmother, what is the meaning of this?"

"What now? You're going to have to specify."

"The line is moving slowly. Far more slowly than it should be, considering the wait time."

"That was only an estimate, dear."

"So humanity not only lies itself, but forces its machines to lie as well."

"It's possible people are moving in and out of the line. And if a lot of guests have little kids with them, it might take extra time to see to them. The staff may not be having the best day, and even the machinery used to operate the attractions isn't always working at one hundred percent."

"If we continue at our current rate of advancement, it will interfere with our plans to ride additional attractions."

"Lining up for hours to ride the attractions is part of the amusement park

experience. It's the weekend, so if we stick to the popular attractions, we'll only have enough time for three or four more."

"Grandmother, that truth makes my heart very lonely."

"Grumbling about it won't change anything, dear. That's just the way these things are."

With that, Ms. Futarishizuka turned to me. Her expression seemed to say, "it's working, it's working!"

It seemed part one of Operation Please Go back to Your Own Planet was a great success. That said, it had done plenty of damage to us, too. I was having a pretty bad time, personally. And, as might be expected, my neighbor wasn't looking great, either.

"If this is too much," I said to her, "you can go sit down somewhere. We'll call you back when our turn comes. I see other people going in and out of line to use the restroom and such."

"No, I'm all right."

"As my partner, I wish you'd take better care of yourself. This place is open to the general public, so there's a higher chance an isolated space will appear. In fact, the game could easily begin any moment now."

Abaddon's concerns were reasonable. *Maybe I ought to deploy my barrier magic, too.* But if I did that, I'd have an invisible wall around me at all times.

My neighbor could be surprisingly stubborn once she made up her mind. I watched her, wondering what I could do for her. I recalled the vending machine we'd seen on our way here; there were lines at the snack stalls, but never at the vending machine.

"Since we still have some time to wait, I'll go buy us a couple drinks at the vending machine. It's pretty cold standing around like this, and something warm should make us all feel better. I think they had hot green tea and black tea."

"Thank you, mister."

After taking everyone's orders, I left Lady Elsa in charge of Peeps's cage and

trotted over to the vending machine.

When I arrived, to my surprise, there was a line even there. After a few minutes of waiting, it was finally my turn.

But just then, there was movement behind me.

“Ah...?!”

Something hard drove into the back of my thigh. Pain soon shot through my leg. It felt as if whatever it was had driven into the bone itself. It felt like Count Müller had just stabbed me as hard as he could with his sword.

I couldn't stay on my feet. With a grunt, I crumpled to the ground.

As I did, the people behind me caught me from the left and right. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I turned to look at them. A few others surrounded us, blocking the other guests' view and pretending nothing was happening. The group consisted of several men and women, all of them dressed like park guests.

One of them waved a stun gun at me to make sure I saw it. “You're with the bureau, aren't you? Come with us, and don't make a fuss.”

“.....”

It was true that I'd let my guard down. I just couldn't believe they'd chosen to come after *me*.

But thinking rationally, I found this development made a whole lot of sense. Ms. Futarishizuka was a rank-A psychic, and like her, Miss Hoshizaki could now kill with a single touch. And if they knew about the angel-demon war, they'd realize my neighbor and Abaddon were a force to be reckoned with. Type Twelve didn't even bear mentioning.

The only others present were myself and Lady Elsa. The latter was currently in disguise and unrecognizable. So if someone was going to take a hostage, I was their best choice. They already knew I was with the bureau, after all.

“Ugh...”

As I squirmed in pain, they began hauling me away. Everything was happening just like when Miss Hoshizaki was kidnapped.

At this rate, our fun time at the amusement park would be ruined. Not only would that sour Type Twelve's mood—it would force us to suspend Ms. Futarishizuka's plan. I had to do something, all the while making sure no one noticed my otherworld magic.

"This way. Move it."

"....."

The pain of the electric shock wore off after twenty or thirty seconds. The man wagged the stun gun at me again as he continued issuing orders. He must have thought they had me in the bag.

Nobody around us said anything. Maybe it looked like I was a park guest having fun who had suddenly felt sick, and they were my friends trying to take care of me.

My "psychic power," as I'd reported it to the bureau, was the ability to create icicles. I'd recently claimed that it had leveled up, and that I could now produce water, as well. That's what would be listed in the bureau's database anyway.

So I decided to make some water to engulf the stun gun.

"Hey! What are you...!" exclaimed the man as he felt his hand get drenched, disabling the weapon.

Instead of bringing out another one, he kicked me and backed off.

"Settle down!"

A moment later, another one of them took a gun out of their pocket. An *actual* gun. Keeping this under wraps had just gotten a lot harder.

I created more water and positioned it to engulf the people around me. Naturally, anyone inside wouldn't be able to breathe. As they writhed around in the water, someone fired, but the bullet had lost all its momentum by the time it escaped the liquid.

I figured I'd just wait for them to drown, but soon my hopes were dashed.

One of them exited their watery coffin and created a giant ball of fire. It was as big as one of those ball chairs programmers working at progressive IT companies used instead of regular ones. If it burst, a lot of people were going to

get hurt. And it was hurtling straight toward me.

I probably could have taken it face-first if I used barrier magic to protect myself. But considering the possible effects on my surroundings, I shied away from the idea. Instead, I created a whole lot of water and formed it into a wall to engulf the flying fireball. It felt like making *ankoro* mochi—when you wrap a sheet of red bean paste around a center of white mochi—and it probably looked like that, too.

The instant the two made contact, a boom rang out, causing the air to tremble.

The fireball burst. The water, boiled by the fire, let off a ton of steam and blocked my vision.

A wave of heat dispersed around us, but the explosion's effects were minor, and no further flames appeared. I waited a few seconds until the white, billowing steam cleared. I could see all the people who had passed out inside the water.

I let the liquid fall and ran over to them. Upon checking, I found that they had all been safely disabled and were now lying unconscious on the ground.

The amusement park, however, was far from unaffected. After the ear-piercing sound of the explosion, nearby guests were freaking out, screaming as they fought to get away as fast as they could. The panic rapidly spread further and further into the park.

Soon, several uniformed police officers rushed over. As I watched, impressed by their quick response, the phone in my pocket started to vibrate. I checked the display; it showed my boss's name.

"Hello, this is Sasaki."

"It's Akutsu. I already contacted those in charge of the facility through their local police department. Other employees are headed there now, so could you help clean up until they arrive?"

"Yes, sir." This was exactly what I'd been expecting when I took the call.

"I must say, I'm impressed that you managed to disable a group of several

people with guns all by yourself. Your ability may not be flashy, but even in the field, you're an excellent member of this bureau. Didn't they have a psychic with them?"

"I was just lucky, sir."

The police officers began putting the people on the ground in handcuffs. I flashed my police badge, assuring them that I was a friend. Just as the chief had said, they all stood up straight and saluted, then silently went about their work. It seemed they'd been informed—both about my name and the situation.

All this raised another question in my mind. "Chief, how did you know where we were?"

"I don't know about you, but Hoshizaki obeys the rules to the letter. She has her bureau phone on her, so I was able to check her location. I've known you were at a theme park in the Kanto area for a few hours now."

"...I'm sorry for not bringing my phone with me."

That meant he knew about Ms. Futarishizuka's base, too. Still, I figured he'd already pieced that together from my neighbor's school transfer. It wasn't a big deal. With his impressive network of surveillance cameras and the bureau's concentrated efforts, keeping where we lived a secret was pretty much impossible anyway.

In the meantime, other people rushed to the scene. The newcomers weren't dressed like police officers, but they calmly stepped over the yellow "keep out" tape. That probably meant they belonged to the bureau. I greeted them and they bowed in response, eliminating any lingering doubts.

"Chief, the ones you sent are here."

"You can leave things to them. I want you to focus on handling the mechanical life-form."

"Yes, sir."

In my peripheral vision, I could see police officers shooing away the rubberneckers brandishing smartphones who had begun to gather around the scene. It seemed unlikely my face would wind up on the internet, at least.

“Also, if you happen to meet an acquaintance of mine on-site, I’d like you to do as they ask.”

“An acquaintance, sir?”

“In exchange, I’ll deal with the congestion in the park. I’m wishing you the best of luck, Sasaki.”

“What? Wait a minute, Chief—”

He quickly hung up on me. With no other options, I went about my business as instructed, leaving the disturbance in the hands of the police and other bureau employees, and returned to Type Twelve. I made sure to grab drinks from the vending machine, as originally planned.

By the time I got back to the attraction, our turn had just come up. Despite my efforts to look cool when I’d left, my return was anything but. I slid back into the group just in time, after which we were shown to the ride. Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka asked about the explosion; it appeared they’d heard it from their place in line.

I told them I would explain afterward, and we went ahead and rode the attraction. It required about ten minutes in total.

To be honest, I’d underestimated this place. I’d thought these parks were distractions for children, but after my first real roller-coaster ride, I was finding myself hungering for more. Suddenly, I felt my excitement surge.

After we’d finished up at the first attraction, I told the others what I’d been up to.

“That sounds like exactly what happened to our esteemed senior,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I had to hand over the site before I could confirm, so I can’t be sure. But I think you’re right. They caught the criminals this time, so we can check with the section chief later. He might be able to tell us their identities.”

“Well, I’m sure plenty of countries and groups have it out for us. I’m not sure we even need to worry about the ones who recklessly try to attack us without even confirming what we’re capable of.”

“More importantly,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “are you all right? Electric shocks are really painful.”

“It hurt at first, but I can barely feel it anymore.”

“I guess that’s good,” she said. She was extra considerate, having just experienced the same thing the other day.

A moment later, my neighbor—who was walking beside me—spoke up, too. “Are we causing you trouble by being here, mister?”

“No, not at all,” I assured her. “That was just a work-related issue. Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Well, if there’s any way we can help, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Yup, that’s right. Family rules say we have to help each other in times of need, remember?”

“I appreciate it.”

Now that we were done riding the roller coaster, we headed to the next attraction. Type Twelve led the way; she’d downloaded a map of the entire park, and she strode confidently out ahead. She could probably see everything that was going on through the park’s security cameras.

As we followed behind her, Miss Hoshizaki said, “Is it just me or are there less people around?”

“I believe we have the bureau to thank for that.”

“Oh?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “What does that mean?”

This must have been what Mr. Akutsu meant about dealing with the crowds in the park. Since an explosion had gone off, they were probably evacuating the guests in case something similar happened again. I explained all that to my coworkers.

While we didn’t hear anything over the park’s PA system, I assumed the staff had mobilized and were helping guide people out. If they said a terrorist attack had occurred in the park and they were trying to prevent a panic from breaking out, the guests would have to obey. The bureau probably didn’t want any more people catching sight of psychic powers, either.

As a result, part one of Operation Please Go back to Your Own Planet had failed spectacularly. I doubted we'd have to worry about wait times for the rest of the attractions.

"I don't know which organization is at fault," grumbled Ms. Futarishizuka, "but they sure mucked things up this time."

"Sounds like you struck out," I said.

"No," she replied, sounding frustrated. "Now that it's come to this, we'll have to decide everything in one fell swoop."

Type Twelve overheard our exchange and turned around to face us.

"Father, what is Futarishizuka talking about?"

"Nothing," I said. "Don't worry about it. It's just work stuff."

Type Twelve was walking backward as she watched us. She looked just like a little kid excited to be at an amusement park. I felt guilty for lying to her, but only a little. I vaguely wondered if my vitals had managed to stay normal.

"Father, this is currently family time. You should not bring work into family time."

"You're right. I agree completely."

"If you understand, we should hurry to the next attraction. I sense that the rest of you are slowing down. The youngest daughter desires for you to move quickly to our destination. If your feet hurt, I can call a terminal to bring us there."

"Are the eldest daughter's feet doing all right?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Thanks to the Band-Aids, they don't hurt anymore, even when I'm walking," my neighbor replied.

"That may be, but don't force yourself," said Miss Hoshizaki.

"If I say it hurts, will you carry me, Father?"

"Huh?" I said, startled. "Uh, I think it would be better to ask Miss Hoshizaki for

something like that.”

“Wait, why me?”

“I’m sorry,” my neighbor said, changing her mind. “It doesn’t hurt at all. I can walk by myself.”

“Why, you...”

“I will call a terminal after all. If this continues, it may influence our future plans...”

“Could we get going before she explodes?” pleaded Ms. Futarishizuka. “I didn’t ask for any of this romcom nonsense!”

And so, at Type Twelve’s insistence, we hurried along.



From there, we enjoyed two popular attractions in a row. Normally, each ride would have required at least an hour’s wait—two or three if we were unlucky. But now that there were fewer people around thanks to the explosion, we spent less than thirty minutes in each line. I got the feeling we were also running into more park actors than before.

Thanks to the short wait times, Type Twelve seemed quite pleased. It didn’t show on her face, but I could sense the joy seeping into her words.

Incidentally, my neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki appeared happy as well. Especially the latter—she was having so much fun I suspected she’d entirely forgotten about Ms. Futarishizuka’s grand plan.

“I’m thinking we try this one next,” she said. “What do you think?”

“Mother, the youngest daughter is drawn to that one.”

The two of them peered at the park map excitedly. *I don’t think I’ve ever seen Miss Hoshizaki like this before.* Aided by her uniform, she seemed like a regular high school girl.

Off to the side, Ms. Futarishizuka watched them with a sour look. At this rate,

not only would she fail to send Type Twelve back to her home planet, but she'd have given her a great time and amazing memories. I could just see the alien asking us to take her to another amusement park the following weekend.

"Then why don't we go to both, and stop at this ride, too, while we're going from one to the other? With how empty this place is, I don't think we'll have to wait long. And backtracking would be a pain anyway."

"I was curious about that attraction as well. I will adopt Mother's viewpoint."

To an outside observer, they would have looked like good friends.

Ms. Futarishizuka, staring pointedly, chose then to interrupt. "Look, dearies, the attractions are all well and good, but maybe we should have lunch first."

"What? It's already that late?"

"We're on the clock, you know. You could do to pay a little more attention to the time."

"Urk... All right, fine, sorry."

She was right—it was just about lunchtime. On a normal day, we might have wanted to prioritize the attractions and squeeze in lunch whenever we could. But with how few people remained in the park, it probably wouldn't make that much of a difference if we got food now.

"You must be getting hungry, yes? Am I right?" pressed Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Um, oh, yeah! I guess I am a little peckish," said Miss Hoshizaki, changing gears.

It seemed she really had lost sight of our original goal. Now she was flustered, probably feeling guilty about getting in the way.

Type Twelve immediately voiced an objection. "The youngest daughter would like to stress to Grandmother that for the moment, we should prioritize enjoying the attractions."

"Oh, no, you've got it all wrong, dear."

“I do? What is your reasoning, Grandmother?”

“In places like these, the food is an attraction in its own right. The restaurants are all made to fit the park’s theme, including elaborate menus. You can’t say you’ve gotten the full amusement-park experience until you’ve enjoyed the smaller things, like the interior decor and tableware.”

Ms. Futarishizuka was speaking like a real know-it-all. But I’d done a little research while we were waiting in line earlier and found that a lot of people agreed with her. One article even said it was a common feeling among amusement-park aficionados.

“...I admit that your viewpoint has some truth to it. Similar viewpoints can be found here and there on the internet.”

“Right? I told you so.”

Type Twelve seemed convinced; she must have gotten the same info I had. But as a mechanical life-form, she didn’t need a smartphone to look things up. Way up in the atmosphere, her main body—the UFO—must have been gathering information from the internet at blinding speeds.

“If we’re all in agreement, then let’s go get some grub.”

“Understood. Mother has complained of hunger as well, so the youngest daughter will adopt Grandmother’s viewpoint.”

“Sweet. I know just the place.”

Ms. Futarishizuka started walking, swapping out with the alien to take the lead. No objections came from my neighbor, Abaddon, or Lady Elsa. Everyone was excited as they followed the grandmother through the park.

A short while later, a family passed by in front of us. While the park had mostly emptied out, there were still plenty of guests around. This group was composed of a relatively young-looking couple with a small boy.

“Papa, my tummy’s rumbling!”

“I hear you. It’s about that time anyway. Let’s check out the restaurants.”

“Huh? A restaurant?!”

“Honey, aren’t restaurants in amusement parks pretty expensive?”

“I worked extra hard so we could splurge today. I heard you can enjoy French cuisine while looking out over the attractions.”

“Wow! Papa, that’s awesome!”

“Oh, honey, you’re wonderful!”

They were the picture of a perfect happy family. Type Twelve kept moving, but her gaze followed the three of them for a time. While her expression showed no change, she squeezed her hands into fists, offering a glimpse of the emotions currently roiling within her.

Ms. Futarishizuka had already filled me in on today’s lunchtime plan; we’d gone to the restrooms together while waiting in line for our third attraction.

This would be part two of Operation Please Go back to Your Own Planet, and our choice of restaurant was key.

“Ah, here it is,” said Futarishizuka. “Right here. I cannot recommend this joint enough.”

We stopped in front of a small shop set up on a street corner. There was no space to eat inside; you got your food from the counter, then wandered around until you found a bench or somewhere else to sit and enjoy your meal. Their primary product was chicken legs. In fact, it looked like that was *all* they served, aside from drinks. In exchange, they were fairly reasonably priced. That said, for the price of a single leg, you could have bought a whole meal at any restaurant outside the park.

“Grandmother, what is the meaning of this?”

“Meaning of what?”

Type Twelve looked aghast as she stared at the chicken-leg stall. At the risk of being rude to the place’s operators and patrons, it felt more like a snack stop than a proper eating establishment. For a family on their weekend outing seeking a fun lunch, it lacked the requisite visual panache.

“The youngest daughter wants to go to a restaurant and eat French cuisine while looking out over the attractions.”

“Sorry, dear. No can do.”

If I was being honest, that was the kind of lunch I was hoping for, too. I’d been seeing a lot of restaurants during our trek through the park and imagining what we might eat. I stole a casual glance at Miss Hoshizaki to find she, too, wore a look of disappointment.

Seeing their reactions made me realize something. “Ms. Futarishizuka, those people before...”

“Hmm? I’m not sure who you mean.”

The parents with the little boy who had crossed our path earlier—they had to have been plants. If she’d even secured help from an elementary school-aged boy, she must have set everything up the day before. It was thorough, and it made me suspect she was enjoying this operation of hers.

“Why? I request a convincing explanation from Grandmother.”

“Oh, it’s quite simple. We don’t have the money.”

“Grandmother would deprive the youngest daughter of a restaurant lunch for such a trivial reason?”

“‘Trivial’? That’s not a nice way to put it. Did you forget all the things we bought at the department store yesterday? Your esteemed father here worked very hard for the money to purchase all of that.”

“Father, are Grandmother’s words true?”

“Well, I hate to tell you this,” I said, “but we’ve been spending a lot of money over the last couple days. As a mechanical life-form, I’m sure you can tally it up. Even with a rough estimate, you must realize that it’s quite a lot compared to my paycheck.”

“...Yes, there is no lie in your words.”

“Exactly,” chimed in Ms. Futarishizuka. “So for today, we’re having drumsticks!”

“I think this place only has chicken legs, Futarishizuka,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki.

“They’re the same thing, child.”

Leaving the two of them aside, I felt bad for getting my neighbor and Lady Elsa involved and then having chicken legs for lunch. We never explained the situation to them, so they were looking at me with genuine concern. As this pretend family’s father, it hurt my heart.

I thought I felt a critical stare coming from Peeps’s carrying cage, as well.

“Um, Sasaki, if you’re having trouble, I could ask my father for help...”

“Please don’t worry about it, Lady Elsa,” I assured her. “This only applies to our pretend family, based on the rules we decided together. And I can petition my workplace for extra funds later on, so my finances are in no real danger.”

“Oh, right. Everything counts as work expenses, huh?” murmured Miss Hoshizaki, finally realizing this. “I shouldn’t have bothered worrying,”

This was all for the sake of getting Type Twelve to go back to her home planet. Without any knowledge of our intentions, however, Type Twelve stubbornly insisted we go to a restaurant.

“In that case, the youngest daughter has an innovative proposal for Grandmother.”

“What is it?”

“It is in situations like these that the money in Grandmother’s retirement account shines brightest.”

“What a little demon, treating me awfully and then turning to me only when you need money.”

“Various sources on the internet imply that this is a realistic relationship between a grandchild and their grandparent.”

Type Twelve was getting desperate now. While her words and mannerisms were those of an adult, she was clearly moved by childish feelings.

Ms. Futarishizuka straightened up, looked her directly in the eyes, and said, “And this is what a real family is like. Everyone has to make sacrifices for the sake of the whole. I don’t care how recently you came into your emotions. You can’t take all the fun parts of being a family and reject everything else. Do you understand?”

“.....”

Even Type Twelve had to shut up at that.

The kimono-clad girl pressed further. “It takes cooperation to sustain a family. Even happy families have their share of troubles. Take our esteemed senior here. Her sister isn’t getting pampered all the time, is she? You know that—you’ve been monitoring them.”

Miss Hoshizaki had to go to work and earn money, so her younger sister helped out by taking over all of the chores. I was well aware of this, because she’d told me as much when I was over at their apartment for our English lesson.

This argument seemed to work on the alien. She gave up on trying to persuade Ms. Futarishizuka and turned to me instead.

“Father, is there no hope for a promotion at work?”

“Not really. I’m sorry to let you down.”

I vaguely recalled a certain Java sparrow once asking me the same thing. Leaving aside whether we were truly father and daughter, the exchange hit me pretty hard. I’d only recently left a low-paying job, and the scenario felt extremely real. What did other fathers say when their kids asked them questions like this?

“...Understood. The youngest daughter will make do with a bird’s leg for lunch.”

“They’re called chicken legs!” insisted Miss Hoshizaki. “What you’re saying

doesn't even sound like food."

"I don't need lunch today, mister. If it's okay with you, please spend my portion on my younger sister, since she's hungry. Otherwise, you can save it for future expenses."

"Elder Sister, your thoughtfulness brings great solace to the youngest daughter's wounded heart."

"You skip meals all the time anyway," noted Abaddon.

"I've had it too good lately. I don't need to eat three times a day."

"...The youngest daughter refuses the elder sister's request. Kurosu must eat her own portion."

Type Twelve must have found out about the neighbor's circumstances when she hacked into the bureau's database. She was markedly less aggressive with her than with Ms. Futarishizuka.

I could empathize—I felt the exact same way.

As we stood near the chicken stall animatedly discussing lunch, we heard a voice from somewhere nearby.

"Oh? Aren't those the people from the Countermeasure Bureau?"

They were speaking in English. I immediately turned toward the sound.

My gaze landed on two familiar faces: those of Captain Mason and Magical Blue. The latter was in her magical girl getup, just like last time we'd run into her, though she was currently wearing one of the headbands sold in the park. It used a design based on the establishment's mascot character.

Captain Mason, on the other hand, was wearing a suit instead of his uniform. It looked exceedingly good on his tall, muscular frame. As soon as I saw him, I started wishing I could wear a suit half as well.

"Oh? What are you two doing all the way out here?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"We're enjoying a little holiday," said Captain Mason, his tone upbeat. "First Lieutenant Ivy here has had it rough lately, so I wanted to let her spread her

wings and relax. But it seems there was an incident a little while ago.”

“Thank you so much for saving me the other day!” exclaimed Magical Blue, bowing deeply in our direction.

As expected, I didn’t understand a word of what either of them were saying. This time, though, I was the odd one out.

“Whoa, I understood that!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki. “This thing really does work on English!”

“I would probably score well on English listening comprehension tests with this,” commented my neighbor, equally impressed.

“I think your teacher would probably be angry if he saw you with that in your ear,” Abaddon replied.

This was all thanks to the translation devices. The whole group aside from Peeps and me were wearing them for the purpose of talking to Lady Elsa. The developer herself had said just this morning that it worked not only with the otherworld’s language, but for Earth’s languages as well.

In fact, the devices even allowed the wearer to transmit auxiliary audio translated via a clip-on mic to other nearby earpieces. With so many eyes and ears on us at the amusement park, some of those in our group had been using them to speak with one another.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said, turning to Type Twelve, “but could I have one of those, after all?”

“Understood.”

Nodding, Type Twelve took an earphone and clip-on mic set out of her shoulder bag. I felt bad for taking advantage of her goodwill right after being so strict with her, but I didn’t want to be left out of the conversation. After all, these people might not be enemies, but neither could we consider them our allies.

“I’ve been hearing secondary audio whenever you speak,” Captain Mason remarked. “Is that technology from the mechanical life-form? We have similar devices on Earth, but these seem much more advanced.”

“This is the first time I’m speaking with you directly, isn’t it? It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Miss Hoshizaki took the lead in speaking to the captain—proudly and enthusiastically. She must be doing her best to ensure he didn’t make light of her. Still, without her makeup and in her school uniform, she just looked like a student trying to sound mature. It was a little funny to watch.

“Miss Hoshizaki,” responded the captain. “I’ve heard of your exploits, too. You defeated a rank-A psychic in one-on-one battle, didn’t you? The word is you’re quite powerful now that you’ve leveled up, even on your own.”

“Oh? I wonder who told you that. Whoever it was, they must have loose lips.”

“As I said before, if you ever feel dissatisfied with your current position, feel free to pay my country a visit. The higher-ups would pay an arm and a leg to get a psychic as powerful as you. You’re always welcome.”

“You just want information. Why ask me anyway? There are others who have what you want.”

From her response, it seemed she remembered what I’d said about how Captain Mason was only after our intel on the Kraken’s defeat. While she hadn’t exactly given him a chance to explain, she also hadn’t rejected his proposal. The allure of that three million dollar offer still loomed large in her mind.

“You’ve got it wrong,” said the captain. “I’m singling you out due to my respect and admiration for your power.”

“Is...is that so?”

“We could offer you a better life. You’d be safe—as would your family. In fact, I could set up a place for you to live. Somewhere more secure.”

“.....”

Oh no, I thought. She’s gonna get poached. The corners of her lips were turning up a bit. Recently, she’d become a rank-B psychic both on paper and in practice. She must have been an attractive enough prospect even without her connection to the UFO. I got the feeling the previous offer hadn’t been mere whimsy, either.

Perhaps sensing danger in our senior's reaction, Ms. Futarishizuka immediately objected.

"She's perfectly safe right now," she said, "thanks to the robo-girl over there. You all fudged your chances with the UFO, and now you've come crawling to the winners, I see. You better be ready to offer a lot more than the peanuts from before."

"My superiors told me to agree to any contract fee you set forth."

"Now *that's* a fright. Why would anyone go with you after a line like that?"

"Mother, your youngest daughter wishes dearly for you to preserve the peace of our family."

"Ah... R-right!" stammered Miss Hoshizaki. "It's just like with the Kraken. Everyone and their dog are curious about you now, that's all. I may be thickheaded, but even I can put two and two together. Don't worry—I'm not going to sell you out!"

"Mother, your words have unexpectedly warmed your youngest daughter's heart."

"Is that so?" said the captain. "Well, come to me if you change your mind. Leaving aside the UFO matter, we are very impressed with all of you—not just her, but everyone else here as well."

He must have figured he wouldn't get any further, because he dropped the matter right then and there. Instead, he paused and changed the topic.

Without wasting any more time, he asked, "What are you all doing here anyway?" and flicked his eyes to the chicken-leg stall nearby.

Type Twelve answered for us. "My father's wages are undesirably low, so we were about to eat the legs of birds for lunch as a family."

It was a very blunt, precise response. And as the down-on-his-luck father, I felt my heart nearly snap in half.

"You've used the words *father* and *mother* in our conversation several times now," noted the captain. "Do you have a family? When you spoke to us on your

spaceship, you told us that you didn't."

"Hoshizaki is the mother, and Sasaki is the father. There is also an elder sister, an elder brother, a pet, and a grandmother."

"Why would you list your grandmother *after* the family pet?" complained Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I see. So you've chosen to make these people your family," said Captain Mason, looking around at all of us—even at Peeps in his cage.

I didn't want to consider it, but had the nerd told him about Peeps? It seemed like I was plagued with such suspicions these days. I wondered how well he was keeping his promise of secrecy. There was no point thinking about that now, though, so I simply filed it away as a possibility.

"Mister Sasaki, I must confess to some concern. Why subject your family to hunger at an amusement park?"

"I'd rather you not butt in regarding our family rules," I told him.

This was all part of Ms. Futarishizuka's plan—but it felt like the strain was falling mostly on my shoulders. It was super rough. Did other fathers have to endure pressure from all directions like this?

Supporting a family must be really difficult.

"Ah..." Captain Mason thought for a moment, then drew himself up and addressed our whole group. "In that case, please allow us to treat you, as thanks for yesterday. I'd like to invite you to a members-only restaurant in the park. Will you join us? It isn't open to the public, so you'll be able to relax and have a nice lunch."

"Ah..."

Type Twelve's eyes instantly began to sparkle. It didn't show in her expression, but her gaze said it all. Here was her chance to fulfill all her lunchtime dreams.

"No, no," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "We can't impose on others. We'll just stay here and enjoy our drumsticks—"

“I would very much like to be invited. We may leave the reluctant grandmother here,” interrupted Type Twelve, casting aside Futarishizuka.

Could the captain have been referring to that restaurant famous among amusement-park fans that only a tiny portion of the upper crust could get into? The one that assigned each of its guests their own actor and offered a bunch of exclusive entertainment? I’d heard it was like a super posh restaurant, with food to match.

“Is that so? I can bring you there right away, then,” offered the captain.

“You seem much more reliable than a certain grandmother,” said Type Twelve.

The captain headed off, taking the lead, and Type Twelve was the first to follow him.

“The youngest daughter has learned that it is useful to have rich acquaintances.”

“Gah. Grrr...” Ms. Futarishizuka growled in frustration.

We hadn’t told Mr. Akutsu about our plan, so Captain Mason had no way of knowing our intentions. He’d offered help because he wanted to get closer to Type Twelve.

And now Ms. Futarishizuka’s plans had been brilliantly foiled. At this point, there was nothing for us to do but give up and follow the others, and so that’s exactly what we did.

No objections came from Abaddon, my neighbor, or Lady Elsa. They’d never met Captain Mason before, but they must have assumed everything was all right from the casual tone of our conversation.

“This is how children get a taste for expensive things...,” grumbled Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I suspect it’s not uncommon,” I replied.

“You should hurry up and level up your powers, too, Sasaki,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “You need a raise.”

“I agree. I’ll do my best.”

“Ugh, you’re one of *those* people,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka. “The kind that starts asserting dominance the moment you get a step ahead.”

“I...I wasn’t doing anything of the sort!”

For someone Miss Hoshizaki’s age, a little pride was probably a good thing. She’d been working so hard for so long; she couldn’t help how happy she was to be seeing results.



Skipping to the conclusion, the restaurant Captain Mason brought us to was absolutely incredible.

The doors at the entrance were plain and easy to miss. Inside, however, it was like the posh hotel Ms. Futarishizuka had temporarily procured for Lady Elsa. It was so quiet inside that you could forget about all the noise of the park. We were able to relax and enjoy our lunch in peace—and, naturally, the food was delicious.

Type Twelve was very satisfied, but it was quite the ordeal for Peeps. We couldn’t let him out of his cage in front of the restaurant staff, much less Captain Mason and Magical Blue. I could sense his bitter stares as everyone else enjoyed the great food—especially since the full-course meal, which we left to the chef’s recommendation, was packed to the brim with meat.

After lunch, the captain offered to come along with us and pay for other things as well. While Type Twelve was quite charmed by the idea, we took a vote in accordance with family rules and declined. We told them we’d come to the amusement park as a family trip and insisted that we split back up. With opposing votes from Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Hoshizaki, and myself, we easily won the majority.

We said our farewells inside the restaurant, though I expected they’d continue to observe us either way.

In the afternoon, we went around to some more attractions. Like before, the crowds were much thinner than usual, and we were able to reach most rides in

under thirty minutes. They must have sent a certain proportion of guests home and stopped admitting new ones. I had no doubt many of the others still here were bureau members and plants from other organizations.

For a while, we simply went around the park and enjoyed ourselves.

As the sun began to set, the park PA system directed us to a parade. We decided to attend, and headed out to the big road where it was set to take place.

“The park seemed pretty empty,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “But there’s so many people here.”

“I’d guess just about everyone in the whole place is here right now,” I said.

“I bet half of them are watching us,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

Parades like these were a first for me, so I didn’t know how the crowd compared to a normal day. The area was crammed with people—as many as a popular shrine on a festival day.

We entered the throng, looking for a good place to enjoy the parade. Slipping through crowds also made for a good chance to speak in secret. After waiting for a moment when we were far enough away from Type Twelve, Ms. Futarishizuka called out, and Miss Hoshizaki and I slowed down to listen.

“This is the moment of truth,” she said. “We need to seal the deal when the parade gets here.”

“I have a lot of doubts,” I replied. “Is it going to have any effect in this situation?”

“Oh, come now. Just leave it to me.”

“You sure are confident,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Despite failing twice.”

“I couldn’t help those,” Ms. Futarishizuka replied. “They were going so well until others got in the way. Both of those plans *should* have worked, but then nosy people started showing up out of thin air...”

She’d shared her plans with us beforehand. Miss Hoshizaki and I would be acting separately here. She’d be going with my neighbor, Abaddon, and Lady Elsa, while Ms. Futarishizuka and I lured Type Twelve away.

“Can I count on you, my esteemed senior?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’m not really into this...”

“It’s for world peace, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” She nodded reluctantly, then moved toward my neighbor and Abaddon.

Their cooperation would be crucial for this plan. In particular, we needed the latter’s demonic powers. In the past, he’d made my neighbor float and healed her wounds. Ms. Futarishizuka and I had gone to the two of them and begged, and they’d agreed without a second thought.

After seeing Miss Hoshizaki off, Futarishizuka and I headed over to Type Twelve. She was up ahead, trying to find a good place from which to watch the parade. Ms. Futarishizuka called out to get her attention.

“How far are you going to walk? All the good spots are taken.”

“I saw reports on the internet indicating that finding a good place to view the parade is of utmost importance. In order to fully enjoy this event, we must never compromise. This is a battle between our family and the families of others.”

“Can’t you see, girl? Look how crowded it is.”

“One option is to have the father or mother let me sit on their shoulders. That would be extremely familial.”

“Right. And how much do you weigh?”

“At the present moment, my total weight is two hundred kilograms.”

“You’ll crush them!”

As Ms. Futarishizuka spoke, my neighbor, Abaddon, and Lady Elsa gradually slowed down their pace. We were a ways ahead of them, and the distance between us was steadily widening. We’d split into two groups amid the crowd

—a front group and a rear group.

Eventually, once we were decently far apart, something changed in the rear. The family members walking down the street behind us suddenly vanished without a sound.

According to my neighbor, this was one of Abaddon's powers. She'd mentioned him using it outside of isolated spaces in the past. Plus, we'd already confirmed that Type Twelve was unaware of it.

Pretending not to notice the change, the three of us continued down the street. A few minutes later, Type Twelve turned around.

"Grandmother," she said, "I have been unable to optically confirm the mother, elder sister, and elder brother for some time now."

"Oh?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "They were just behind us. Where did they go?"

"It's pretty packed around here. They must have gotten lost in the crowd," I added.

We'd prepared our excuses in advance. After searching around for a bit, we were unable to find the others. In the meantime, the parade continued to approach.

The leading float appeared at the starting point, and with great fanfare, it began its advance down the main road. The area was growing darker as the sun set, and many-colored lights began to glow. The guests all raised their voices in admiration.

"Father, Grandmother, what is going on?" asked Type Twelve. "The parade has started already."

"Well, there's nothing for it now," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "All we can do is watch from here."

"If we keep moving around, it'll bother the other guests," I added.

"....."

As she watched the parade, Type Twelve's face was like an impassive mask. But I could sense a tinge of disappointment radiating from her. We were

surrounded by other guests, and with her small stature, she couldn't see much of the floats.

She stood on her tiptoes, poked her head up as far as it would go, and tried to see the road in the gaps between people.

Being right next to her as she did all that made me feel really, really guilty. I found myself thinking, *why not give her a ride on our shoulders?* But this was all for the sake of peace on Earth, so I said nothing and let the time go by. Several floats passed in front of us.

When the parade had reached the halfway mark, Type Twelve said quietly, "I have optically located the rest of the family."

Her eyes left the parade and moved to the other onlookers. Ms. Futarishizuka and I followed her gaze.

When we did, we saw the other half of our group. They had taken a separate route, led by Miss Hoshizaki, and were several meters away. I noticed them immediately despite the distance because of Lady Elsa's striking blond hair.

Evidently, they'd found themselves a spot right in front. They were watching the parade, full of joy, with smiles on their faces, ignoring the rest of us. Anyone could see they were having a lot of fun.

"....."

Type Twelve gazed at them in silence. Her attention was now fully on Miss Hoshizaki and the others instead of the parade.

"Well, *they* seem to be having a good time," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"They did say it was their first trip to an amusement park, didn't they?" I replied.

It wasn't clear what sort of thoughts were going through Type Twelve's mind, but I figured she was feeling very lonely right about now. I guessed as much from the way she was staying perfectly still.

In fact, the others weren't that far from us. But due to the crowd, they seemed worlds away.

This was all part of Ms. Futarishizuka's plan. She'd asked Abaddon to have the group reappear a little while after the parade began. We'd also discussed how far away they should be.

To drive home the point, Ms. Futarishizuka turned to Type Twelve and said, "Do you understand now, dear?"

This was the gist of her plan.

"This family isn't connected by blood. Its connections are weak and brittle. A real family would have panicked if they'd lost their daughter and would run around trying to find her. They'd never be able to relax and enjoy the parade."

"...Futarishizuka, I must admit that what you say is correct."

We'd successfully created a gloomy atmosphere within the family to contrast with the brilliant amusement-park parade. All of this was necessary in order to save humanity.

"You can't be a family just because you want to," continued Ms. Futarishizuka. "Family is about the bonds you were born with. Mechanical life-forms may not have families, but this knowledge is carved right into the genes of us humans."

"....."

There was no response from Type Twelve. She only stared, fixated, at Miss Hoshizaki and the others. Her expression was flat, unemotional, just as it always was—little different from how she'd looked before, when she'd been so excited about the parade. But now she stood still and silent, as if in a daze. It seemed to me she was feeling no small amount of shock.

Precisely because her face was so inexpressive, however, everything came out in her tiniest gestures. We could see right through her.

Satisfied with the alien's reaction, Ms. Futarishizuka gently remonstrated her.

"Don't you think this is enough?"

She'd promised to wrap things up once the parade arrived, and she appeared to be doing just that, intending to secure a significant promise from Type

Twelve right here and now. Mechanical life-forms couldn't lie. Whatever she said, it seemed reasonable to believe she would follow through.

"We have our rules and mechanical life-forms have theirs."

"....."

Meanwhile, the parade continued to move along from right to left.

Before we knew it, the final float was shrinking into the distance.

The members of Miss Hoshizaki's group were looking at one another, squealing and making merry. This, too, was part of the plan. Ms. Futarishizuka had instructed them all on how to behave.

My neighbor, Elsa, and Abaddon hadn't been filled in on the details, though. We'd purposely kept the truth from the demon, asking only for his cooperation—saying basically that we had something complicated to talk about with Type Twelve.

Had the alien seen them from up close, it was possible Miss Hoshizaki, who knew the situation, would have given everything away. But at this distance and with the crowd between us, it appeared as though they were enjoying this moment to the fullest.

Naturally, there was no way for Type Twelve to know what was really going on. She simply stood there in silence, watching the others have fun.

Eventually, all of the floats disappeared past the parade's endpoint. The lively music faded away, and the endlessly glittering lights blinked out. A broadcast over the park's PA system announced that the parade was over, and the guests around us all began to leave.

"Grandmother, the parade has ended."

"Stuff like this is for kids anyway. I'm sure it wasn't very interesting for someone of such advanced intelligence."

"One can still find value in things one doesn't enjoy."

"Human children love watching parades. Even when they become adults, they remember them fondly. The other children enjoyed them, too, didn't they? But

you couldn't. Do you truly think you're fit to be part of their family?"

“.....”

They say the third time's the charm. On her last attempt, Ms. Futarishizuka had won a total victory.

Usually, Type Twelve would have fired back with banter of her own. But this time, nothing came. The youngest daughter faced the grandmother and opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again as though the words had caught in her throat.

I knew this was all for humanity's sake—but it was still painful to watch. I felt even more guilty for having made Ms. Futarishizuka into the villain.

A little while later, when there were less people around, Miss Hoshizaki's group pretended to notice us and walked over. Our eyes had never met during the parade, but they'd probably known where we were. Even the timing of their return had been decided in advance.



Miss Hoshizaki spoke up immediately. “I’d heard about stuff like this before, but that parade sure was crazy!”

“We ended up separated from you, but I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” I replied.

Miss Hoshizaki kept glancing over at Type Twelve. She really was a bad liar. She’d been opposed to the plan at first, too, insisting it went too far.

“It was dark, and yet most of the costumed staff members were pretty high up on the floats,” noted my neighbor. “Is that really okay? A few of them could have easily fallen with one wrong step.”

“Why do you always have to be like that? There are better things to say in this situation.”

“They’re all wearing safety harnesses, dear,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “It’s just hard to tell because it’s dark.”

“Still, it’s amazing that no accidents happen when they have this parade every day,” replied my neighbor, sounding impressed.

I’d been thinking the same thing; a few actors had been making do with less than half a tatami mat’s worth of space.

“Sasaki, this world is just wonderful!” exclaimed Lady Elsa. “I can’t believe you get to see such incredible shows here!”

“I hope you’ll treasure the memory when you’re back in your home country,” I replied.

“R-right! I’ll never forget it, even after I go back to my country!”

Lady Elsa always seemed like she was about to accidentally reveal the otherworld’s existence, and with everyone’s translation devices, helping her veer away from such topics was of vital importance. Still, if she’d enjoyed the day that much, I was glad we’d decided to bring her along.

After everyone was done excitedly giving their impressions of the parade, Miss Hoshizaki asked a question. “What should we do now? The park will stay open for a while longer.”

“I believe we have enough time to enjoy a few more attractions,” I said.

“In that case, I’ve got a suggestion. Why don’t we go see the ones we were talking about before lunch? We ended up eating at the restaurant instead, but we’re pretty close to them now. We should be able to make it there.”

“Understood. The youngest daughter will adopt Mother’s proposal,” replied Type Twelve. She seemed much the same as before. Still, I couldn’t help but feel her gaze was just a tiny bit downcast.

After that, we went along with Miss Hoshizaki’s plan and enjoyed a few of the attractions we’d put off. Before dinner, we headed back to Karuizawa. We skipped our meal in the UFO since it was so late; Miss Hoshizaki’s sister was waiting for her at home, and my neighbor had school tomorrow, so we prioritized their schedules.

While I assumed Type Twelve would object, she readily agreed—doubtless a result of Ms. Futarishizuka’s plan. We hadn’t broken any family rules, since we’d all eaten lunch together.

And so, after arriving back at Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa, we all went our separate ways.

<Bonds, Part One>

The day we returned from the amusement park, Peeps and I held off on our usual trip to the otherworld. We'd decided to gather more data in an effort to figure out what was happening to the time flow difference between the two worlds. For now, our plan was to travel to the otherworld only once every two or three days. That meant Lady Elsa's trips home would be less frequent, as well.

For this reason, we stayed the night at Ms. Futarishizuka's villa.

Normally, we would have gone back to our temporary residence at the hotel. But I'd grown too used to our posh lodgings in the otherworld, and now staying in a cheap hotel seemed like a pain to me. That cramped bathroom was positively *criminal*.

So when Ms. Futarishizuka asked us if we were staying over, I found it extremely difficult to resist. We decided to take her up on the offer, along with Lady Elsa. Getting to stretch my legs in a nice, big bath was the best. It was quite late, so I went to sleep immediately after that. After taking Miss Hoshizaki back home, Type Twelve returned to her UFO, as well.

The next morning, we all gathered in the villa's living space just like we had the day before.

"Type Twelve is taking a while," I remarked.

"Yesterday must have hit her hard," said the villa's owner.

"I suppose that's true."

It was time to start our bureau work—in other words, our pretend family activities. Miss Hoshizaki was already present; she'd sent us a message earlier, and Peeps had gone over to pick her up. Until today, Type Twelve had always wanted to be the one to do it.

“You didn’t do anything weird to her, right?” she asked.

“We did nothing to deviate from Ms. Futarishizuka’s plan,” I assured her.

“Oh?” said the villa’s owner. “Tickling the old maternal instincts, is she? Are you feeling protective?”

“N-no!”

We’d already finished breakfast, and we were now relaxing on the couches. Miss Hoshizaki hadn’t put on makeup today and was once again in her school uniform. She said she’d told her sister she was going to school. Our senior had been spending work hours with us for several days in a row. I was a little concerned about her academic career, with how many days of class she was missing.

“Perhaps we’ll get lucky,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “and she’ll simply go back to her home planet right away.”

“I hope so, yes. Once all parties have come to an agreement, of course,” I replied.

“.....”

Miss Hoshizaki watched us, her expression conflicted. She knew logically that there was no other way to handle Type Twelve, but she was still averse to the idea. Naturally, her focus began to wander.

“What do you think about her, Elsa?” she asked.

“Am I free to give my personal opinion?” returned Lady Elsa.

“Sure. I’d like to hear it. After all, you were with us at the amusement park yesterday.”

“In that case, I feel that Sasaki and Futarishizuka’s decision is far too kindhearted.”

“Uh. Really?”

“I heard she came to this nation of her own accord to attack it, and that she has caused significant unrest. If she were in my homeland, she would likely be executed along with her entire family.”

“Wow. Execution? That’s a word you hear a lot in historical dramas, but I didn’t know people still did it...”

“In my homeland, death by sawing and burning at the stake are quite common, apparently.”

“Wait, um, you mean...”

“It would depend on the balance of power between you, of course, so I can’t make any sweeping generalizations.”

“.....”

Miss Hoshizaki looked astonished; she probably hadn’t expected anything so brutal. She’d probably hoped the girl would have a little sympathy for Type Twelve. If so, she’d been utterly betrayed.

Our mismatched viewpoints really made the group feel like the pretend family it was. Everyone had a totally different level of resolve.

A short time later, we heard a light rapping on the glass sliding door leading out into the yard. At some point, Type Twelve had arrived. The villa’s owner had already disengaged the lock, and the alien threw open the door and addressed us.

“It is time, and so I have come to pick you up. We will now leave for the dwelling.”

There was no change in the way she spoke and acted. She was wearing one of the outfits we’d bought at the department store, too, just as she had the day before.

Today, however, she’d added an unfamiliar accessory—a cute-looking water bottle hanging from a shoulder strap. The strap passing through it was relatively long, going from her shoulder to the front of her body. Given her short stature, she reminded me of a little kid walking to elementary school in the summertime.

“What’s that hanging from your shoulder?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“As you can see, it is a water bottle.”

I'd considered the possibility it was some sort of alien weapon in the shape of a water bottle. But apparently, it was exactly what it looked like.

"Did you have plans to go out somewhere today?" asked the girl in the kimono.

"No outings are currently planned, save for my visit here."

"We won't be able to go to an amusement park if that's what you're after. Your father's wallet is now empty and gathering dust. It looks like you'll be joining the thirty-thousand-yen allowance club. Time to start saving."

"Grandmother, I have no such intention."

"Oh yes? Well, okay."

"Correct. I have not considered it whatsoever, in any capacity. This water bottle is for another purpose."

"I understood you the first time, dear. No need to repeat yourself."

"....."

I couldn't help but feel like Type Twelve was trying to get us to ask more about the water bottle. Beneath her cool attitude, she could be quite a handful. But the grandmother, who liked to give her grandchild a hard time, asked no further questions.

A water bottle, huh? I thought. Miss Hoshizaki's psychic power involves water. Is this about her?

"You know," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "I wonder why thirty thousand yen is the norm for allowances."

"I think I remember a married coworker at my old job saying five to ten percent of your income is standard," I replied. "If you include the cost of lunch and things like that, I think thirty thousand is a fairly realistic estimate."

"What about you?" she said, turning to Miss Hoshizaki.

"We don't really do allowances at my house..."

Ms. Futarishizuka took the initiative and changed the topic. We continued exchanging casual conversation as we left the villa. At the front door, we changed into our outdoor shoes and boarded the terminal parked in the yard.

In just a few minutes, we had arrived at the house that served as the set for our pretend family, and promptly headed inside.

The striking house, with its tiled, hip-and-gable roof was exactly the same as it had been when we visited the day before. The incredibly realistic blue sky was still being projected onto the space's ceiling, and the breeze continued to brush our cheeks. Several sparrows were perched on the roof, tweeting away. I wondered where the crow we'd seen at sunset the other day had gone.

We entered through the sliding front door and headed for the living room. On the way there, we discussed the day's plans.

"I have an idea of what we can do today," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I will hear Grandmother's viewpoint."

"The appliances I ordered the day before last have arrived. Shall we go ahead and get them installed?"

"Do you mean the washing machine we were talking about the other day at the department store?" I asked.

"We were lucky," she explained. "They had some in stock. And we can't exactly let the vendors in here, can we?"

"Understood," said Type Twelve. "I shall adopt Grandmother's viewpoint."

And so, that morning we brought in all the furniture and appliances Ms. Futarishizuka had procured. Steadily, we finished setting up everything we had put off. We started with the washing machine, then set up the bedding and the microwave. We also installed a warm-water bidet in the bathroom.

Since none of the suppliers could come to the house, we did all the setup ourselves. I tried my hand at installing the bidet, only to fail spectacularly. When I wound up flooding the toilet, Miss Hoshizaki's psychic power and Ms. Futarishizuka's DIY skills bailed me out.

Between our shopping trip the other day and our current efforts, we finally

had everything we needed to live in the house. A little while after lunch, we met up with my neighbor and Abaddon, who were back from school.

When all the work was finally finished, it was time for a snack. We all gathered around the wooden table in the living room and chatted. On the table were bowls of *anmitsu*—syrup over agar jelly with fruit, mochi, and ice cream—that we’d procured from the department store, along with matching cups filled with steaming hot tea. For a time, we enjoyed ourselves.

Once the conversation died down, my neighbor straightened up and broached another topic.

“Umm, excuse me. There was something Abaddon and I wanted to talk to you all about.”

“What is it, dearie?”

Ms. Futarishizuka reacted right away. Abaddon’s inclusion had probably gotten her attention. Like her, I assumed the matter had to involve the death game.

“It’s just, well, I’m not sure how to say this...”

Despite being the one who brought it up, my neighbor seemed hesitant. Her gaze flitted over to Miss Hoshizaki and Lady Elsa.

“Should Elsa and I leave for this?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “We’ve explained everything to you already. In fact, I think it would be more dangerous for us to keep you out of the loop. You could get caught up in something unexpectedly.”

“I share her opinion,” I said.

“Then I’ll go ahead,” said my neighbor, taking a phone out of her uniform skirt; I’d heard Ms. Futarishizuka had lent her one.

After tapping the screen a few times, she placed it face up on the wooden table so everyone could see. Naturally, our attention came to focus on the website she’d just opened.

Immediately, I noticed the header text, which said that a death game had

begun. The whole thing was set up like a teaser site for an event. With its eerie design elements, it looked just like a promotional website for a horror movie.

My neighbor scrolled down to reach a sequence of several grotesque images. All of them showed people who had met violent ends. None of them were censored, either; I was overcome with the urge to look away.

The distinctive remains were, as the website's text pointed out, likely participants of the death game who had lost. When a participant died in an isolated space, they died in the real world, too, and their corpse would reflect the actual manner of death.

"Oh, this is that site everyone was talking about a little while ago," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"The one that got criticized for all the horrible pictures, right?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

The two of them seemed to already know about it. I'd never seen it before; I was too wrapped up in my otherworld life, and woefully ignorant of goings-on in modern Japan. I knew there were blogs like this floating around on the internet that used shocking images to attract views, but this one was particularly bad. *No wonder it's getting lambasted.*

"You two have already heard about it?" my neighbor asked.

"Yes, but I don't know much more than that," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"You're not involved with this thing, are you?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"I remember one of the bodies in these photographs," my neighbor explained. "I was there at the time."

To be honest, the pictures were difficult for me to look at. I did not like gore. Everyone else seemed fine with it, though, and I couldn't be the only one looking away, so I tried my best. Ms. Futarishizuka was one thing, but I was shocked that my neighbor, Miss Hoshizaki, and even Lady Elsa were able to remain calm.

Are all kids like that these days? I wondered. Then something dawned on me. *Come to think of it, all of them have had it pretty rough, huh? I'm probably the*

one who's led the safest, most peaceful life out of all of them. Looking at things in that light, I started to feel a little guilty. This was becoming a common occurrence for me.

“I was curious, so I looked up the domain's registrant,” explained Ms. Futarishizuka. “I didn't find anything, though. The site itself is protected by bulletproof hosting from overseas, so I couldn't get anywhere.”

“Elder Sister, if you ask the youngest daughter to do so, I will immediately acquire the data from the server.”

“Could you? I'd appreciate it.”

“Very well.” Type Twelve nodded, then started hacking into the site.

She didn't appear to be doing anything, of course. While her point of contact sat in the living room with us, something else was doing all the work—perhaps one of her terminals responsible for redirecting the internet connection, or some machine in charge of computations. We sat in silence, waiting for her report.

In a matter of minutes, she gave us the information. “I've analyzed the target. I could not find any data pointing to a specific organization or individual within the information on the server, nor in the payment information linked to the website. From the data's structure, I have concluded that the deployment server is frequently changed.”

“I suppose they'd have to go at least that far,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Do you want to bring the website down? Is that it?” asked Miss Hoshizaki, looking to Abaddon and my neighbor for confirmation.

As bureau employees tasked with covering up supernatural phenomena, it seemed unwise to simply leave a site like this up. With Type Twelve's help, we could wipe out the entire data center hosting it.

“About the site,” my neighbor said, “it updated just the other day...”

She poked the screen, and the website jumped to another page. We'd moved from a news feed to some kind of event announcement.

The text on the page was advertising a “new daily quest.”

“Aim for the bonus! Anyone who kills a Disciple will receive a prize of ten million yen. All Disciples are applicable, regardless of their allegiance. Plus, players who entertain with their eccentric style are eligible for additional rewards!”

It read like an ad for a limited-time event in some mobile game. Despite its peppy tone, the announcement was literally promoting murder. A shiver ran down my spine.

The page also contained a map. In the center was a scarlet pin, pointing to a lone island in the middle of the sea. You could just barely make out the southern half of the Izu Peninsula near the top. That meant we were looking at a volcanic island within the Izu chain and one of Japan’s designated remarkable geological sites—Miyakejima.

The mostly circular island was about eight kilometers across, centered on an active volcano called Mount Oyama. Even now, and despite the volcano, it boasted a population of two or three thousand people. I remembered it featuring on the news every so often in the past due to eruptions.

A date and time were visible right below the map—indicating the game would start precisely at eight PM today.

“I don’t recall seeing this page when I checked yesterday,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“It was just updated this afternoon,” my neighbor explained.

“Seems a bit far for a sudden gathering, don’t you think?”

I used my phone to check transportation to the island. It was over six hours by ferry from Tokyo’s Takeshiba Pier, or fifty minutes using a small passenger aircraft from Chofu. The former made one trip per day, while the latter made three.

Naturally, we wouldn’t make it if we started now. Checking the map again, I saw that the journey was about two hundred kilometers over water. Even if you measured straight from the tip of the Izu Peninsula, the closest land to the island, it was still about eighty kilometers.

The place was basically out in the open ocean. Obviously, we couldn’t just

swim there. If we wanted safe passage, we'd need a pretty sturdy ship. Trying to make the journey in a swan boat would be suicidal.

As I mulled this over, Abaddon quickly picked up the thread.

"That's a pretty reasonable distance if an angel or demon is carrying you."

"Maybe that's why the site updated so close to the start of the event," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

"And if there's already a Disciple there, the isolated space will trigger right away."

The information presented on the site required a knowledge of the proxy war and how it worked. Anyone unrelated to the death game would have no idea what it meant. The ridiculous ten-million-yen prizes would have made the whole thing seem like a joke. *I'm curious what the site's creator's real intentions are.*

"As for me, I'd like to take advantage of whatever opportunity I can."

"That's Abaddon's view, but I'm not sure what to do," said my neighbor.

"If you two want to take part, I could help you out," offered Ms. Futarishizuka, fixing them with a loaded look. She was probably eager for more opportunities to earn rewards.

But this was, without a doubt, a trap. Why thrust ourselves into such a situation?

"Don't you think this sounds a little *too* dangerous?" I asked. "We should at least find out what side the site's admin is on first, shouldn't we? Abaddon could end up having to fight a whole host of angels."

"If we waste time like that, the event will be over," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"If the idea troubles you, mister, then I'd rather not do it at all," said my neighbor.

"Wait, hold on. I think this is a good chance to attack," objected Abaddon.

"Who was it who saved us when you got in over your head?"

"When you put it like that, I'm not sure how to respond..."

“Hey, Sasaki?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “I’m not quite following all of this.”

“There’s going to be a large event this evening centered around the death game we explained before. If we play our cards right, we could earn some major benefits. But the likelihood that we will end up putting our lives on the line is high.”

“I mean, did you forget what we do for a living? Seems a little late to be worrying about that,” she pointed out.

“I suppose so, but...”

When it came to my neighbor, I always found myself getting overprotective. In my mind, she was still a little kid wearing her elementary school backpack.

Wait, no. Hold on.

She *was* still a child. She was only thirteen. Weren’t the ones trying to send her into a battle to the death like it was nothing the *real* problem here? It was scary how fast my values were turning on their head.

“Sasaki,” said Lady Elsa, “if there’s anything I can do to help, you only need to ask.”

“I appreciate it,” I replied.

Seated around the table, the entire family gave their opinions in quick succession. It was all very easy to understand—their viewpoints represented their personalities perfectly. And nobody said anything that didn’t make some amount of sense.

I could understand Abaddon and Ms. Futarishizuka’s viewpoint as well. With how the death game worked, taking out enemies early would directly secure one’s future safety. And because wins allowed a Disciple to level up, going on the offensive from the start would prove extremely important later. It felt sort of like a MOBA game to me.

After a short but lively debate, the one family member who, up until now, had been silently listening, straightened up and made herself heard.

“I understand everyone’s viewpoints.”

It was Type Twelve. She looked at everyone in turn as she continued.

“I would like you all to recall the family rules. For our household, the family rules are absolute.”

I thought of the eight rules we’d drawn up a few days ago. Everyone else was probably doing the same. Miss Hoshizaki put a hand to her chin and squinted at the ceiling. Perhaps she’d forgotten a few.

“Rule six states that when a family member is in trouble, the whole family must work together to help.”

“Does this really count as being in trouble?” wondered my neighbor aloud.

“You are troubled, so you are in trouble.”

“I suppose that’s true...”

“If Elder Sister and Elder Brother are troubled, then it is the family’s duty to help them.”

“You know, every once in a while, you say something good,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Father, I would like to confirm. Is the source of your concern the safety of the elder sister and the elder brother?”

“It is,” I replied.

As a bureau member, I was also charged with covering up supernatural phenomena. In that sense, however this conversation played out, I was considering checking on things for myself, if and when I could secure Peeps’s help.

The place in question was an isolated island out in the middle of the ocean. Out there, I could afford to let loose a little without causing too much of an issue. That was probably why the event’s sponsor had chosen Miyakejima in the first place.

“Then we only need to prepare sufficient combat power,” stated Type

Twelve. “The youngest daughter would like to ask the eldest brother this: If everyone here worked together and helped you and the elder daughter, would it be enough to resolve the issue we face?”

“If everyone helped out, we could handle an entire swarm of angels!”

Abaddon flicked his gaze to the distinguished sparrow on the table. Noticing this, Peeps spread his wings and fluttered into the air. He then landed on my shoulder and gave a measured response.

“I am part of this family as well. I agreed to the rules, and should my assistance be required, I promise that I will do everything in my power to help. I do not know how strong these angels and demons are, but should worse come to worst, I shall protect your retreat to the end.”

“Sorry for dragging you into our problems, Peeps,” I said.

“It is nothing for you to worry about,” he assured me. *“For this is what family means, is it not?”*

No way, I thought. *Peeps is treating me like family.* I felt happier than I could have imagined. It was just an offhanded comment, a natural extension of our pretend family, but it still made my heart skip a beat. And he was even concerned for my neighbor, too. I couldn’t thank him enough.

I wondered what his true family was like, and if they were still alive in the otherworld.

“Then it is decided,” said Type Twelve. “The family will rally as one and resolve the issue facing Kurosu.”

“You’re normally so shy,” pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka. “What changed?”

“I am only following the family’s rules. There have been almost no changes.”

“But if you do this, it’ll be like when we were searching for our esteemed senior in the mountains of Chichibu. Your—what did you call it—your point of contact will have to be in standalone mode for a long time. Are you sure you won’t run away at the first sign of danger?”

“There...there should be almost no issues. It is for that purpose that I possess standalone capabilities in the first place.”

“Oh? Look at you, acting all tough.”

I thought about the way she kept using the words “almost no” to skirt the truth. *I guess mechanical life-forms have certain strategies to avoid lying.* I bet she was feeling uneasy at this very moment. I didn’t miss how she grimaced for a second. Meanwhile, Ms. Futarishizuka’s grin grew wider and wider.

I began to wonder—*would Type Twelve have suggested this before what happened yesterday, even if it was for my neighbor’s sake?*

“Then we’re decided?” asked Abaddon, summing up our opinions. “We’ll take part in the event tonight?”

A moment later, my neighbor bowed to me and apologized. “I’m sorry for causing trouble for you, mister.”

“Don’t be,” I replied. “We’d have to fight them sooner or later. I know we have the advantage, and that we should take the chance to collect a win. It’s just that I can’t make decisions as easily as Ms. Futarishizuka.”

“You can’t, eh?” said the girl in the kimono. “I bet you were thinking of going behind our backs, sneaking onto Miyakejima with that pet sparrow of yours, and hogging all the rewards for yourself. After all, if everyone goes, you’ll get less.”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong.”

I would be lying if I said I hadn’t considered it—the reason being Prince Lewis.

In order to revert his flesh-lump form back to normal, we’d need to gain a few wins in the death game ourselves, just like Ms. Futarishizuka had implied. This event was the perfect opportunity. *I bet Peeps was thinking the same thing.* Besides, I couldn’t leave things be—not when my neighbor might suffer for it.

If an isolated space appeared, then no matter how long the game took, the flow of real time would snap back to zero once the space collapsed. And with Peeps’s help, we’d be able to reach Miyakejima in the time it would take me to get to the bathroom.

“The scheduled time approaches,” said Type Twelve. “We should all prepare to set out.”

“Then let’s go back down to Earth for now,” suggested Miss Hoshizaki.

“Ms. Futarishizuka’s mansion does seem a better meeting place than this,” I agreed.

“Oh, so my home is your hangout spot now?” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Understood,” said Type Twelve. “We will move to the terminal in order to adopt Mother and Father’s viewpoint.”

At the alien’s direction, we all nodded and began our preparations for the death game.



A little later, we left Karuizawa to pursue the truth behind the website’s event announcement. Just as when we went to the amusement park, the whole family was in attendance: my neighbor and Abaddon, who were the main actors when it came to the death game; Type Twelve, who had taken charge at the meeting; Miss Hoshizaki; Ms. Futarishizuka; myself and Peeps; and even Lady Elsa.

I had to admit I had reservations about how “participating in a death game with the whole family” sounded when put into so many words, but that was neither here nor there.

Type Twelve allowed us to use her terminal to reach the destination. We all stood inside the invisible saucer, surrounded by displays showing a view of the outside. As usual, the terminal departed Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa and rapidly ascended, then moved parallel to the surface at an extremely high altitude. We could see the landscape rapidly descend below us, followed by views much higher than those of a typical airplane.

“What a beautiful sight,” said Lady Elsa. “If we had time, I’d like to stay aboard for much longer.”

“Elsa, weren’t you impressed yesterday when we were traveling to the theme

park, too?” asked Miss Hoshizaki. “Have you never been on an airplane?”

“Huh? Umm, I...”

Everyone was still wearing Type Twelve’s translators in their ears and on their collars. This allowed us to share information with Lady Elsa easily, and ensured we wouldn’t have any problems communicating with Disciples who spoke other languages once we arrived.

“Perhaps it’s because we’re so much higher up than a normal airplane,” I suggested.

“Oh, um, yes. That’s it.”

“Being so used to air travel must make the difference quite conspicuous,” added Ms. Futarishizuka. “And it’s a lot quieter in here than in some jet. It’s the perfect place to do some deep thinking.”

“Right,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “I guess Sasaki did mention she was some kind of royalty.”

Lady Elsa was always on the verge of spilling the otherworld beans, which made it my job to back her up. Ms. Futarishizuka was casually helping out, too, and while I knew it was only because of her many ulterior motives, I was still grateful.

“Speaking of airplanes,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “would you mind if I asked a question, young demon?”

“What’s up?”

“What happens to demons, angels, and Disciples who get caught in an isolated space while up in the air like this—say in an airplane or a helicopter? Last time, the people in the car I was driving suddenly vanished from the back seat.”

I’d been curious about that, too. When you were in a car or train, you wound up standing on the ground. It was like the game assigned you a fixed starting point. We’d figured that out from our fight with the Kraken—Himegami and Eriel had been deposited onto the road with zero momentum after being in transit on a highway.

But in that case, anyone airborne would start right where they were—up in the sky.

“Unfortunately, I guess you’d end up upside-down, plummeting toward the ground.”

Abaddon gave us the answer I’d been expecting. Considering the distance between Disciples necessary to create an isolated space, it didn’t seem very likely. The aircraft would have to be very close to each other, after all. Of course, I assumed that chance would go way up if you butted heads at the airport or something.

“Sounds brutal,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Well, the last time we revised the proxy war’s systems was right after humanity started flying. Considering how fast technology is advancing now, we’re all wondering if we should adjust the rules again.”

“You’ve never mentioned that to me, Abaddon,” said my neighbor.

“Changing the rules in the middle of the game is strictly forbidden, so it’s nothing Disciples need to worry about. Even if we did decide to change them, the new ones wouldn’t go into effect until the next war.”

“Strictly forbidden? I don’t like the sound of that.”

“This may sound weird coming from a demon, but humans are tricky, crafty characters. Occasionally one will show up, exploit a loophole in the rules, and go undefeated. So it’s up to the angels and demons to close the loopholes, right?”

I found myself a little curious how many revisions the rules had gone through.

Ms. Futarishizuka spoke up right away—maybe she was thinking the same thing. “In that case, I’d like to announce my availability as an advisor for when you *do* revise the rules.”

“You’re going to get in trouble if you keep poking your nose into strange places,” I commented.

“But they’ll need someone on humanity’s side who knows a lot about humans, right? Come on.”

“I don’t really think there’s room for a human to interfere.”

“Well, that is unfortunate.” She sounded sincerely disappointed.

For someone as long-lived as her, it was certainly possible to participate in the next generation’s death game. In fact, I could even imagine her angling to represent humanity as one of the game’s supervisors.

Abaddon, however, brought the topic back around. *“Anyway, that’s why most Disciples use their rewards on flight near the beginning.”*

“Then there’s something of a standard strategy for the game,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Though I think it’s a lot more common for Disciples to pop out of an isolated space only to be run over and killed by a moving object speeding around the real world. Whether by coincidence or on purpose.”

“I experienced something similar the other day,” remarked my neighbor. “It was very scary.”

“Leaving an isolated space is one of the things you have to be extremely cautious about in the proxy war.”

“I see...,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Umm, so were you okay?” I asked, a little taken aback to learn that my neighbor had been messing around in the death game on her own.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but hearing about it like this made me feel guilty for enjoying a life of relative peace and luxury. *Is this what it feels like to send your adult children out into the world?*

“I’m sorry, mister. I’m babbling now. Please forget what I said.”

“She got sniped right after leaving an isolated space,” explained Abaddon.

“What...?”

“Abaddon, you don’t have to tell him everything.”

“That sounds like quite the predicament,” I replied. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m totally fine. The bullet only grazed me, and Abaddon healed my wound, too. You can’t even see it anymore. But thank you—I’m very happy to

know you're worrying about me."

"I mean, I think *anyone* would be worried in this case..."

"Besides, I remember *her* pointing a gun at me the moment we met," she went on in an attempt to change the subject, glancing at Miss Hoshizaki as she spoke.

I suppose she's right about that. We had been in that posh hotel suite Ms. Futarishizuka had secured. I remembered how the window glass was shattered, letting in a nice, healthy breeze. My neighbor, Miss Hoshizaki, Lady Elsa, and Magical Pink were at a standoff, their weapons at the ready. *Actually, I guess my neighbor was the only one unarmed.*

"Urk... Look, I'm sorry about all that, okay?" said Miss Hoshizaki. "I really am." Seeming to remember the events herself, she hastily tried to apologize.

Beside them, Ms. Futarishizuka continued questioning Abaddon. "Were there any rule revisions between the previous game and this one?"

"We reached the decision to make positive changes to help the game progress," he replied.

"Then you had to speed things up a little, hmm?"

"While I feel bad for the Disciples, I can't exactly deny that."

Futarishizuka had earned us yet another nugget of information about the death game.

At this point, however, Type Twelve made an announcement.

"This terminal has arrived over the destination. We are currently thirteen thousand meters above the surface."

We'd gone from Karuizawa to Tokyo Bay and then all the way to Miyakejima in a matter of minutes. Everyone turned their attention to the display at our feet, which showed the ground below us.

Normally, the dark of night would have prevented visual confirmation. However, the image had been put through what looked like a night-vision filter—no doubt another product of the mechanical life-forms' superior technology.

Through the scattered clouds hanging in the sky, we could make out several islands in the open sea below.

One of them had a roundish shape, just like the one we'd seen on the map earlier.

"I will yield to Elder Sister and Elder Brother on the timing of our landing," said the alien.

"We have a few more minutes before its scheduled to start," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

"So. What's our move?" Abaddon asked my neighbor.

Displaying a degree of levelheadedness far surpassing a girl in her first year of middle school, she replied, "I'm curious what kind of reach that website actually achieved. If several isolated spaces occur one after the other, those caught up in them right from the beginning may run out of steam partway through. I think a lot of Disciples will be aiming to arrive late and take advantage of that."

"I will use another terminal to verify the number of angels and demons on the island," said Type Twelve.

"They're hidden most of the time, so you might not be able to," pointed out Abaddon.

"Then in accordance with Elder Brother's suggestion, I will suspend verification."

The mechanical life-forms' technology seemed omnipotent, but right at the critical moment, it failed in the face of the angels' and demons' mysterious powers. The whole thing reminded me of trying to communicate across cultures. *I guess the same's true of the otherworld's magic and Earth's psychic powers.*

"Would we be able to bring this terminal into an isolated space?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I don't have any experience with something of this size..."

"We merely need to erect a defensive barrier around this round vehicle, yes?"

said Peeps.

“That’s right. Could you do it?”

“If that is all, then there will be no problem,” he replied immediately.

He was so reliable. He’d wrapped a barrier around the Kraken before, so I felt confident leaving the job to him. The light touch of his talons on my shoulder gave me an incredible sense of relief.

“If we can manage that, then we should be able to hop back on and run away if we need to,” pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka. “Should we just charge in right now? Even if we make a mess of this thing, I’m sure you’ll be able to whip a new one up lickety-split.”

“The grandmother’s viewpoint is correct. The cost of manufacturing a new terminal is low. In addition, I maintain extras in reserve.”

“It feels a little sloppy,” I said, “but it will be a nice option to have in case of an emergency.”

I wondered what would happen if we used Peeps’s teleportation spell inside the isolated space. I realized then that I’d never been involved in a death game battle with Peeps before, so we hadn’t ever tried. If we could use magic to escape an isolated space, it would be the perfect trump card for getting through the proxy war alive.

But that meant we also had to consider psychics who could do something similar. Third parties weren’t supposed to be part of the death game, but they were and that made it more complicated. It was like shogi pieces or Othello pieces had invaded a chessboard, putting our queen—who had been dominating the game—on the back foot.

These days, in fact, it was more like we had tiles from the Game of Life sprinkled over the chessboard. A car packed with children was next to the king, running over the knights and bishops.

“Then there’s no need to hesitate, right?” asked Abaddon.

“Okay,” said my neighbor. “Could you please descend toward the island?”

“Understood. Now lowering the terminal toward the destination in accordance with the elder sister’s request.”

“Peeps, would you put up the barrier?” I asked.

“It is already deployed,” he responded. I should have expected as much from the Starsage.

At Type Twelve’s announcement, the terminal began to move. Through the display at our feet, we watched as the island’s geography grew closer and closer. Unlike our ascent, we were moving fairly slowly. The right side of the display showed our current altitude.

Just as we passed the five-thousand-meter mark, it happened.

“All connections lost, excluding links to this terminal and the space within it. Now constructing an independent network while maintaining links to all remaining units. All sensors malfunctioning. Based on prior data, I have confirmed entry into the area you call an isolated space.”

“Looks like we got in as one big family,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, glancing around the terminal. Everyone was there.

“Does that make us the first ones to arrive?” wondered Miss Hoshizaki.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell,” replied Abaddon. *“When an isolated space appears, it covers a larger area than the distance between the Disciples required to produce it. We could have entered an already existing space.”*

“Right,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Otherwise, the whole game would consist of one-on-one fights.”

“Oh, I see,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “It just shows up when you get close enough to each other.”

“Shouldn’t that have been obvious ages ago, even to a modern high school girl?”

“I... Well, maybe I should have figured it out earlier, but... Ugh...”

Despite our senior's fancy new powers, Ms. Futarishizuka didn't hesitate to criticize her. I wondered what was driving her bullying.

"In real time, death games only take a moment," pointed out my neighbor. "The first round could have already ended. We might have gotten caught in the second or third."

"Yup, that's right!" agreed Abaddon, nodding enthusiastically.

Looking very pitiful, Miss Hoshizaki watched the two of them with frustration.

"Elder Brother, the youngest daughter would like to know specific values for the conditions to create an isolated space."

"Unfortunately, it all depends on stuff you can't put into numbers, like how strong the angels and demons in the area are. Quantitative measurement is basically impossible, since not only the Disciples' partners, but all the angels and demons nearby factor in."

"This whole thing is turning out to be very complicated," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"If stuff like this was too easy, humans would immediately start coming up with clever schemes to manipulate it."

That made me think something had happened in the past.

All the while, we continued descending toward the surface. The bare ground spread out below us on the display. The caldera was nearby, and almost no plants were growing in the vicinity, so we had a good view of the surroundings. We were in the center of the island, too, far from human settlements.

"Choosing a vantage point near the south of the island as our landing point. I would hear the elder sister's thoughts."

"I don't have any idea what this place is like, so could I leave the decision to you?"

"Understood. In accordance with Elder Sister's request, I will now have the terminal land at the chosen point."

Our craft touched down exactly where Type Twelve said it would. The perfect inertial dampeners completely nullified any bouncing around we might have otherwise experienced during the landing. If the display beneath us wasn't showing the ground, I would have thought we were still in Karuizawa.

There was a change in the terminal, and the door we'd used to board appeared once again, right where it had before. It opened with a hiss, leading outdoors.

"All righty, then," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Let's go show all those angels and their Disciples who's boss."

"Grandmother, why are you assuming leadership?"

"You really get hung up on the small things, you know that?"

"As the eldest daughter," said my neighbor, "I'd like it if the grandmother and the youngest daughter could try to get along."

"Understood. I will respect the elder sister's viewpoint as we proceed with the death game."

Though I didn't intend to expose anyone here to life-threatening danger, if I got the chance, I figured I'd contribute to this proxy war just enough to undo the curse on Prince Lewis.

I glanced at the sparrow on my shoulder and saw him nod. After I returned the gesture, we followed the rest of the group.



According to Type Twelve, our landing spot had a local name—Shichitou Lookout, the first part of which meant "seven islands."

She'd obtained map data for the local area off the internet in advance. When we asked her for more info on the lay of the land, she produced a midair display showing all of Miyakejima, much like what we'd seen while searching for Miss Hoshizaki in the Chichibu mountains

We located ourselves on the map to find our current position. The name

Shichitou Lookout was easy to find; in fact, the location was already pinned. Just as Type Twelve had told us in the terminal, it was on the south side of Miyakejima, about two kilometers from the shoreline. We could see Mount Oyama at the center of the island, about the same distance away. It was kind of like the close-up view of Mount Fuji from the Fuji Subaru Line Fifth Station at the base of the mountain.

Because of the repeated volcanic eruptions in the past, there was less vegetation the closer you got to Mount Oyama. The root cause was volcanic gas, and there was a time when everyone entering the island was given a mandatory gas mask.

Even now, nobody was allowed near the crater. While the terminal had landed outside the restricted area, most of the surrounding land was still barren, with only a few ankle-high plants scattered here and there. You'd have to be at a significant elevation to see anything like this on the mainland.

Casting my eyes in the other direction, I was greeted by a great expanse of ocean. The settlement along the shore looked a lot like any other port town, which only made it seem all the more mysterious.

Miss Hoshizaki was apparently thinking the same thing. "Ever since I buddied up with you, Sasaki" she muttered, "work has taken me to some really crazy places."

"Oh," I said. "I apologize for causing you so much trouble."

"No need. This is great! I can't wait for all the overtime pay."

"Ah. I see."

Come to think of it, how does our pay work while we're in an isolated space? The other day, our boss had put together a template for working in outer space. But since it wasn't clear whether Mr. Akutsu even knew about the angel-demon proxy war, all of that was still up in the air.

I bet it'll wind up as unpaid overtime, I thought, watching the sparkles in Miss Hoshizaki's eyes.

"Sasaki, what should we do about the flying thing?" asked Lady Elsa.

“I was curious about that myself,” I replied.

“I recommend keeping it concealed and stationing it underwater,” said Type Twelve. “From our earlier conversation, I have learned that angels, demons, and their Disciples fly around in the sky. This option should greatly decrease the probability of an attack when compared to stationing it on land or in the air.”

“Oh, that’s perfect. Thanks!” said Abaddon.

“Thank you,” said my neighbor. “Please go ahead.”

“Understood,” replied Type Twelve. “In accordance with Elder Sister and Elder Brother’s request, I will move the terminal to the seafloor on the southeast side of the island.”

The terminal was still optically camouflaged. With the exit door closed, you couldn’t physically see it, and considering the mechanical life-form’s superior technology, I assumed it was protected against non-visible light as well.

On top of that, Type Twelve—our point of contact—could communicate with it even inside this isolated space. She explained that if she called for it during an emergency, it would come right away. *That’s sure a handy feature.*

“It can move on its own?” said Lady Elsa. “It sounds very smart.”

“Elsa, that evaluation is excellent,” replied Type Twelve.

“Oh, um, is it?”

“If you’d like, you may repeat your praise.”

“Huh? Oh. Well... Yes, I think it’s very smart.”

“Mechanical life-forms are smart. Yes. Very smart...”

It seemed the terminal liked praise just as much as our point of contact did.

Type Twelve had been getting some harsh treatment from humanity recently, so maybe she was feeling emotional at the friendly compliment. Unlike Ms. Futarishizuka, whose words were always suspect, Lady Elsa was totally honest. It didn’t surprise me that even a mechanical life-form was moved by her praise.

Abaddon looked over our group as we stood next to the terminal staring with

wonder at the scenery, and said, *“If you want my earnest opinion as the eldest son, I think we should move somewhere else and quickly. Don’t you?”*

“I agree with Abaddon,” replied my neighbor. “The view here is too good.”

They were right. It would be very easy to spot us here—the perfect chance for a sniper. I had a barrier spell around the whole group, so I doubted anyone would suddenly go down without warning. Still, any situation where they could see us but we couldn’t see them was less than desirable.

“There are no heat signatures detected in the area,” said Type Twelve. “However, I agree that we should move.”

“If we’re after a hiding spot, perhaps the settlement would be a good bet,” suggested Ms. Futarishizuka.

But just as we were discussing our next play, we heard a voice in the distance.

“This is the Office, announcing that the death game will begin shortly. We are happy to see how many angels, demons, and Disciples have gathered here today. We’d now like to reveal the additional bonuses to all those participating in this daily quest.”

The voice sounded a bit crackly; it was probably coming over a loudspeaker, like one of those town-wide broadcasts. But it wasn’t just crackly—it was also being distorted to an unnaturally high key. It reminded me of when they used voice changers on TV shows to hide an outside collaborator’s gender and natural voice when dealing with potentially dangerous topics.

“Sasaki, I can hear a voice from nowhere!” exclaimed Lady Elsa.

“No need to worry,” I assured her. “It’s made with a machine, and quite common.”

“They must have brought in a loudspeaker or something,” said Futarishizuka.

It was probably best to assume that others like us had entered the space using methods besides forming a contract with an angel or demon. Plenty of psychics could probably do something similar to me, after all.

“Anyone who kills the angels or demons whose names we are about to announce, or their Disciples, at this venue, will not only receive the ten million

yen promised on the website but an additional ten million yen as a bonus.”

As we stood there, I sharpened my ears and listened carefully to the voice from afar. They were framing this just like an amusement park attraction. The fact that the “Office” was making their broadcast within an isolated space made the ten million yen sound a lot more convincing. Going by what Abaddon had said, you didn’t have to be present to verify which Disciples died—you could ask your partner angel or demon for that information. In fact, that was how he verified that Ms. Futarishizuka had earned her reward.

“The angels eligible for the additional bonus are Cassiel, Ireul, and Arael. The eligible demons are Sitri, Bifrons, and Dantalion. I repeat. The angels eligible for the additional bonus are Cassiel, Irueel...”

A few of them sounded like names I’d heard in novels, manga, and anime before. That said, I’d never actually met any of the ones listed. While I was curious about the Office’s intent, I didn’t know enough to make any guesses.

Everyone’s attention turned to Abaddon.

“Huh,” he said. “That’s a curious group.”

“Are you acquainted with them, Abaddon?” I asked.

“We’ve been warring so long that we know a fair amount about each other. I might not have talked to them, but I’ve heard about them from other people or seen them from afar. I guess in your terms, we’re kind of like students who go to the same school but belong to different classes.”

“Are they singling out the superstrong ones?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“It doesn’t seem like it. It feels indiscriminate,” replied the demon.

“Then I’d guess it’s more the Disciples they’re worried about,” she mused.

“Yeah, I think so, too. Or maybe they’re just a screen for someone else.”

It was nice having the smart people here—Abaddon and Ms. Futarishizuka—to move the discussion along. The rest of us naturally quieted down, forming a kind of audience. I was a little curious about Miss Hoshizaki’s frustrated expression as she watched the latter, though.

“How about this,” offered Ms. Futarishizuka. “Why don’t we search for this

‘Office’ or what have you?”

“I agree,” I said. “I don’t know how these battles have gone in the past, but based on what I’ve experienced so far, this seems different. The thought of charging straight ahead makes me a little anxious.”

“Then what about you?” Abaddon said to my neighbor. *“Though I suppose I don’t need to ask.”*

“You’re right. I agree with him.”

Knowing someone of unknown identity had the initiative in this isolated space put me ill at ease. We’d already followed the bait on the website and come this far; I wanted to gain some sort of foothold here while we could, whether that meant getting directly involved or something else. At minimum, I wanted to know who was behind this.

“I have a suggestion to that end,” I said, glancing at the sparrow on my shoulder. “Could you leave searching for this ‘Office’ to the two of us?”

My neighbor seemed surprised. “Huh?”

“Is that okay with you, Peeps?” I asked.

“It is. I see no issue,” he answered immediately.

At his reply, I was struck by a pang of guilt. I was always dragging him into my affairs and using him as I saw fit. I felt crappy for always naively assuming he’d help, and pitiful for always having to rely on him. *I’ll have to keep working hard at magic practice.*

“Well, look who’s raring for a fight?” teased Ms. Futarishizuka. “What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Our family may not be real, but I’m still our breadwinner.”

If the death game continued like this, its effects might spread beyond just my neighbor and reach Miss Hoshizaki and Lady Elsa, as well. I’d considered taking a wait-and-see approach while Ms. Futarishizuka got involved, but I didn’t like the thought of leaving them to their own devices. If it just made a bunch of work for me in the end, what would be the point?

In that light, my only choice was to take the initiative and bring down our

opponent. Everything was for the sake of my relaxing life with Peeps.

“I object,” replied my neighbor.

“You do? I think it’s a pretty good decision myself,” said Abaddon.

“Maybe it is, if we’re talking about winning the game,” she replied. “But if we lose him here, we may not be able to cooperate with Futarishizuka anymore. And wouldn’t that also sour our relationship with the bureau where he works?”

“Oh, not at all, dearie,” Ms. Futarishizuka assured her. “Even if this guy bites the dust, I’ll continue to help you out. And our esteemed senior and the mechanical life-form would be able to keep you safe from the bureau. It’s much better than a full family wipe, in my opinion.”

“But...but I—”

“She’s got you there, huh?”

“Please shut it, Abaddon!”

“Ahhh, a Disciple’s orders are always unfair, no matter what the era...”

“Then we’ll take a vote, just like family rules dictate!” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “All those who agree, raise your hand!”

Everyone responded, and the family permitted Peeps and me to go ahead of them by a majority vote. Peeps and I, Abaddon, Ms. Futarishizuka, and Type Twelve all voted in favor. That was enough not to have to count the rest of the votes.

It’s just like Type Twelve to casually agree, I thought. *After all, her species can’t lie.*

I turned to the others and said, “I think you should all either hide in the settlement or wait inside the terminal. Stick to defense. And this is just a suggestion on my part, but if we’re not back within the hour, I’d like you all to flee the isolated space.”

“Wait, mister, that’s going too far...,” said my neighbor.

“Gotcha!” replied Abaddon.

“Abaddon!”

“In that case, let’s agree to meet back here in an hour,” suggested Ms. Futarishizuka.

“All right. We’ll go with that,” I said. “If you have to leave the space without me, I’d like you to send some kind of signal once you’ve gotten far enough away from the island. Would that be possible?”

“Affirmative,” replied Type Twelve. “Your youngest daughter promises to send a signal to you at that time.”

“Thank you.”

Depending on how things went, we might want to use that beam spell on all of Miyakejima. It could work, if we got everyone onto the terminal and out over the sea before blowing the entire island away. Fortunately, anything that happened inside the isolated space would revert back to normal as soon as it collapsed. While I balked at harming anyone unrelated, I had to keep those in our group safe.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” I said, “and my apologies for going off on my own like this.”

Ms. Futarishizuka and Abaddon enthusiastically agreed, and nobody else raised any objections. Still, my neighbor was watching me with a worried expression. What a kindhearted girl she was, worrying about some old man who just happened to be her former next-door neighbor.

“You ready, Peeps?”

“Yes. Let us wrap things up quickly.”

At the Starsage’s dependable words, I nodded, and we took to the skies.



<The Neighbor’s POV>

My neighbor and the weird talking bird head off to investigate the strange announcement. Family rules are absolute, according to Futarishizuka, so I have to stand there and watch them go. In an hour, we’ll be meeting back where we landed, but for now we decide to board the terminal and have it sink into the

ocean where we can safely wait.

Angels, demons, and their Disciples can hide their presence or make it known at will. As long as Abaddon and I don't assert ourselves, no one else will realize we're here, at least as far as angels go anyway.

"Sasaki always seems so unreliable," says Makeup after my neighbor is out of sight. "But when push comes to shove, he's oddly decisive. And, like, gung ho. He always says what he thinks, no matter who he's talking to."

She's not wearing makeup today, nor is she wearing her suit, but I'll still call her Makeup. I can't help but feel irritated at how calm she is. *What's she going to do if something happens to him?* I wonder.

"Well, he *is* the family breadwinner, after all," says Futarishizuka.

"I'm not just talking about right now, with our pretend family."

"Oh?"

"Father told me Sasaki and that little bird are very strong," says Blondie. "If he says they'll be okay, maybe we should believe him."

It isn't just Makeup, either. *Everyone* is calm. They're acting the same as always. Do they not think he's worth worrying about? Or do they just trust him that much? The latter would annoy me even more.

I know as well as they do that he has strange powers. But he's the same as us—a person. Every time I enter an isolated space, I remember him getting cut in half by that angel's sword. I'm beside myself with worry. It's so bad that I can't help speaking up.

"Are the rest of you not concerned about him?" I ask.

"Well, of course we are," answers Makeup. "But whenever he says he'll handle something, he does. And he does a good job of it, too. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"And he's got that pompous little bird with him this time, too," adds Futarishizuka.

"You know, my father treats that bird with a lot of respect," says Blondie. "Though I don't know why. Do you have any idea, Futarishizuka? And if you do,

could you tell me?”

“I wonder the same thing, dear. I don’t know much about the creature.”

From their conversation, I can tell they probably know things about him that I don’t. I have my own thoughts about the bird roosting on his shoulder. I wonder if it’s controlling my neighbor in secret somehow. *No, I’m probably just overthinking it.*

“Excuse me,” I say. “I’d like to know more about him, too.”

Our plan is to spend a whole hour here, so I might as well ask about the things I don’t know. But right when I do, something happens.

“Multiple heat signatures detected approaching our location.”

Robot Girl, who we all know to be emotionally unstable, says something odd. Everyone looks at her in blank surprise.

“Activating shields around the terminal, including all surrounding family members,” she continues. “Please be aware I do not know how long they will hold against attacks from angels and demons. It would be wise to take evasive action as soon as possible. There is no time to hold a vote.”

“Oh no!” says Futarishizuka. “Bolts-for-brains can barely think. We have to respond as soon as possible!”

“Time for my partner and me to strut our stuff!” says Abaddon.

“Abaddon, reveal thyself as soon as possible.”

“Of course! You can count on me!”

In response to my instruction, the demon’s body loses its human shape. His skin splits open and his guts expand, and a moment later my partner has turned into a lump of bloody flesh. The clothing and accessories he was wearing are swallowed up inside, and in only a few seconds, the short boy has become a gory mass.

I hear the girl named Elsa let out a terrified squeal. I was surprised the first time I saw Abaddon’s transformation sequence, too.

“Grandmother,” says Robot Girl. “I vaguely feel as though my speech is being

mocked.”

“‘Vaguely’?” repeats Futarishizuka. “There’s nothing vague about it. We’re all teasing you.”

“What? Elder Sister, as the youngest daughter, I consider you a precious member of my family, and—”

“She’s not trying to make fun of you,” Makeup assures her. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Mother, are those words true?”

All of them—Robot Girl, Makeup, and Futarishizuka—are criticizing me to my face. While I don’t like the idea of sitting down and taking it, I’m reluctant to talk back considering the situation.

“The elder sister isn’t happy about the father acting on his own,” says Futarishizuka to Robot Girl. “And when we asked for your vote, you were the first to agree. Can’t you figure it out for yourself? Your elder sister must think much less of you now.”

“I do not understand. Are you trying to deceive me again?”

“I suppose it’s going to take more time than we thought for you to get a grip on these new emotions of yours.”

“I will ask again. The youngest daughter wishes to know what Grandmother meant by that remark immediately. Elder Sister’s concerns had already been eliminated. Before that, she was the first to cast her vote agreeing that we should investigate the ‘Office.’ In addition, Father’s suggestion was sound and practical.”

“Come on, now. You really don’t get it? It’s *love*, all right? That’s what she’s feeling.”

“This ship has already accumulated sufficient knowledge on

humanity's lusts."

"Then you must understand."

"The chances of an unappealing middle-aged male receiving goodwill from the opposite sex is close to zero. If desired, I can confirm by submitting a picture of Father to the internet and holding a poll asking whether anyone would regard him as an object of romantic affection."

"Okay, dear, I get it," says Futarishizuka. "But please don't do that last thing. For his sake."

"I think she has a point," adds Makeup. "The age difference is pretty severe."

"Oh? Why, you make it sound as though you're not in a similar situation."

"B-because I'm *not*! Would you stop talking crazy already?!"

What a bunch of chatterboxes. I'm pretty sure it's more important to *do* something already, whether that's responding to the threat or getting into the "terminal" or whatever. Unfortunately, while we hesitate, the other party makes the first move.

Noticing this, Blondie speaks up. "Futarishizuka, I see them over there. They're waving."

"Ahhh, so *they're* the heat signatures you mentioned, youngest daughter?" asks Futarishizuka.

"Their position and number are consistent. Grandmother's assumption is correct."

While we were wasting time on nonsense, the "heat signatures" Robot Girl mentioned moved into visual range. And when I look more closely, the way they're waving is quite friendly. This disturbs me.

They quickly approach us, smiles on their faces. I find this confusing because Abaddon—now a hunk of flesh—is right next to us. Most people would turn tail and run as soon as they saw him, or at least grimace at the horrible sight. And

yet this group looks happy as they approach us. At that point, even I can put the pieces together.

“Oh, would they happen to be allies?” asks Futarishizuka.

“Yup! Seems like it,” Abaddon replies, his familiar voice coming from inside the fleshy mass. He floats up into the air and flies toward them.

“Urk.” Not a moment later, he runs into an invisible wall and flattens up against it. It looks like someone threw putty at a glass window. I’ve never heard Abaddon make a noise like that before, and it cheers me up somewhat.

“What’s this? Something squashed the eldest son,” remarks Futarishizuka.

“There, um, seems to be a wall of some sort here.”

“Temporarily disengaging shields.”

Apparently, this is Robot Girl’s fault. It sounds like she engaged some shield to protect us.

While the other group—presumably Abaddon’s allies—looks surprised by our response, they still approach us. They consist of several Disciples and their demon partners. I can tell the latter are demons by the way they look and dress, unfettered by modern values. They’ve got horns growing from their heads and wings on their backs, and their skin ranges from pale white to dark black. Some seem to be men, while others look like women. Some have their weapons unsheathed, too, making them very intimidating. The Disciples, on the other hand, are all dressed like normal people.

“As the youngest daughter, I recommend immediately boarding the terminal and evacuating,” says Robot Girl.

“My partner and I will handle this,” replies Abaddon. *“You all go ahead. But stay inside the isolated space if you can. I doubt we’ll be fighting here.”*

“I can hear the eldest son’s voice coming from nowhere. Grandmother, what is happening?”

“Could you stop relying on your old granny for everything?” grumbles Futarishizuka. “It’s coming from that big hunk of meat up there, obviously.”

“Those people seem like they’re all on the demons’ side, so I don’t think we need to flee,” adds Makeup.

“Understood,” says Robot Girl. “The youngest daughter will now register that ball of flesh as the eldest son.”

Despite the confusion, we manage to come to an agreement. Abaddon and I go out in front to greet the group of demons and their Disciples. Futarishizuka, Makeup, and Blondie wait behind us.

Robot Girl is the only one to run toward the terminal, but when she notices none of us are joining her, she stops and turns back. She stands there, a little ways away, with nothing to do. After that, she seems to make a decision before returning to the group. *If she’s that scared, she should just wait in her flying saucer.*

“Well, hey there! Long time no see.”

“Heard the rumors, Abaddon. Doin’ pretty well for yourself, eh?”

A conversation begins between Abaddon and the newcomers. The first one to speak is the demon standing in front. He looks like an owl with really long legs. He has a crown on his head, and he’s about as tall as a person. His rough, familiar way of speaking takes me by surprise. The gap between this and his cute facial features is extreme. That, and his long ostrich legs make him very creepy.

“Is that boy your disciple, Stolas?”

“Yep!” says the demon, before turning almost all the way around to look behind him. *“Hey, kid, introduce yourself to this very stylish demon and the lady next to him.”*

Yep, definitely an owl, I think.

A boy stands there, even shorter than me. Did this demon choose an elementary school kid as his partner? It’s true that, if the death game drags on for a long time, the younger Disciples will be at an advantage later on. *But this kid’s a little too young, isn’t he?*

He takes a step toward us and greets us in a loud voice. “N-nice to meet you!

My name is Oobayashi!"

"Pleased to meet you, Oobayashi," I reply.

"Wow, he's so well-mannered," comments Abaddon. "Unlike my partner."

"Abaddon, why would you put down your own Disciple in front of someone I'm meeting for the first time?"

"I'm just saying you could be a little more friendly, you know?"

He probably wants me to smile more, even if I have to fake it. I know stuff like that is important. My recently deceased mother absolutely hated how unfriendly I always looked. In her case, though, she'd criticize me even if I forced a smile, so there was no point.

"Hey, don't push yourself on our account. Demons tend to pick real weirdos as Disciples."

"Thank you for your kind words."

Aside from this pair—the long-legged owl called Stolas and the boy who introduced himself as Oobayashi—everyone else stands behind them and silently watches. They probably decided in advance who would handle the negotiations.

Proving me right, Stolas makes his offer. *"I won't keep you long,"* he says. *"Wanna team up with us?"*

"Should I assume that's what all of you decided on? Demons and Disciples alike?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well, you heard him. What do you think, Disciple?"

The giant hunk of flesh floating in the air lurches, as if turning to face me. His true form is utterly grotesque, but now that I'm more used to it...I don't know, maybe it *does* look kind of cute. Or maybe not. The other Disciples have never met him before, though, and the motion puts them all on guard.

"I know it's sudden," says Stolas. *"So if you'd rather, we could just join forces for this stupid event. Then, if things work out, we can decide where to go from*

there.”

“All right. I agree.”

“Yup! I think that’s best, too!”

We’d been hoping to make friends with other demons, so for us, their offer is perfect. I remember Abaddon once encouraging me to reach out, too. If we can build a good relationship with them, I feel like I’ll be able to sleep a little better at night.

Naturally, there’s no guarantee they’re trustworthy. But I’ll never know if I don’t try.

“By the way,” says Abaddon, “we’ve got some...well, interesting circumstances. Is that still all right?”

“You mean the ones behind you?”

“Exactly.”

Futarishizuka, Makeup, Blondie, and Robot Girl are still behind us. If we wait a little longer, my neighbor and his talking sparrow will return, too. We can’t afford to leave them out of the conversation.

“Sounds like we both have few people with us,” says Stolas. “While I’d love to get everybody introduced, why don’t we take ’em somewhere else, first? We can always trade info once we’re safe. This place is way too open.”

“Are you all okay with that?” asks Abaddon, turning around. Everyone responds quickly.

“I’d be perfectly fine with that, dear.”

“No objections here.”

“I’ll go along with whatever the rest of you decide.”

Futarishizuka, Makeup, and Blondie seem to agree, though Robot Girl is looking at me unhappily.

“Then it’s decided,” says Stolas.

Fitting his tone of voice, the owl demon seems pretty bossy. Us Disciples were meeting for the first time, but he kept the conversation moving at a very brisk

pace.

I wonder if he's as strong as Abaddon.



After parting ways with the members of our pretend family, Peeps and I flew through the sky toward the coastline. That was the direction I'd heard the announcer's voice coming from—the one that called themselves the "Office," and was most likely the website's admin. Concealed from view with Peeps's magic, we maintained an altitude of several dozen meters as we looked down at the ground below. According to the distinguished Java sparrow, an average magic user wouldn't be able to see us like this.

We flew around for a while, but we never came under attack. I assumed there was little chance modern equipment like thermal cameras and radars had made their way into an isolated space.

"We're near the settlement now," I said. "But it's too dark to see anything."

"From my point of view, your former home was far too bright at night."

"Yeah, I guess compared to your world, there's a lot of artificial light."

Like the other isolated spaces I'd experienced, this one was completely unpopulated. No illumination came from inside the houses, either, making the ground pretty dark. My only glimpses of the town came from a few scattered streetlights. Compared to the big city, it was, if you'll excuse the pun, like day and night.

Under these conditions, finding someone hiding on the island would be backbreaking work. I'd told the others to give me an hour; maybe I should have asked for two or three.

"I talked a big game back there, but this might be really difficult."

"Want to set some fires down there?"

"Umm..."

The bird's suggestion sounded casual, but wasn't that kind of brutal? *Peeps does get pretty ballsy sometimes.*

I didn't want to cause any fires if we could avoid it—that would probably lead to unrelated angels and demons attacking us. My memories of the six-winged angel cleaving through me with her sword came rushing back. Not that I didn't trust the Starsage, but I wanted to avoid unnecessary combat.

If our opponents were on the level of Himegami and Eriel, I'd be able to overwhelm them. But once a stronger one came out, like Abaddon or little Mika, I wasn't sure how my otherworld magic would stack up.

"It was a joke," he told me. "No need to look so troubled."

"What? Come on. You were totally serious."

"Why do you think that?"

"Past experience."

"...Ah."

See? I thought. You were serious after all! Man, this bird is dangerous.

"Even taking into account our time spent in the otherworld, it's only been a year or so since I met you. But now that I think about it, perhaps the time we have spent with each other is not as insignificant as one might believe."

"Yeah, we do tend to stick together a lot."

As I chatted with my pet bird, we continued flying over Miyakejima.

A municipal road ran along the island's shoreline. It went all the way around, circling Mount Oyama in the middle. Along it were houses, restaurants, supermarkets, office buildings, and an airport. We followed it overhead.

After a little while, we suddenly heard a noise. It was shrill, like metal against metal.

Skreee. Skreeee.

"I sense the presence of others," said Peeps. "What shall we do?"

"Is it all right if we go and check?"

"Yes."

This might not have been the Office we were after, but I decided to

investigate, just in case.

Pricking up our ears, we were able to locate the source after a few minutes—a fishing port on the island's west side. Fishing boats were lined up all along the berths, and I could see them bobbing gently in the peaceful waves. Past the breakwaters, I could see whitecaps coming in and out. It seemed very calm for open sea.

There were no port workers around, of course. A few cars were parked on the premises, but after descending to check, we found them all empty. As far as we could tell from the sky, at least, the place was abandoned.

The only exception was a warehouse near the market area. Its shutter had been twisted and destroyed, and the noise that had drawn us was coming from inside. After descending, I very carefully peeked inside.

“...Someone's in there,” I whispered.

“Indeed.”

The warehouse was fairly large, and a fight was going down in the middle of it. On one side were two people with wings growing from their backs. Their fanciful clothes immediately gave them away as angels. Behind them was another group of two. They were young—probably around twenty.

Facing them was a single opponent. I wondered if he was a demon, considering the situation. But his clothes were far too normal for that. He was an Asian man who looked around thirty, wearing a leather jacket and jeans.

It concerned me that there was nobody in sight who looked like his Disciple. After all, moving around in an isolated space on your own, without your angel or demon, was extremely risky. There was always a chance they were hiding somewhere nearby, though.

“Those people look like angels, and it seems like they're fighting a human.”

“I had heard that Disciples were far weaker than angels and demons inside isolated spaces,” said Peeps. *“But as far as I can see, the one who looks like a demon's Disciple is overwhelming the angels. Though I suppose it is possible he is not a human, but a demon.”*

“Even Abaddon looks human until he has to change into flesh-ball mode, I guess.”

The only source of light was the moon shining in through the windows. From that, I could make out the people’s facial features.

If I could have used a smartphone, I’d have taken a picture and sent it to Abaddon to figure out. But all wireless functions were disabled inside isolated spaces. I’d checked as soon as we entered, but the terminal appeared to be out of range.

“Why are you doing this to us?! Do you have some kind of grudge?!”

“Who the hell are you?! No human should be able to fight angels!”

The two I assumed to be the angels’ Disciples raised their voices in shock and concern. They seemed quite lively standing behind their partners, who were taking care of all the fighting. As Peeps had pointed out, the angelic team seemed to be on the back foot. Was that why their Disciples were in such a panic?

One of the angels held a sword; he looked like a man about my age. His features were way more attractive than mine, though. *There sure are a lot of beautiful angels*, I thought. The other one was no exception. She looked about twenty or so, and she had a bow and arrow at the ready.

What really piqued my interest, however, was their opponent’s fighting style.

No matter how many times the angels attacked, they never reached their foe. One ran up with superhuman speed and swung his sword too fast to see, yet his opponent easily avoided it. Even the arrows from the other’s bow never came close to striking their target.

The unknown man, meanwhile, used his rather large knife to slice comfortably and easily at his opponents.

The angels didn’t appear to be slacking off. In fact, their movements were incredibly sharp. Their physical abilities far outstripped even Ms. Futarishizuka’s. So who was this man whose footwork surpassed even theirs?

His speed made me think he might be teleporting. That made me wonder

—*was he a psychic?* From what the Disciples had said, it seemed they believed the man was a human rather than a demon.

“I don’t have a grudge against you,” said the possible psychic. “I’m not even interested in you. You’re not even worth my time.”

The two Disciples immediately recoiled.

“What?! Are you kidding me?!”

“Then why are you doing something so stupid?”

“That’s why I used your names like I did,” the man replied. “Don’t you get it?”

That caught my attention. Did the names in the announcement earlier refer to these particular angels and their Disciples? Had they gone out to look for the Office just like Peeps and me after being singled out?

If that was true, then there was a very good chance this man had something to do with the Office.

“I’d say I’m impressed you found our location so quickly, but I’m *not* very impressed with what you decided to do afterward. You may be relatively well-known angels, but there are always exceptions, I suppose.”

The two continued trading words, confirming my suspicions. The guy didn’t say anything about the Office directly, but I was piecing it together from the scraps.

“Of course we found you! Do you know how much noise you were making on an empty island like this?”

“That’s right! The other angels and demons will be here soon. You’re done for!”

“Oh, I’ll be long gone by then.”

There was another series of shrill, metallic sounds. Apparently, we’d been hearing their weapons clashing. The angels’ offensive grew fiercer, as if manifesting their Disciples’ panic. But their foe handled each attack with confidence and ease.

“You can’t run from my angel’s clairvoyance! You’ll never escape!”

“Ah, yes. I was wondering how you all managed to find me.”

One of the Disciples was getting desperate now. But the knife-wielding man only smiled in response.

And in the blink of an eye, both angels' heads went flying.

“Huh...”

“Wha...?!”

The two Disciples were shocked. Their jaws were practically on the floor as they cringed away from the sight before them. I was no different, despite watching the scene from outside the warehouse.

Before I knew what was happening, the angels' heads were detached from their bodies. The possible psychic had probably cut them off with his knife. It was just that I hadn't seen it happen.

He had been standing several meters away from the angels only a moment ago. But then, somehow, he was in a different place. That was when the angels' heads had flown off and tumbled to the ground. It was as though they'd popped off of their own accord.

They hit the warehouse floor with wet thuds. A few moments later, their bodies collapsed.

“Wha...? What just...?”

“This can't be real! How could a regular person defeat two angels with a single strike?”

The two angelic Disciples had done their best to fight back, despite their opponent clearly displaying his advantage. But the loss of their partners had changed their tune. Now panicking, both of them backed away, trembling. While this was just speculation, I had a feeling they were both new to the death game. Otherwise, they would have had more allies. At least, that's what it seemed like based on the legion of angels that had attacked my neighbor in the past.

“Good. That's one-third of them. I should probably withdraw,” the possible psychic muttered to himself.

The names of three angels had been announced over the loudspeaker earlier, and it seemed the man had business with one of the two he'd just killed. And as for the term "clairvoyant"—I assumed that meant the angel could see things very far away.

A troublesome ability indeed for someone doing evil deeds on a daily basis. These days, a talent like that was a lot more dangerous than simply being skilled at combat. The man must have decided he needed to do something about it.

But was that the only reason for this event?

I was at a loss. As I thought about it, the one on my shoulder whispered to me.

"Is that man who fought the angels not the same as those you work with?"

"Yeah. I think that's a pretty good bet."

"If so, then I find myself quite curious as to what sort of phenomenon he produced."

"I can think of a few different possibilities off the top of my head."

"Oh? Now I am even more curious. Please illuminate me."

I exchanged intel with Peeps as we stood outside the warehouse entrance, hiding against the building's wall. In the meantime, things progressed inside.

"Ah, yes. To receive a reward from the angels and demons, it's the Disciples I need to kill, not their partners."

"Huh? Hey, wait a second. You're just gonna—"

"Please, no! We'll never go against you again! We promise!"

In their panic, the two angelic Disciples tried to flee the warehouse. They began running toward where Peeps and I were standing, though they couldn't see us, since the sparrow's magic was keeping us hidden. I had a feeling our gazes met, but they didn't react. They would have at least made some kind of noise if they'd noticed us.

But after getting just a few steps away, they fell.

It wasn't us—we hadn't had the time to do anything.

Like the angels, all of a sudden, their heads were flying.

“...!”

The sudden, grotesque sight almost made me cry out. I just barely managed to keep it down.

Their heads hit the warehouse floor just as blood began to spurt from their severed bodies.

They hadn't even screamed. It seemed likely they'd been cut with the man's knife, but I hadn't seen any of it happen. We hadn't even noticed him closing in on them.

Once again, the psychic had appeared in a different spot.

“This proxy war's setup practically forces them to use young people. It's horrid. Such cruelty is hardly befitting of an angel. A little banter and they rush to their deaths. They don't even understand their position.”

The psychic spoke sadly as he gazed at the Disciples' remains. His sorrow was most likely sincere.

As an ordinary person, seeing this display made me hesitate. But the same was not true of the Starsage.

“I believe I have an idea as to his methods.”

“I think we should run away right now.”

“You called it a psychic power, yes? Indeed, it is quite astounding. Which is why I'd like to make sure we cull him while we have the chance. If there is any possibility that he may be hostile to us in the future, we cannot let him escape.”

“Umm, Peeps, does that mean...”

“I'm sorry, but would you leave this to me?”

“R-right. Sure, that's fine. But will you be okay?”

“You were correct to suggest we conceal ourselves. Otherwise, those might have been our heads on the floor. But if I can take him by surprise, he is as good as dead.”

“...Yeah. I think you're right.”

The bird fluttered off my shoulder and into the air before slipping through a gap in the warehouse's shutter.

At about the same time, he must have disengaged his concealment spell, because the psychic spoke up at the sight of the out-of-place creature.

"A sparrow?" he said. "What is it doing here...?"

"....."

He only looked confused for a second before his eyes opened wide in shock. His attention shifted to where he stood. A great amount of water had begun to spurt up from below.

"Who are you?!"

For some reason, the water didn't flow out over the floor; instead, it gathered around the man in the shape of a sphere, where it stayed. The sight of the sphere rapidly filling in made me think of a person being drowned in a goldfish bowl.

I was reminded of Miss Hoshizaki's power. Peeps was probably using either a barrier spell or some other magic to restrain the target, then a second spell to fill it with water. I'd used the same strategy against the magical girls once before.

But this time, the caster's intent was very different.

The water continued to surge at an alarming rate, and in the blink of an eye it had practically engulfed the psychic. Trapped inside the sphere, he was up to his neck in water within minutes.

"No! Is it that sparrow...?!"

The man looked hatefully up at Peeps. As if in response, the bird bellowed to me, *"Your safety is secured. If you've something to say to him, do it now."*

"Thanks, Peeps," I said as I stepped into the warehouse through the gap in the shutter.

When he saw me, the psychic cried out. "You! I've seen you somewhere before."

“Have you?” I replied. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Oh, that’s it. Now I remember.”

I figured he was stalling for time. *Probably waiting for other angels or demons to come around*, I thought. *Or maybe he has other companions.*

“Your picture was in the list of people who went aboard that UFO,” he said.

“I see. Figures something like that would be making the rounds.”

“So you don’t deny it?”

“No. Everyone already knows anyway.”

I took over the question-and-answer session in place of the sparrow, who returned to my shoulder.

“What *is* that talking sparrow?” the psychic asked.

“A little while ago, that website about the angel-demon proxy war got quite a lot of attention. Are you acquainted with its administrator? Or have you come here by yourself for some other reason?”

I decided to prioritize my own questions and ignore anything he asked. If I was right about him, he had plenty of time to think. We, on the other hand, had very little leeway; we didn’t know when more angels or demons would show up. And if he broke out of the fishbowl Peeps had created, we were done for.

“Could you let me out of here first? Then I’ll talk.”

“I’m sorry, but no. There is no saving you at this point.”

“.....”

I wondered what this psychic’s rank was.

For the sake of argument, I could assume my beam and barrier spells made me rank B. Little Mika, the six-winged angel, had easily sliced me in half in a straight fight. It hadn’t even been a contest.

In order to take on stronger angels and demons, you’d need multiple rank-B psychics with abilities geared toward combat, at least. But even then, you’d have a difficult time. Ideally, you would want the help of a rank-A psychic, like the nerd.

It wasn't clear if the Office had made any such calculations. But just now, this man had defeated two angels. The event had been set up with a website and everything. If they were being careful, I assumed they'd put a rank-A psychic into the fray.

That said, the only rank-A psychics I knew of were the nerd and Ms. Futarishizuka, so I couldn't say anything for sure. The latter was just above rank B, while the former was obviously a full-fledged rank A, meaning the rank itself covered a pretty broad spectrum.

Taking advantage of the short silence, the psychic began to shout. "Hey! Magic girl! Save me! I know you're watching from somewhere!"

I expected he was referring to a magical girl. This answered my final question. He had probably made it into the isolated space with the help of her Magical Barrier. I'd considered the possibility he was both a psychic *and* a Disciple, but it seemed that was not the case.

I looked around. My barrier had been up constantly since we entered the isolated space. A few seconds passed, and the "magic girl" never came.

"Dammit! That brat! How dare she run away by herself!"

"May I ask which country's magical girl is aiding you?"

"If that'll get you to release me, then sure, I'll tell you."

"Oh. In that case, never mind."

"Ugh...!"

For a moment, I considered Magical Pink. But she was an enemy to psychics—she'd never help one. Which meant this magical girl was from a different country.

If it's Magical Blue that presents a big problem. And her involvement isn't out of the question.

"If you resent your employer even a little, then give me information to get back at them," I said. "It might earn you slightly nicer flowers at your grave."

"Please save me. I'll do anything. I'm serious. I'll never betray you."

First anger, then scorn, then seriousness. This psychic was very unstable emotionally. He'd probably been racking his brain a whole lot longer than we knew. The more I saw of this suspicious behavior, the more certain I became about the nature of his power.

"Are you a psychic?" he asked. "Or a demon? You can't be an angel."

"I'll leave it to your imagination."

"This doesn't make any sense. Who does shit like this?"

"The only ones who would respond to such criticism are poor young people like the ones you just killed. You seem like someone with empathy, so I may consider passing on your final words, if you have any."

"What? Hey, wait. Did they set me up?!"

"I don't know about that. I don't think it's out of the question, though."

"Fuck! What the hell?! This can't be happening!"

I wasn't sure who he meant by "they." But I stood by what I said. There was a possibility "they" had put this psychic on the job in the hopes he would be taken care of.

After all, I thought, his power is far too terrifying for anyone to want to take him in.

He could stop time.

"I finally got all this power... Everything was going so well..."

"And it's because of that power, I expect, that nobody wants you."

Unfortunately, "they" were still an unknown entity. If all my assumptions were correct, we were playing right into their hands. I was aware that something like this could happen when I decided to take part in the event, but I was increasingly concerned about just how far ahead its sponsors had planned.

I really wish I could see the whole picture. But the higher-ups have probably worked things out so that will never happen.

"This is the last time I'll ask you," I said. "Who is trying to control the proxy war using that website and people like you? I won't force you to answer, but

this is the last chance you'll have to affect this world."

"Come on... Are you really gonna do this?"

"I'm sorry, but yes."

"...Oh."

I couldn't afford to be tolerant with this man. If I did, he would kill us.

If his power was a psychic ability, it would have restrictions. When Miss Hoshizaki controlled water, she had to physically touch the target. But if I underestimated him, we could wind up with our positions reversed.

His power was far too strong. It left zero room for negotiation. And he probably knew that. He knew that no matter how much he tried to get himself out of it, he would never change my mind. In that sense, overpowered psychic abilities were a kind of double-edged sword.

As I was mulling it over, I realized that the nerd could probably do the same thing under the right circumstances. There had to be a video game somewhere with an item that could stop time. *Oh, great. What would I do about that?*

The only way I could protect myself against him right now was to preemptively put up a barrier spell. But our last fight had taught me he had ways of getting through that. If I ran into him again without Peeps, I'd be in serious trouble. Images of battle scenes like those in a shounen manga flitted through my mind.

As a result, I fell silent. That's when the psychic began to speak. He must have prepared himself.

"If you're here, you must know about the reward system," he said.

"I do," I replied. Disciples were granted rewards for defeating their opponents in the death game. Ms. Futarishizuka was trying to get close to Abaddon for that very reason.

"The rewards in this war will decide everything. They can cure incurable diseases, grant eternal youth, and give you as much money as you want. There are people in this world who are after those things. Many people. Rich and influential people."

“Yes, I believe there are.”

“If people like them want to get their hands on more rewards... Well, you get it, right?”

Only so many Disciples could take part in the death game. If someone wanted to scoop up more rewards, they would need to think about the best order in which to kill the Disciples. One Disciple backed by so-and-so would slay another supported by so-and-so. Management over these matchups would be required if one wanted strict control over the rewards.

The fact that this was a proxy war between angels and demons didn’t even matter. It could have been anything.

“Plenty of people are giving that a lot of thought,” he concluded.

“I’m curious to know exactly who is in on this.”

“I don’t know that much. It’s the same as global custodians for stocks. Our contacts bundle up tasks and give them to people like us on behalf of the actual investors. The bottom rung has no way of knowing who’s behind the money.”

“Yes, that is indeed a sad state of affairs.”

“Isn’t it?”

While the public was criticizing the Office’s website and its gory photographs, it was still up on the web, and still being updated. Whoever was in on this, they were very high up. In fact, there was even a chance Ms. Futarishizuka was involved.

“That’s all the information I have,” he said.

“Thank you.”

I hadn’t learned much, but I now knew that people were organizing at a high level in order to hack into the proxy war. Its original form—a battle between two opposing factions—was now essentially meaningless. Angels attacking angels, demons saving angels—such things would probably start happening more frequently from now on.

“As a final act of mercy, I shall send you on your way painlessly.”

“Hey, look, do I really have to die?”

“As we said, yes. You seem to be a sore loser.”

“Of course I am! Ah, I don’t want to die!”

For Peeps and me, it had only been a few minutes since we barged into the warehouse. But this pleading man had probably spent twice or even ten times as long worrying, all alone, trying to think of a way to survive. Stubble had appeared around his mouth, which had been clean-shaven at the start. It was clear he’d been racking his brain in isolation for a considerable amount of time.

Compared to the angelic Disciples who hadn’t even had time to realize they were dead, this seemed a much more tragic way to go. *Knowing your worthless life is about to end, and having to take that last step yourself?* I shuddered just thinking about it.

Many people in this world must have met similar fates and would do so in the future.

“If it was going to be this terrifying,” he said, “I wish I’d never been born.”

I’d thought similar things before—that it would have been better if there had been nothing right from the start. Perhaps that was why I decided to offer a few words of consolation.

“I don’t want to say it like this, but you killed two people just now. Almost nobody in this country will do that before dying. In that sense, your death is very special, and from society’s standpoint, for better or worse, it has value.”

“Really? Seems like a miserable death to me.”

“I won’t deny that. But you did as you pleased in life, which is more than others can say. Plenty of people think about it but can’t bring themselves to do it. Not that I think they should, of course.”

“...I see.”

“I apologize if that wasn’t much comfort to you.”

“The fact that I felt a tiny bit happy, a tiny bit relieved, makes me feel sick to my stomach. Is this what religion’s all about?”

He wore a strange expression—like he was crying and smiling at the same time. *How was a person supposed to respond to that?* While I thought about it, the psychic continued.

“You’re quite the demon, you know that?” he said. “If this is the end, at least tell me your name—”

His body gave a jolt before he could finish his sentence. Peeps must have used a spell.

The man’s body began to gently drift inside the water-filled sphere. As his body relaxed, he lost the ability to stand. We waited a few moments, but he showed no response. He simply floated there, bobbing in the water like seaweed.

After several seconds, the water surrounding him splashed to the floor, and his corpse smacked the ground. He wasn’t breathing.

“It seems those who acquire status, wealth, and fame do the same things in every world.”

“I’d like to believe they’re not all bad.”

Thinking about things like that made mechanical life-forms seem awfully pure and wholesome, which troubled me. I couldn’t help but think Type Twelve’s compatriots sealing away their emotions was the best decision they could have made.

In any case, I knew very well what—or who—was proving the biggest obstacle in “their” attempt to manage the proxy war’s rewards. In short, it was the demon-Disciple pair currently tearing it up in the death game.

“Peeps, I need your help, and fast.”

“Indeed. We should return to the others.”

This was just a guess, but I had a feeling the main targets of this event were likely my neighbor and Abaddon. She’d already slain so many angels and their Disciples, and now she was friends with Type Twelve. The people at the top couldn’t afford to let a Disciple with that much influence run free.



“I do not object to using teleportation magic, but I’m worried it will eject us from the isolated space. I think we should fly back for now and investigate that later. What about you?”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

I nodded to the bird on my shoulder and left the warehouse, indescribably happy at how well my pet and I seemed to understand each other.

<Bonds, Part Two>

<The Neighbor's POV>

After parting ways with my neighbor, we decide to go with Abaddon's demon acquaintances. The group contains several demons and their Disciples, with the long-legged owl and his elementary school-aged partner in the lead.

Our first order of business is to change locations. Leaving the lookout and its wide, clear view, we head for the settlement, where we are likely to find a lot more hiding spots.

To get there, we rely heavily on Abaddon in his flesh form—after all, nobody but us can fly. Robot Girl and Futarishizuka decline to enter the terminal with other people around, and, the former aside, the latter is basically our guardian, so I'm hesitant to object to her decision. As a result, we have Abaddon turn into what is essentially a big meaty flying saucer and ride on top of him.

When they feel the soft, soupy sensation under their shoes, everyone grows quiet and meek. We stay low to the ground, almost crawling along it, so we aren't attacked by any angels on the way.

Eventually, we reach the settlement on the southeastern side of Miyakejima. While I want to hide indoors somewhere, we have too many people to fit into a regular house. Instead, we choose a public facility—probably a community center. Nobody else is here, which means we now have a peaceful place to talk.

"So," says Stolas, "am I good to assume you'll be working with us for this game, at least?"

I nod. "That's fine with me. Thank you."

As usual, we hold a family vote to decide whether to work with the demons. Five vote yes—aside from me and Abaddon, Futarishizuka, Makeup, and

Blondie all vote to join up. Robot Girl abstains, but she says she'll go along with Makeup's decision, so we're all in agreement. We have enough votes even without my neighbor and the sparrow, who are currently absent.

Robot Girl doesn't seem to like these demons very much. To tell the truth, hers is a much more normal reaction. Being dragged into a strange place and having to fight alongside humanoid monsters would earn a "no thank you" from just about anyone. The way Futarishizuka and Makeup take it all in stride is much stranger.

"Great," says Stolas. "So about all the people behind you..."

"They aren't angels, demons, or Disciples. They are essentially gate-crashers who happened to enter by coincidence. I might be willing to tell you more once we know each other a little better."

"Don't trust us, eh?"

"I'm sure you all are the same."

"Heh. You're not wrong."

This was another thing we decided by majority vote. We can't go telling everyone we just met our secrets—that we're psychics, or mechanical life-forms, or whatever. Everyone insisted we keep it secret. I doubt the neighbor and his sparrow would have been able to swing the vote even if they were here.

And the other party doesn't press for details, either. Our response must be within their expectations.

After that, we all introduce ourselves. We may not be sharing backstories, but we'll need to remember one another's names, at least. We ask the names of everyone aside from the owl called Stolas and his Disciple.

I validate their identities with Abaddon, too, getting an instant handle on their power levels and personalities. What I'm more curious about are the Disciples. There's no guarantee they're using their real names, so I need to make sure to remember their facial features.

Once they're all done with their introductions, it's our turn. We go one by one as well.

“I’m Hoshizaki. A high school girl, as you can see.”

“And I am Saotome.”

“Please call me Tanaka.”

“Huh...?” Makeup, who spoke up first and gave her real name, looks back at us in surprise.

She’d rushed to introduce herself using her real name, so when Futarishizuka and I give false ones, her face immediately goes pale. Her mouth hangs open as she tries to say something. *Great, now they know we’re using fake names. What an idiot.*

She’s in her school uniform for the death game today. In that light, maybe it’s inaccurate to call her Makeup, since she’s not wearing any. But it’s a pain to change it now, so I keep calling her that anyway.

“This individual’s name is set to Hanako Yamada within this space.”

“My name is Anneliese.”

Robot Girl and Blondie, following Futarishizuka and my lead, also give fake names. Aside from Makeup, no one else has revealed her real name.

All of the Disciples are focused on Blondie, though. They probably remember seeing her on TV or the internet. She works with my neighbor’s company on propaganda stuff, and she’s basically an internet celebrity now. Several videos of her have been published on video submission websites, garnering tens of millions of views.

“And I’m Abaddon. Nice to meetcha!”

My partner introduces himself last. He reverted to human form once we arrived at the community center. The way he grins is so friendly. He looks exactly like a child, and an adorable one at that. The other Disciples, who were first introduced to him as a clump of meaty flesh, seem conflicted as they take in his new appearance.

Now that we’ve exchanged the bare minimum of information, the demon group immediately makes a suggestion. It’s the long-legged owl demon who

speaks up, just as before.

“Let’s get right down to business, then,” he says. “Got something to discuss with you all.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“Aren’t you curious about that hokey voice that came outta nowhere?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.”

“Well, we’re thinking we should go root them out right away.”

“I see.”

Now I’m not sure how to react. The neighbor and his sparrow are already investigating the voice. We promised them we’d wait, so I don’t want to simply nod and agree. What would be the point if we got in their way?

But those thoughts don’t last long, because Robot Girl issues a warning we can’t ignore.

“Multiple heat signatures confirmed approaching this facility.”

Futarishizuka reacts immediately. “Didn’t you send the thing somewhere else?”

“Grandmother’s viewpoint is correct. I have positioned the thing elsewhere.”

“The thing” is the saucer-shaped flying object we used to travel to this island. As originally planned, Robot Girl hid it at the bottom of the ocean near the coast while we flew to our current location.

“I thought that without an external connection, you couldn’t even bring up a map in here,” comments Futarishizuka. “Maybe I was wrong. Or were you talking about other connection points when you mentioned links inside the isolated space earlier?”

“Grandmother’s speculations are both correct. I have mobilized a smaller, separate group.”

“Abaddon, please reveal thyself!”

“Yup! Just leave it to me!”

Apparently, Robot Girl has several smaller mobile devices aside from the flying saucer operating within the isolated space. We didn’t see any from inside the terminal, though, so they must have the same optical camouflage.

At any rate, it seems she isn’t lying. In the blink of an eye, our surroundings change dramatically. We hear a loud boom, and something half-destroys the community center we’re hiding in.

Most of the destruction is on the side of the building facing the street, near the entrance.

A moment later, I hear another loud boom, and the walls and roof are blown away. The dust from the fallen building materials reaches us. It’s like explosives went off—it reminds me of what happened to my old apartment building.

Immediately, figures appear from beyond the wreckage—likely angels and their Disciples.

The first one to charge in is a six-winged angel brandishing a sword. Abaddon reverts to his fleshy form and takes the slash with his body.

We only have a few seconds to react, but it’s enough to stave off the angels’ ambush. The demons with us follow their Disciples orders and immediately move to intercept.

At a glance, the angels and their Disciples number about as many as we do. After taking part in so many death games, Abaddon and I are finally making our team deathmatch debut.

“How did they find us?” Futarishizuka wonders aloud.

“Some angels and demons have good eyes or ears,” answers a small chunk of flesh floating next to us. *“Positioning lookouts and creating ambushes is a pretty old ploy in the proxy wars. And in regular human wars, too, I suppose.”*

Abaddon has cut off a piece of his body and left it with us so we can communicate. At first this trick was shocking to me, but by now I’m pretty used to it.

“Your mortal enemy is here again, Abaddon,” I tell him.

“She must really want to kill me, huh?”

“Does she have a personal grudge against you or something?”

“Hmm. I mean, I don’t think so.”

The angel in question is called Michael. Her name is so well known it regularly comes up in novels and movies and the like. Her strength doesn’t disappoint, either. She looks like she’s in her mid-teens, with striking blond hair.

I stare at her, thinking about how much I dislike her. I find her extremely irritating—probably because she’s the one who cut up my neighbor.

“What bothers me more is that her Disciple is absent once again.”

Abaddon was right. The total number of angels and their Disciples doesn’t match up. There’s one more angel than human.

I suspect he’s right about the reason—the six-winged angel’s Disciple isn’t here. We’ve encountered Michael several times already, but we’ve never seen her partner. Not even the briefest glimpse, to my knowledge.

When their surprise attack fails, the battle becomes a messy brawl.

At least, that’s what it looks like from my perspective. Everyone pushes forward, only to be driven back, followed by another push forward. Abaddon and the girl with six wings are no different. The community center isn’t very big, but with the ceiling and walls blown away, we might as well be outdoors at this point.

Maybe all these individual angels, demons, and Disciples are fighting their own battles and going through their own drama. Unfortunately, I’ve only just met them, and I don’t know how skilled they are, so I can’t get a grasp on the specifics.



This is really making me want a big encyclopedia with information on all the angels and demons in the death game.

“Whoa, no, no, no! They’re coming this way! Retreat!” cries Futarishizuka.

“Hey, Futarishizuka! Shouldn’t we be fighting too?!” exclaims Makeup.

“Whoa, no, no, no! A high school girl just beat the world speed record for blowing her comrade’s cover!”

“Ah... I-I’m sorry!”

“Mother, Grandmother, we should retreat as quickly as possible. We must leave this place immediately.”

“Saotome, I just saw wings behind that building!” calls Blondie.

“Turn around! Turn it around! We can’t afford to get stuck in a head-on fight!”

This battle between angels and demons is way more than a human can handle. It would be suicide for a Disciple to jump into the fray.

Instead, we scurry around with no time to catch our breath, searching for somewhere safe while keeping our distance from Abaddon and the angel he’s fighting. Occasionally a stray attack nearly picks us off.

The other demons’ Disciples are in the same boat; all of them are hurrying this way and that.

We escape the community center—mere seconds before its total collapse—and run behind a reinforced concrete building we spotted nearby hoping to shield ourselves. Abaddon and the other demons continue their fight against the angels, their backs to the building we’re using as a shelter.

Opposite the building is the shoreline. There don’t seem to be any angels over here, which affords us some room to breathe.

Thankfully, none of us are hurt—and that goes for the other Disciples, too. For a moment, we celebrate our mutual safety. For now, as long as the demons don’t lose, we have time.

I sigh in relief, but it seems the sentiment was premature.

“Umm, Tanaka...”

A boy who looks like he’s in elementary school—the one the long-legged owl demon introduced as his Disciple—speaks to me.

In contrast to the bossy demon, this boy appears very docile. It seems like the worst kind of personality to have in a death game, but the demon must have chosen him for a reason.

“What is it, Oobayashi?” I reply.

“At this rate, the angels will kill us.” The boy looks worried as he approaches me.

For a moment, I wonder who Tanaka is. But then I remember it’s the fake name I gave him.

“Then we should do something to prevent that,” I say.

“I agree. We should think of a plan.”

“If you have anything in mind, I’d love to hear it.”

“Yes, I do. This is just a guess, but over there...” The boy nods meekly and raises his arm to point away from us.

Naturally, everyone’s attention follows. He’s pointing to another building several dozen meters away from the one we’re hiding behind. I’m not sure what it’s for, but it looks like a housing complex or a guesthouse.

“That building?” I ask. “What about it?”

I can’t tell what the boy means just by looking, so I urge him to continue.

Instead of an explanation, he responds with a knife.

“Well, we can move over there, and...”

He continues speaking to keep up the facade, then thrusts the blade at me.

Having vaguely caught on, I frantically pull myself away. Not a moment later, a ball of flesh slams into the boy from the side.

The part of Abaddon with us now is smaller than the one fighting the angel—

he's only as big as a volleyball. But the impact is still powerful enough to knock the boy several meters into the air.

"What is the meaning of this?" I ask the boy when he lands.

This time, I hear an unsettling voice from behind me.

"Die!"

Instantly, I turn around. One of the Disciples with us is pointing a gun at me.

"Ah—"

"I'm sorry! My mistake!" says Abaddon.

I didn't expect this.

It's over, I think. The guy has a handgun. Abaddon's too far away, as evidenced by his panicked apology. He's always so sardonic—this behavior is totally unlike him. That alone tells me how dire the situation is. *If I was going to die anyway, I should have forced myself on him.*

A moment later, I hear the shrill sound of a gunshot.

But for some reason, the gun-toting Disciple is the one who falls over.

"Guns really come in handy at times like these, huh?"

It's Makeup. She has a gun in her hand, and it's pointed at the Disciple. I catch a glimpse of a thigh holster under her skirt as it flares up momentarily.

The bullet she fired seems to have struck home, and the Disciple immediately stops moving. Blood begins to seep out of him, dyeing the ground black in the darkness.

The other Disciples look at Makeup in shock.

"Hey, wait! What's a high school girl doing with a gun?!"

"Did she lie?!"

"I thought it was suspicious that she made such a big deal of it!"

"Dammit! So that was just a costume...?!"

"Oh, shut up!" yells Makeup. "I really am in high school! I swear to God!"

At the risk of sounding like an ingrate after she saved my life, I have to agree with our opponents.

The Disciple's gun was knocked out of his hand when he was shot, and now lays at Blondie's feet.

She picks it up and gazes at it with interest. "This looks the same as the one you use, Hoshizaki."

"That's really dangerous, okay?" says Futarishizuka. "Let your old lady take it."

She takes the gun from Blondie, then wastes no time pointing it at the other Disciples. She looks like a little girl, but her pose as she aims speaks to a wealth of experience. There's no denying she's much older than she appears.

In an instant, the tables have turned. The women with me are all brazen, dependable people. Watching the others out of the corner of my eye, I turn to Makeup. "Thank you. You saved me."

"All part of the job," she replies. "It's nothing."

"You really don't seem like a high school girl, though," I tell her. "Is that uniform real?"

"Of course it's real!" she exclaims. "I just do regular training!"

Now that Futarishizuka and Makeup have guns, the other Disciples stop in their tracks. They stare at their comrade now lying on the ground, shot—they must realize now that we mean business.

When he sees this, the elementary school-aged boy on the ground yells, "Stolas, the big-boobed loli got me! Come back!"

Big-boobed loli? I think. *Who could that be?*

The boy's vulgar remark rings out around us. All of us turn to look at him. Belatedly, I remember that everyone working with my neighbor is a young woman, including me—even though two are technically older than him.

"Who? Who is this big-boobed loli hussy?"

"Well, it can't be you, Futarishizuka," replies Makeup.

"You're right. It's much more likely to be you."

“I-I’m not a loli! Don’t drag me into this!”

It sounds like Futarishizuka is trying to be nice, in her own way.

I notice an immediate change in our vicinity. As soon as the boy calls out, the battle between the angels and demons—which we’ve been hearing ever since it started—stops.

An instant later, multiple angels and demons gather above our heads. All of them are floating, looking down at us. At the sight of all of them together, no longer fighting, I feel a wave of hopelessness wash over me. It isn’t much different from when I’d had a gun pointed at me.

The only exception is Abaddon. He returns to us, fending off the six-winged angel all the while.

“Abaddon, what’s going on?” I ask.

“Looks like we drew the joker,” he replies.

I have the feeling the only thing keeping us alive right now is the fact that none of the other Disciples can make a move thanks to Futarishizuka and Makeup having guns. Otherwise, they’d probably launch an all-out attack right this moment.

“The demons and angels previously engaged in combat are now targeting us as a single unit,” says Type Twelve. “The so-called Disciples are no exception. I cannot imagine a scene that would induce more loneliness than this.”

“As a matter of fact, youngest daughter—I must say I agree with your viewpoint,” replies Futarishizuka.

“I’m sorry, everyone,” I say. “I truly didn’t expect this to happen.”

“What I wanna know is why,” muses Abaddon. *“There must be a reason.”*

“Aren’t angels and demons supposed to be enemies?” demands Makeup. “They’re definitely on the same side right now.”

“Every now and again an angel or demon will turn traitor. But this is a major alliance, which means it must have a major reason. That’s why I’m so curious.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” murmurs Elsa. “It looks like I am fated to die in this land.”

Given the situation, there's no hope for a decisive victory. I should prioritize everyone's safety and retreat—that will do the least damage to my neighbor's impression of me. I don't think Abaddon will object if I remind him of our deal with Futarishizuka.

I decide to take the incapacitated Disciple hostage and escape from the isolated space.

"Sorry 'bout this, Abaddon," says Stolas, approaching us. *"Master's orders. You understand."*

"You really found a good partner, huh?"

"I know, right? He's a real frightening kid."

In response to their exchange, the "kid" he mentioned speaks up.

"Yep. So it's time to say bye-bye, big-boobed lady."

"Nobody will like you as an adult if you start sexually harassing people as a kid," I tell him.

"You don't get it, do you? Women love it when younger guys are rough and crude."

He doesn't stay on the ground long; he stands up just fine and turns to face us. His earlier meek demeanor is completely gone now. Even with Futarishizuka's gun pointed at him, he gives off a relaxed confidence.

Was he like her—much older than he looked? And yet the way he provoked us seemed a little too coarse for that. Then again, Futarishizuka sexually harasses my neighbor a lot, too.

"Bye-bye?" she says. *"It seems to me we're on even footing here."*

"Are we looking at the same picture?" he asks in response. "We have an overwhelming advantage."

"Did you think we'd let you all go without a fight?" asks Makeup. Guns at the ready, they're trying to threaten all the Disciples, starting with the little boy.

"Did you think we'd confront psychics unprepared?" he shoots back.

"Y-you know who we are?"

“Look,” mutters Ms. Futarishizuka, “I know honesty is a virtue, but methinks you should fix that bad habit of yours.”

Apparently, they know who Futarishizuka and Makeup are. There must be psychics behind them, not just angels and demons. And since Makeup already let Futarishizuka’s name slip, they probably have all the information they need.

“Unfortunately, our lives were on the table right from the beginning,” says the boy, sighing like he’s talking to helpless children.

“Huh...?”

His switch in attitude from stubborn to careless lends credence to what he’s saying. It sounds absurd. Even I can’t help but react.

“Sorry, kid,” says Stolas. “I wish it hadn’t come to this...”

“I lost the gamble,” the boy replies. “But considering what I would have gotten if it had worked, it was worth it.”

The exchange between the long-legged owl and the boy sounds like lines out of a play. The boy—who looks younger than me—offers a dry smile, like he’s realized the truth of everything. None of it sounds real.

But the angels and demons overhead ready their weapons for combat. A few of them start radiating light, as though they’re about to let loose some pretty crazy attacks.

I remember something similar happening before I moved to Karuizawa, when angels attacked my old school. Naturally, that brings the image of my neighbor being sliced apart back to mind. I don’t ever want to see something like that again.

I need to manage without him.

“Abaddon, we’re retreating from the island. Please defend us and buy us time.”

“Right, leave it to me! I can at least guarantee you’ll get off the island alive.”

“It’s not like you to be so pessimistic.”

“Even I feel responsible for my actions. And this time, you were completely

right.”

Abaddon spreads himself out in the air to cover us. I doubt he has much of a chance of withstanding a concentrated angelic barrage, though. Even if he did, there’s no telling what would become of him. At this point, I’ve already lost the death game. Maybe that’s why he’s being so modest for once.

“I think you should get the thing ready now while we have the chance,” says Futarishizuka to Type Twelve.

“Grandmother’s words are unnecessary. It is already moving this way.”

“If only we were close to the water—then I could have helped!” laments Makeup.

“Umm, do you need water?” asks Blondie. “I could make some for you with magic...”

If we can get onto Robot Girl’s saucer-shaped flying object, we might be able to escape the isolated space alive. Everyone else seems to agree, so we all start working toward that goal.

But just then, a flash of light lances through the night sky, from right to left. And it’s not coming from any of the angels or demons.

Instead, the light shoots straight through them.

Everyone peers out from behind Abaddon’s flesh-wall to see what’s going on.

The light engulfs a decent percentage of the angels and demons in the sky, shooting through the air at incredible speed and causing the heavens to vibrate. This powerful stream of light feels like something you’d call a beam or a laser.

The angels and demons who escaped the light turn toward it and ready themselves. They seem unsure of what’s going on.

Meanwhile, we hear a familiar voice very close by.

“I will kill all psychics.”

It’s coming from near the roof of the building we’re huddled up against. Everyone shifts their attention toward it, including the angels and demons

hovering in the air.

We all see what I can only describe as a tear in space.

One moment, a crack forms in the empty air, and the next, a black space darker than night pulls open with a loud scraping noise. The blackness is opaque, blocking our view of the building's wall beyond.

Then, from out of the strange space, a person appears.

She's called a magical girl, if I remember correctly. That's what my neighbor and Futarishizuka said anyway.

Everything from her clothes to her hair is a vivid pink. Her outfit is cute, with tons of frills, and reminds me of a character from a children's anime. She certainly looks the part of a magical girl.

She readies a wand in front of her and asks us, as if issuing a challenge, "I will kill all psychics. Are the ones in the sky psychics?"

"Did you come to us just so you could ask that?" replied Futarishizuka.

"The magical middle-aged man said that there are all kinds of people with powers."

"Ah. How conscientious of you."

I've seen this girl several times before. We even ate dinner together at the inn in Atami with the hot springs. According to my neighbor, she has a different background from angels, demons, psychics, and mechanical life-forms.

The phenomena we just witnessed were probably her Magical Beam and Magical Field at work. Right after firing that brilliant beam of light across the sky, she used a kind of instant teleportation to come to us.

As cute as her moniker made her sound, the reality was brutal.

"But you already fired a shot," Futarishizuka reminded her. "And it was a good one, too."

"Should I not have helped?" she asks.

"No, no. We're grateful, of course. Thank you. But we're psychics too, aren't we?"

“You saved me before. So I saved you this time.”

“Really? Oh, is it finally happening? Are we going to join forces and get along —”

“Now that we’re even, I won’t hesitate next time. I’ll kill you then.”

“Whoa. I guess not.”

“Since you’re all together, I thought the magical middle-aged man would be with you.”

“Unfortunately, he’s attending to other business right now.”

Apparently, she’s after my neighbor. What relationship do the two of them have? I’m extremely curious.

And what’s this “magical middle-aged man” business?

I look up into the sky again and see the angels and demons still floating in the air. A few of them are gone now, but about eighty percent of them remain. It was probably the ones of lower rank that got taken out. It seems these beings are indeed extremely powerful within isolated spaces.



“What are you even doing here? You’re pretty far from the mainland,” says Makeup.

“I saw this island on the internet. And on the evening news.”

“You mean that website with all the awful pictures on it?”

“I think so.”

“Why isn’t anyone deleting that thing? It’s full of gory images. It’s disgusting. And why did the news bother bringing it up?”

“You’re surprisingly sharp sometimes, my esteemed senior,” says Futarishizuka.

“I’m not answering that. I know you’re just trying to make fun of me, and I’m not falling for it again.”

“Actually, I meant it this time.”

Normally, only angels, demons, and their Disciples are able to enter isolated spaces. My neighbor told me there are other ways of getting in, though—and that this magical girl has one.

She probably suspected some psychics were behind the website in question and flew here.

“Are the flying ones psychics?” she asks again.

“Yeah. They are. Mind wiping them out?”

“Hey, Futarishizuka,” Miss Hoshizaki cuts in, “are you trying to put this girl in the line of fire?!”

“Oh, come now, dear. It was just a little joke.”

“The flying ones aren’t psychics?” asks the magical girl. “Then what are they?”

“You saw them once before, right?” says Futarishizuka. “They’re angels and demons.”

“...Oh.”

The angels and demons seem flustered by the magical girl’s previous attack, but they quickly regain their calm and begin to rally. A few of them start shining

again—they'd stopped when the Magical Beam hit them. They must be charging up for an attack.

"I'll defend this place against the ones in the sky," says the magical girl, readying her wand and looking up sharply.

"Sounds great to me," says Abaddon, still floating in front of us, serving as a literal meat shield.

It seems the two of them intend to use a double-layered defense to negate the angels' and demons' attacks. We all bunch up behind them.

The safe zone is very small—about the size of the grandmother's room in our pretend family house that Futarishizuka complained about.

Just then, the mixed force of angels and demons hits us with everything they've got. A series of booms and bangs echo through the air.

It seems less like a combined effort and more like each of them is simply attacking however they please. Abaddon's body blocks our vision, so we can't see most of what's going on, though I can tell they're really pummeling us.

The surrounding area lights up as if dawn has broken.

Abaddon's meaty body begins to tear apart before our eyes under the onslaught.

Whatever beams of light or flames that make it through the holes slam into some kind of spatial distortion—the Magical Barrier—which in turn begins to crack. At this rate, it won't last even a few minutes.

"I...I don't know if I'll be able to...kill any more psychics after this..."

Even the magical girl seems to have accepted defeat. She looks like she's in pain. She's probably putting every last bit of her magic into maintaining the barrier.

Outside the area under her and Abaddon's protection, the Disciples who deceived us are dying one after another. There was no chance for them to run. Their corpses continue to bounce up and down under the assault, growing smaller and smaller.

"Youngest daughter?" says Futarishizuka. "Where's the thing?"

“It has moved to a position nearby. However, it is not possible to secure a safe landing area in this situation. If exposed to the angels’ and demon’s attacks, it will not endure long enough to maintain its flight capabilities.”

“Ugh, could this get any worse?”

The flying object we used to get here is pretty big, and Robot Girl’s concerns are reasonable. But our shield, Abaddon, is already thinning out at an alarming rate. I don’t think it’s realistic to ask him to defend an even larger area.

Then, as if reading my mind, she makes a suggestion. “I propose to the eldest son a change in plans.”

“Whatcha got? I gotta be honest—I can’t do too much at this point.”

“I request a role switch.”

The youngest daughter, her face as impassive as a Noh mask, looks ever so slightly strained.

“You want to take over defense and have me run away with the others, right?”

“Eldest Son, your viewpoint is correct. If I deploy the terminal’s onboard shields, then its sacrifice should buy us some time. Meanwhile, you will envelop the family with your body and immediately withdraw from this area. That will result in the highest chance of everyone surviving.”

“You mean that invisible wall I bumped into at the lookout?”

“Affirmative. I will expand said shield to maximum output. According to this point of contact’s simulation, you will need only a few seconds to escape with the family. If that is all it takes, I can use the terminal as a shield.”

Compared to bringing the terminal to us and trying to board it under constant

fire from angels and demons, having Abaddon grab us in meat form and fly away seems like it will take a lot less time.

But what will happen after that?

“Won’t they stop targeting the terminal and chase after Abaddon?” I ask.

“I will address that problem with this point of contact, separate units, and the terminal.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the terminal arrives, this point of contact and the separate units will charge the enemy forces. By activating their self-destruct mechanisms, they can buy time for the eldest son’s escape. In addition, once the eldest son is a certain distance away, the terminal will also charge the enemy and activate its self-destruct mechanism. This will buy us anywhere from several seconds to half a minute.”

“Huh...?”

“I can guarantee the eldest son the necessary time to withdraw from the isolated space.”

That would mean sacrificing Robot Girl. Is she really okay with that? *Those are big words for a coward constantly telling us to retreat from everything.*

“You said something similar in Chichibu, didn’t you?” remarks Futarishizuka.

“Your viewpoint is correct, Grandmother.”

If she can draw away the enemy even after we take flight, there’s a good chance we’ll make it out of here. Most importantly, I won’t lose Abaddon.

“Are you sure you’re all right with that?” asks the kimono-clad girl.

“The loss of this point of contact is trivial. An equivalent machine can be manufactured.”

“But everything that happens inside this space goes away, doesn’t it? If we lose your terminal, your separate unit, and your point of contact, you won’t have any way to recover your memories, or the equivalent, from the isolated space. You’re in standalone mode, remember?”

“Grandmother, why do you say these things?”

“What? I’m just shocked the youngest daughter is making such a suggestion.”

“.....”

Robot Girl falls silent at that.

Nobody says anything. We simply wait for her to speak. After appearing to think for a few moments, she continues.

“If I lose this moment, this continuity of memories and time, but create another point of contact in the factory—will it still be the same me spending time with my family? I have never questioned this before.”

She seems to be talking to herself. She looks away from us and gazes into the distance. Is she looking toward her homeland, where she was born, far-off in space?

“But now, this trivial notion terrifies me. How frightening emotions are—and how sweet. I believe that I have grasped the reason mechanical life-forms sealed them away so long ago and forbade them.”

“You can’t copy your memory data onto some media device and send it with us?” asks Futarishizuka.

“My experience in Chichibu tells me that in isolated spaces, this point of contact is treated like a human. However, I confirmed that new data stored on any medium I bring inside will revert upon exiting the space.”

“Right, right. My phone contacts and photo folder went back to how they were before, too.”

“There is value in elucidating the conditions under which the data stored in points of contact and memory media will revert. However, we do not have the time resources needed to do so now.”

Futarishizuka is right—all the notes and pictures saved on my phone, as well as the clock, all revert when exiting an isolated space. But according to my neighbor, the point of contact—Robot Girl’s body—was able to retain her memories of the disturbance in the Chichibu mountains.

There’s little room for doubt. Isolated spaces have some kind of mechanism that distinguishes between living beings and everything else. If it decides she’s a living being, her memories and data will be safe. Otherwise, she’ll be treated no differently than our phones.

I don’t know any more about the rules and mechanisms than the others do.

“Then you should come with us. Let the eldest son handle this,” says Futarishizuka.

“Grandmother, your judgment is correct.”

“Yes, your old granny’s always right.”

“However, for some unknown reason, I have determined that I must do this. I do not know how effective the terminal’s shield will be at present. A counterattack is required to stall for time and reduce follow-up attacks during your escape, and I am the only one who can accomplish it.”

“.....”

Robot Girl turns back to Futarishizuka. Like before, I don’t see any emotion in her eyes. But somehow, she seems a tiny bit more gallant, more courageous than before.

“If you insist, I won’t stop you,” says Futarishizuka.

“I have registered Grandmother’s agreement with the youngest daughter’s proposal.”

With everything decided, Robot Girl turns her attention to Makeup. Then, for whatever reason, she removes the water bottle hanging from her neck. It’s cute, the kind meant for kids that you can buy at any supermarket. She suddenly showed up with it this morning—the day after our trip to the amusement park. Now, she’s holding it out toward Makeup with both hands.

“...Um. Mother, please let me help you.”

“Huh?”

The intended recipient looks blankly at the bottle as if she doesn’t know what it’s for.

“There is water inside. I would be happy if it aided you during your retreat.”



“You... You brought that for me...?”

Makeup’s expression crumbles.

She’s a psychic. She can bend any water she touches to her will. She apparently uses that power while on the job with my neighbor. Robot Girl must have hung the bottle from her neck so she could supply Makeup with water.

I remember her saying once that she brings plastic water bottles if she doesn’t think she’ll have a ready source at hand.

“Mother, please take it.”

“O-of course...”

Hesitantly, Makeup takes the bottle from her. Her eyes flit between it and the person standing in front of her.

Has she totally caved? I wonder. She looks like she’s about to burst into tears.

A few moments after taking it, she begins to speak, a strained expression on her face.

“Umm, you... Maybe you shouldn’t blow yourself up. Come with us instead...”

I figured she’d start trying to talk Robot Girl down.

In fact, I wonder if Robot Girl did everything just to get this reaction. It was easy to imagine her saying “Well, if you insist,” then retreating with the rest of us.

But then she turns her back to Makeup and raises her voice.

“Commencing operation.”

“You really sure about this?”

“Family rule number six: Everyone must work together to help any family members in trouble. I will do what I am able to. Eldest son, I want you to act as the head of the family in Father’s absence and save the others.”

“Right. You can leave it to me. I won’t let anyone get hurt.”

Upon Abaddon's agreement, the surrounding area changes, and a giant flying object appears out of thin air. It's the one we used to get to Miyakejima. It must have been cloaked up until now.

It accelerates, sliding between Abaddon's meat-wall and the enemies, and positions itself to face the brunt of the angels' and demons' attacks.

Once he sees this, my partner starts moving. After changing his shape with a strange, organic motion, he scoops us all up. It feels like I'm an ingredient in a batch of *okonomiyaki*.

I can't call the awful, sticky sensation comfortable by any stretch. If I'm being honest, it's incredibly disgusting, like I'm being devoured. But nobody cries out. *These ladies really have their stuff together.*

"All set!" says the demon, giving the signal.

"Acknowledged," replies Robot Girl. "The point of contact and separate unit will now charge."

Looking more closely, it seems like she's clinging to something I can't see—like she's riding an invisible motorcycle. She probably called the separate units, or whatever along with the terminal, and is riding one of them through the air.

As I watch, her body floats upward, proving me correct.

At about that time, her final words quietly reach us.

"Will this bring me a little closer to being part of the family?"

"You—you were eavesdropping when we—"

Futarishizuka tries to say something, but Robot Girl launches off into the sky before she can finish.

She accelerates much faster than a car or motorcycle—it's hardly fair to compare them. In a flash, she's up in the air, right next to the angels and demons. Her trajectory brings her in a large arc, probably to avoid the enemy attacks that are still ongoing.

A moment later, we hear a series of loud booms.

"And we're off!"

In the same moment, Abaddon takes to the skies.

As we leave the shadow of the terminal, we can see the other side.

The sky is alight with whirling flames and billowing smoke. The series of explosions we heard must have been the separate units going off after the point of contact.

She really did it. She blew herself up.

And here I thought she would try to escape on her own.

“Futarishizuka, we can’t just run away like this...!” Makeup pleads.

“Stop,” says Futarishizuka. “Don’t let her sacrifice go to waste.”

“Maybe you’re right, but... This is too sad!”

“She said so herself, didn’t she? She’ll be back before you know it.”

“B-but...!”

The angels and demons are confused by the surprise attack, just as Robot Girl predicted. The flames and smoke block us from view, and for a few moments, many of our opponents stop attacking. Others, confused, begin flinging attacks in random directions. It doesn’t seem like the explosions finished many of them off.

Taking advantage of the opening, Abaddon accelerates through the air, shuttling us away from the island.

As if it can sense that we’re nearly out, the terminal waiting on the surface begins to move as well.

The angels and demons realize what Abaddon is doing and move to give chase. But the flying saucer flies up toward them and positions itself between us, serving as a shield.

“No! I have to go back!” yells Makeup. “If I can use the seawater, I might be able to do something!” She begins struggling, trying to free herself from Abaddon’s fleshy grip.

A moment later, her pleas rejected, we exit the isolated space.



After learning more about the situation from an agent working for the Office, we decided to meet back up with the others. After Peeps concealed us with his magic, we flew into the air and hurried off.

On the way, we saw something shining in the southern part of the island—several rays of light were streaming down from the sky toward the ground.

“Peeps, do you see that? Could that be...”

“Our only choice is to hasten there and pray your hunch is incorrect.”

“Okay.”

I nodded to the distinguished sparrow, and we set a course for the rays of light. Putting the pedal to the metal with my flight spell, we reached the area in just a couple minutes.

We found several angels and demons in the air. And just as we arrived, explosions started going off in their midst.

At first, I thought they’d noticed us and started attacking. However, they looked even more flustered than we did. While I couldn’t make out any details, I figured Abaddon and my neighbor had probably done something.

Turning my attention toward the sea, I saw a huge hunk of flesh sporting burn marks here and there flying through the sky, seemingly trying to escape the commotion. A flying saucer hovered in the air behind them, protecting their retreat and barring the angels and demons from approaching.

A glance was enough for me to tell what was going on.

“Peeps, sorry to keep asking, but would you be able to help out?”

“Would you mind if I defeated all of the ones floating in the air?”

“It’s not likely any Disciples will be in the line of fire, so yes, if you would. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. The family is in trouble, after all.”

With a nod, he fluttered off my shoulder and flew away.

Not a moment later, a magic circle appeared in front of him, firing countless rays of light.

The bursts of radiance shot into the night sky like a meteor shower, zooming toward the angels and demons floating in the air. The beams of light traveled incredibly fast, and our enemies started dropping like flies, unable to dodge.

The spell was like a bunch of beam spells bundled into one and fired at the same time.

“Peeps, can you handle things here?”

“Yes. Can you deal with the airborne vehicle?”

“Of course. Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

Leaving the angels and demons to the sparrow, I flew toward the terminal, placing myself between it and our opponents. Someone could have been in there. And even if they weren’t, the terminal itself was like a part of Type Twelve. If it was shot down, she was sure to feel even more lonely.

If Ms. Futarishizuka caught wind of this, she’d probably criticize me, saying this was a perfect chance to ask the mechanical life-form to go home. But in this situation, I couldn’t possibly leave her be.

The moment I moved, an angel and demon pair came flying at me. There were a lot of them here, and some had doubtless managed to avoid Peeps’s spell.

I fired back with my own beam spell, having finished the incantation in advance. I made this one extra large.

“Is he a Disciple?”

“Yeah, he must have failed to escape with the oth—”

They started to say something, but they weren’t able to finish, because as soon as I was done casting my spell, they were wiped off the map.

Thankfully, it seemed they hadn’t been too powerful. I doubt I would’ve been able to handle myself against a boss-level character like Abaddon or little Mika. I probably would have been sliced to ribbons.

I was extremely grateful for Peeps, who was fending off the lion's share of our enemies. I looked over and saw a large number of angels and demons locked in battle. I couldn't see the tiny bird among them, but I could tell he must be somewhere in the middle.

I was stricken by the impulse to go help him out.

"....."

But I'd only hold him back if I did. There was something more important for me to do right now.

I shifted my attention to the terminal behind me. And then, as I watched, a striking change occurred.

The flying object, which was stopped in midair, seemed to lose all of its energy and began hurtling upside-down toward the ground. It wasn't very high up to begin with, so before I could even move to stop it, it hit the surface.

Looking more closely, I saw signs of damage all over it. Pieces were missing, or burned, or frozen, or pierced through with strange arrows, swords, and spears.

I didn't know what to think. Had it been destroyed?

I flew around it, looking for an entrance, but couldn't find one.

The sight of it sent shivers up my spine. There could have been people in there. I considered using my beam spell to force my way in, but I didn't want to hurt anyone inside.

Then again, since I'd seen Abaddon retreating, I figured my neighbor had to be with him. It was likely everyone had withdrawn together. Maybe they'd used this terminal to stall for time.

Under that assumption, I decided to refrain from blasting it open.

Still, I couldn't let anyone recover it. The mechanical life-form's point of contact had been treated as a living thing inside an isolated space once before. If this terminal was the same, it would leave a broken-down saucer on the island back in the real world. Without the ability to fly, I was almost certain it would wind up in someone else's possession.

So, as initially planned, I made it my responsibility to protect the fallen

terminal.

Not a moment after I made that decision, there was a change on Peeps's end. It seemed like the angels and demons were retreating.

They started flying into the distance, moving away from me. The booms and bangs of flames, lightning strikes, and laser beams that had been lighting up the night sky like fireworks abruptly quieted down, and the area began to regain a measure of calm.

My overpowered sparrow had probably terrified them.

I looked down at the ground and saw a group of people hiding behind some buildings not far away. They were probably the Disciples of the angels and demons we'd just been fighting. A few among them appeared to be other angels and demons acting as their bodyguards.

They began to flee the area, as well.

"....."

I had the option of striking them down here.

But I held back. If I wanted to keep my neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki safe—as well as maintain my standing in Japanese society—it was very important not to harm any of the Disciples. They all had futures, and I wanted them to get out of this isolated space unharmed.

If the time-stopping psychic's words were to be believed, the Office—and the ones backing them—were after the proxy war's rewards. Those rewards were given not to angels and demons, but to the Disciples contracted to them.

If I tried to scoop up all those rewards for myself right now, I would be incurring those people's displeasure. Even if Peeps and I could handle ourselves, I could easily foresee a future in which those around us were put in harm's way.

The ones behind the scenes were already running amok. We'd need time to lay some groundwork before we could strike. Unfortunately, it seemed like I'd have to let my boss take care of this business.

"Look! Up there, floating above the saucer!"

"If we can kill a Disciple, we've got this in the bag!"

“No way in hell I’m running away without accomplishing anything!”

But apparently, not all the angels and demons had decided to flee. A few hot-blooded ones came flying toward me. They must have thought Peeps was a demon or something.

Disciples couldn’t hold a candle to angels and demons. Especially not in isolated spaces. They wanted to take me down to prevent me from causing trouble for them in the future. They thought it was worth the risk if they could remove an extremely powerful demon from the equation, and I understood that.

“Ugh...”

Like before, I hastily fired my beam spell.

The angels and demons probably hadn’t expected a counterattack from a Disciple. The beam took out two of the three coming at me; they were hit head-on and obliterated. The last demon, however, raised his spear and withstood the hit with some kind of barrier.

“Wh-who the hell is this guy?!” he exclaimed.

“If you withdraw, I won’t chase you,” I said, muttering the beam spell’s incantation again under my breath.

They’d seen my face now. If I could, I wanted to take them down. Of course, now that all those angels and demons had seen Peeps, maybe there was no point. Still, I figured it was best to do everything I could.

“You one of those?” demanded the demon. “A psychic or whatever?”

“You know about us, then?” I asked.

“Yeah. Seems like a few of us are working with people like you.”

“I see.”

The angels and demons apparently already had psychic collaborators. That meant there was a good chance Mr. Akutsu already knew about the proxy war. I’d been meaning to talk with him about it anyway, which made this quite convenient.

“There’s always been weirdos, but recently there’s a hell of a lot of them,” the demon remarked.

“Is that right?”

“I mean, I haven’t *counted* them or anything. Wouldn’t know for sure.”

That was as far as our conversation got. A certain sparrow crashed through the demon’s back at an incredible speed, launching out from his chest. A tackle attack—I couldn’t believe it. The bird’s body was glowing, too.

I thought I remembered Peeps doing something similar to the elven woman in the otherworld—one of the great war criminals allied with some big country in the north. She probably had more defensive potential, though.

“There you are. Are you unharmed?”

“Uh, yeah. Thanks to you.”

The demon didn’t even have time to scream before he fell to the ground below. We watched him for a few more moments, but he didn’t budge.

I turned back to the sparrow and noticed that one of his feet was gone.

“Peeps, your foot!” I exclaimed, quickly reaching for his small body.

I didn’t know how much good it would do, but my limbs moved on their own. I felt his soft down under my fingertips.

“I’m fine. I did not push myself that far.”

“Yeah, but your foot’s gone!”

“In time, it will grow back naturally.”

“Maybe so, but...”

I guessed there was an angel or demon in the mix as strong as little Mika. If she and Abaddon were on equal footing, the angels and demons would need to gather a significant force if they wanted to be sure they could defeat the latter.

“More importantly, I am glad you are safe.”

“I have the magic you taught me to thank for that.”

“Then you should be proud. The fact that you are able to use magic is, without

a doubt, a product of your talents.”

“No, no. You were the one who gave me the mana to begin with, remember?”

“In that case, both the mana and talent are already yours.”

The beam had an extremely high attack power—as expected from a spell classified as above advanced. Still, it hadn’t worked against that spear-wielding demon, nor had it gotten through that angel’s shield the other day. I couldn’t let myself get cocky.

“But that aside, these enemies are an interesting bunch. Some are very powerful and others quite weak,” Peeps remarked. *“We must be vigilant around them.”*

“Yeah, I agree,” I said.

We observed our surroundings from where we floated beside the fallen terminal. The combat was over, and the whole area was quiet. The Disciples we’d seen on the ground seemed to have already escaped.

“What is our next move?” asked Peeps.

“The isolated space should collapse soon, so now’s our chance—” to recover the terminal and return to the Karuizawa villa.

But just before I could make the suggestion, sound returned to the world.

Not many people lived on this island, so unlike Tokyo, there wasn’t much change. Still, I could faintly hear the engines of cars and the roar of air conditioners in windows.

That was our signal that we had returned from the isolated space.

“It would seem we are back.”

“I feel like I’ve been asking favors from you all day, but could you get the terminal and bring us back to Karuizawa?”

We were on a remote island in the middle of the night, and we didn’t see anyone out walking. But if something this big was laying on the ground, it wouldn’t take long for someone to find it. I could see a smattering of houses nearby.

“Understood.”

“Thanks, Peeps.”

The bird and I used flight magic to move over to the terminal and cause it to float up off the ground.

That was when I noticed that it had changed when the isolated space collapsed. All the marks from the attacks it had received were gone.

I remembered that time my body had reverted back to normal after being cut in half. The same thing seemed to have happened to the terminal. Just as the isolated space in the Chichibu mountains had designated Type Twelve’s point of contact a person, so had this one done the same with her terminal.

We waited a few moments, but it didn’t show any signs of moving again. I decided to focus on getting it out of here instead.

“Then let us be off.”

A huge magic circle appeared—large enough to fit both us and the terminal inside.

My vision immediately went black. It was a good thing I was already in the air, so I didn’t have to feel my feet suddenly getting swept out from underneath me.

A moment later, light returned, and we were greeted with the familiar sight of Ms. Futarishizuka’s garden.

I had suggested we head directly to her Karuizawa villa, and Peeps used his magic to move the terminal, too, setting it down right next to us.

Just then, the phone in my pocket started to buzz. Someone was calling me. In the center of the display was the name Futarishizuka.

“Peeps, it’s Ms. Futarishizuka.”

“By all means, answer her.”

After checking with Peeps, I took the call.

She greeted me with an enthusiastic voice. *“Oh, good, I got through! Where on Earth are you right now?”*

“We just got back to Karuizawa, actually.”

“Wait, really?”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, could you tell me how everyone’s doing?”

“We’re all safe. Nobody’s dead, at least.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I must have been right about the giant hunk of flesh I saw flying toward the ocean being Abaddon. And it didn’t seem like anyone had been left behind inside the broken terminal, either.

Perhaps it was disrespectful to put it like this, but as long as nobody was dead, I knew the Starsage’s magic could fix them right up. I felt really bad relying on him so much, but it was incredibly reassuring having him with me at times like these.

“I suppose saying any more over the phone would be unwise, hmm?”

“Indeed. Let’s meet up soon.”

Mr. Akutsu used the phone as little as possible for conversations like these, too. If Ms. Futarishizuka insisted, then it was best to go along with what she asked. Promising to meet back up with them, we ended the call. In total, it lasted only a few minutes.

“Peeps, she says everyone’s safe.”

“Oh? That is good to hear.”

For now, I could breathe a sigh of relief.



Unfortunately, that sentiment lasted only a moment.

While Ms. Futarishizuka had told me over the phone that nobody had died, apparently, there had still been what one might call a sacrifice in the line of duty. She told us about what had happened once we were all back together.

At that point, every one of us was in her villa’s yard. The terminal was in the center of it, and we were all standing nearby. Unlike when we’d left, Type

Twelve was missing from the group.

“So this UFO thing hasn’t moved at all?” asked the villa’s owner.

“It hasn’t responded ever since it fell out of the sky when we got close,” I explained.

“It looks repaired on the outside. I wonder if it’s internals are wrecked...”

“I-isn’t there anything we can do?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

Everyone’s attention was focused on the saucer-shaped flying object sitting nobly in the middle of the yard. I’d just heard the reason for all this a moment ago.

According to the others, Type Twelve had risked her life to save everyone else.

Still, as a mechanical life-form, as long as her mother ship and production facilities were safe, she could apparently manufacture as many replacement points of contact as she wanted. That said, it would be impossible for them to inherit her memories due to the special environment within the isolated spaces.

Though it was only a short amount of time, any experiences she’d had inside were lost.

If there was any exception, it was this one terminal. Unfortunately, it wasn’t making a peep.

“Even if we could fix it, I doubt it has her memories in it,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Is there any way we can contact, umm, her main body or whatever?” asked Miss Hoshizaki. “With these things, the earlier we do it, the more likely it is we can save her. I want to do anything we possibly can.”

“It’s not like she had a stroke or something.”

“Well, she might be a machine, but isn’t it kind of the same thing?”

“Perhaps. But these memories only amount to a little under an hour.”

“Okay, but don’t you want to bring them back if we can?”

Miss Hoshizaki’s affection for Type Twelve was genuine. I’d always known her

to be a compassionate, empathetic sort, and as such, her response was very different from Ms. Futarishizuka's.

That went for the others, too.

"Futarishizuka, if we can save her, I'd like to help."

"Yeah. Consider it a request from me too, if you don't mind."

"I know you've already done a lot for us, but please."

Lady Elsa, Abaddon, and my neighbor added their voices to Miss Hoshizaki's. Type Twelve must have really done well—she'd gained the full trust of the family.

"I can't do much," replied Ms. Futarishizuka. "She never put any of her communication or transportation terminals here at the villa. All we can do is try to call for them on the radio. Which I don't particularly mind doing..." She glanced over at the villa. "I suppose I'll set things up."

Everyone else looked at her with anticipation.

Incidentally, Magical Pink was there, too. They'd met up in the isolated space and she had saved them from a pack of double-crossing demons. When I asked, she told me she went there to kill psychics, just like she had on other occasions. The website update announcing the start of the death game was making the rounds in the news, and she had assumed psychics were involved and decided to go. *Always a hard worker*, I thought. According to her, she'd gotten her information from the big-screen TV at some train station or other.

Now she, too, made a request on behalf of Type Twelve. "I don't know what's happening, but if we can save someone, I want to do so."

"Yes, yes. And I see the biting criticism in the eyes of each and every one of you," complained Ms. Futarishizuka. "I'm not saying we shouldn't help her, all right? Granny will go set up the radio, so just wait here a moment."

But as soon as she turned to walk off, there was a clanking noise and the terminal shook. Everyone naturally shifted their attention to the source of the noise.

"Hey, did that thing just move?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Who knows,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Could have just been settling into the dirt.”

“Maybe we set it down in a bad spot,” I wondered aloud.

Growing curious myself, I peered at where the terminal met the ground. It was indeed on soft soil, and the device appeared to be quite heavy, so it could easily have tilted over a little. That said, I couldn’t get a good look since it was still dark out.

“I could flip it over, if you are concerned about how it’s seated,” offered Peeps.

“No, that’ll probably just cause other problems,” I said. His magic could make quick work of the task, but we didn’t want to damage the device any further.

As I considered this, part of the terminal began to glow.

“Father’s viewpoint is correct. Peep, this terminal has a top and bottom. It must not be overturned. While that will not be enough to damage it given its structure, you must handle the terminal properly, otherwise unforeseen errors may occur.”

A familiar voice rang out through the villa’s yard. Its tone was flat and emotionless, just like Type Twelve’s.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. “The terminal’s talking.”

“Wait! A-are you okay?” cried Miss Hoshizaki.

Everyone’s attention once again shifted to the terminal.

“Synchronization of point of contact, separate units, and terminal was successful inside the isolated space. The point of contact and separate units were lost due to self-destruction. However, the terminal did not need to self-destruct, as Father and Peep came to its aid. Thanks to them, I was able to bring the data from the point of contact and separate units outside of the isolated space.”

“So the one talking to us is the same one from inside the isolated space, right?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Mother’s viewpoint is correct. I was able to bring back a continuous set of memories without loss or damage.”

“Oh. Thank goodness. Thank goodness...”

Miss Hoshizaki squinted as tears formed in the corners of her eyes. She must have been sincerely happy that Type Twelve’s memories were safe.

“Mother, your concern soothes your youngest daughter’s loneliness like nothing else ever has.”

“I should be saying the same. I’m so, so happy you made it back.”

A heartwarming scene indeed. The others spoke up in turn.

“Whatever happened, I’m glad you’re okay. I want to thank you, too.”

“Thank you so much for saving us. Without your help, I think they would have defeated Abaddon. If they’d succeeded, I wouldn’t have lasted much longer.”

Ms. Futarishizuka had explained to me that they were in a life-and-death situation. But based on what my neighbor and Abaddon had just said, it had been even more heart-pumping than I’d imagined.

“It’s thanks to you that I avoided disappointing my father,” said Lady Elsa. “You have my sincere gratitude.”

“...Yeah, thanks,” chimed in Magical Pink. “I was supposed to save you, but you saved me.

This was warmer treatment than Type Twelve had ever received; she was on cloud nine.

“Ah, how sweet it is to be in one’s family’s thoughts...”

The terminal sat there in the dark, looking like nothing more than a vehicle. Naturally, it had no face to express itself with, nor any body or hands to gesture with. But Type Twelve’s characteristic remarks painted a vivid picture of the girl we’d come to know.

As she spoke, bits of the terminal flashed, which I found rather adorable.

“The youngest daughter would be willing to hear words of gratitude from the grandmother as well.”

“You don’t have to goad me on, you know. I’m quite thankful. You saved us all.” Ms. Futarishizuka acquiesced; even she had to yield in this situation. Instead, she voiced her objection in the form of a question. “But why were you silent until now?”

“While this terminal is equipped with external speakers, it does not have the faculties to communicate with humanity like a point of contact does. It took time to reconstruct its internal systems using the synchronized data received from the point of contact.”

Apparently, she’d been trying to install a speech function in the terminal the whole time. Since she’d been in standalone mode inside the isolated space, she probably hadn’t been able to receive any data from outside. But what about after the space collapsed? There was so much we didn’t understand about mechanical life-forms and their high-tech background. *It seemed to take quite a while, though*, I reflected.

“Sure, sure,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “But I bet you were so happy your family was worried about you that you waited a bit longer, hmm? You said a single point of contact has more computing resources than all of humanity put together, if I remember correctly.”

“...I will choose silence.”

For a mechanical life-form who couldn’t tell lies, that was as good a “yes” as anything she could have said. Apparently, she was pretty happy.

In order to change the subject, she began speaking about her feelings.

“I had known for some time that I was not necessary to the family. But I wanted to change that. I wanted to be wrapped in the warmth of the household. Just as Sasaki cares for Elsa, and

Abaddon cares for Kurosu.”

“So you decided to contribute to the family somehow?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If there is no exaggeration added to Futarishizuka’s suggestion, then I would not deny the possibility.”

“Please. I’m sure that was the unadulterated truth.”

“.....”

Apparently, it was.



Type Twelve's behavior had changed; it was like we were fast-forwarding through watching a child grow up. She was far more sociable now than she had been when we'd first met her, a factor I could sense was driven by her newfound emotions. The way she talked about her own feelings so openly spoke to that. I wondered if, once she matured a little more, she'd start desperately trying to hide them.

"I suppose I have to ask the question," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Did you catch on to what we were doing?"

"If you are referring to your actions at the amusement park, then yes, your viewpoint is correct."

"I see."

That meant our entire plan to ask her to go back to her home planet was foiled. In fact, one of the plan's key members, Miss Hoshizaki—who had always been against it—was looking at the kimono-clad girl in a way that implied she'd never help out with something like that again. And at this point, Ms. Futarishizuka wouldn't be able to force her.

As for myself, I really wanted to refrain from any similar endeavors in the future—especially now that Type Twelve had saved my neighbor from a life-and-death situation.

"Then it would seem there's nothing more I can do," murmured Ms. Futarishizuka, sounding a little annoyed.



With Type Twelve safely returned to us, we moved inside the villa to have dinner.

Family rule number one: The whole family must eat one meal per day together at the table.

We were in the living room of our home inside the unidentified flying object—the one a certain someone had procured by causing someone else a whole lot of trouble. We sat down on floor cushions set around the wooden table in the

house's living space and had our meal.

Today's dinner was curry. Since it was late, Ms. Futarishizuka had brought all the ingredients from her villa, and had whipped up the meal in no time. She'd added a homemade spice mix to the leftover curry roux in the kitchen.

"Though I really hate to admit it," said Miss Hoshizaki, "this is so much better than my curry..."

"How many years of experience do you think I have working in a kitchen, dear?" replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Well, you're rich, aren't you? Don't you have servants take care of the cooking?"

Futarishizuka finished cooking in less than half the time Miss Hoshizaki and Type Twelve had taken. Even the side salad, which she'd thrown together at the same time as the curry, was accented with roasted veggies. It was delicious.

Type Twelve's point of contact was at the table with us, too. A replacement had arrived in a fresh terminal while dinner was being prepared. By transferring the data from the terminal in the yard, she'd acquired a new body with which to communicate. Its design was the same as before, and all her memories had been brought over, too.

"Grandmother, did you choose curry for dinner in order to bully Mother?" the mechanical life-form asked.

"I only chose it because it would be fast," insisted Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Then you have cut corners?"

"I had to. There was no time to go out shopping for ingredients. The girlie here has school tomorrow, so she can't be out too late. Otherwise, she'll still be digesting during first period."

"Thank you for being so considerate," my neighbor replied.

"I can't thank you enough for all you've done for us," Abaddon added.

"Come, come. You needn't stand on ceremony."

Ms. Futarishizuka wasn't just a dependable fighter—she was a pro at daily life

and trip preparation, too—a real renaissance woman. She had my neighbor and Abaddon apologizing for every little favor.

“...Is it really okay to give me food, too?” asked Magical Pink, now drawn into the conversation.

“You really saved us out there, dear,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “If I didn’t feed you dinner before sending you home, it would besmirch my honor! Oh, do you not like curry? I can make you something else if you want.”

“No. I love curry.”

“Well, there’s plenty left in the pot for seconds.”

“...Okay. I’ll eat first and then go home.”

Despite her stubborn attempts to send Type Twelve back to her planet, Futarishizuka was always very placating when it came to the magical girl. It was scary how attuned she was to her own interests. *It’s like she’s more of a machine than Type Twelve.*



“In any case,” said Futarishizuka, “I’m quite curious about my son’s accomplishments on the job.”

“Should we be speaking of that here?” I asked, glancing at my neighbor and Abaddon, and then Ms. Futarishizuka.

They nodded, so I explained what I’d done in the isolated space while off with Peeps. We’d encountered psychics and angels fighting at the pier, seen the angels get destroyed, and gotten information from another psychic about the Office.

I was particularly specific when it came to the Office, and how people were treating the death game in modern society. I told them there were some powerful people out there plotting to take control of the proxy war from behind the scenes. I also explained how more than a few angels, demons, and Disciples were under their influence, and about how the rewards from angels and demons were being treated as assets within that framework.

Once I finished, Ms. Futarishizuka was the first to comment. “Even this proxy war is just another investment opportunity for them, like stocks or real estate. I’ll bet they see the Disciples as living securities.”

“A scary prospect indeed,” I said.

“When you’re rich, you start thinking you can get anything with money.”

“Futarishizuka, you’re a rich lady yourself, you know,” pointed out Miss Hoshizaki.

“I am,” she replied. “And in truth, you *can* get most things with money.”

“.....”

For someone who had struggled so much to manage her finances, Miss Hoshizaki must have had a lot to say about that particular stance. She stopped herself before she said any more, though, and settled for sending her coworker a pointed glare.

“Does that mean we’re an obstacle to the people who want to control the rewards?” my neighbor asked. “We’re defeating all the Disciples and taking what they want, after all. That must be why even the demons joined forces with

the angels to try to kill us.”

“That’s what it sounded like to me, based on that man’s testimony. He was probably the one who made the announcement, too.”

Some of this was speculation, but I was pretty sure we were right. *I should encourage my neighbor and Abaddon to be careful right now.*

“Human greed truly knows no bounds.”

“It sounds like you’re not that surprised, Abaddon.”

“Things like this happen a lot. It’s not unusual.”

“Oh. Is that right?”

“It’s never been quite as pronounced as what you just described, though.”

He must have been referring to previous proxy wars. People always sought to control anything of value in the world. Even a market worth as little as a few billion yen would have a major player or two with all the capital, trying to turn everything into “wealth” for themselves.

With half of the world under capitalism, it was inevitable. But how much worth had they assigned the proxy war?

“I had something I wanted to ask you as well, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I’ll be straight. Are you involved in this?”

“...I suppose it’s natural to suspect me, isn’t it?”

Everyone’s attention shifted to Ms. Futarishizuka. She’d answered the question a little mischievously, probably on purpose. But it seemed to have backfired, because a moment later everyone was criticizing her over the table.

“Wait! Futarishizuka, what do you mean?!” demanded Miss Hoshizaki.

“Grandmother, I cannot ignore that remark,” said Type Twelve.

“I’m curious about that one, too,” said Abaddon. *“What about you, partner?”*

“There isn’t enough evidence to make a judgment. We shouldn’t jump to conclusions.”

“Yup! You’re absolutely right!”

She’d garnered all sorts of reactions. Lady Elsa, Magical Pink, and Peeps refrained from commenting, however. If I’d considered the possibility, then Peeps definitely had. That said, he didn’t seem too concerned as he dug into his pile of curry-flavored meat.

“You may not believe me, but I’m completely uninvolved,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “I did get an invitation or two, yes. But I’d already met the rest of you by then. I decided to prioritize this group, instead.”

Her gaze was on my neighbor and Abaddon—and it was sharp and serious. The bit of curry stuck to her mouth lessened the desired effect, however. But then again, maybe that was all part of the act.

“Abaddon, I’d like to trust Futarishizuka on this.”

“Could I ask your reasons?”

“If she had invested in the proxy war, I don’t know why she’d have let us go about our business freely. And she was with us this time, as well. She never tried to take us by surprise.”

“Yeah. That’s what I was thinking, too.”

Personally, I felt like that could have all been part of some overarching scheme. She was gutsy enough to take on significant risk if it meant all the profits would go to her in the end. Her immortality as a psychic seemed better suited to plots like these than brawls, in fact.

“I’m happy to hear that,” she replied.

“Are you sure we can trust her?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Oh, I know what’s going on,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “You’re so attached to your cute little mechanical life-form now that you’ve decided to join her in bullying me. Ah, my only choice is to run crying into the arms of my dear son!”

“Th-that’s not what’s happening here!”

“I’d really rather you didn’t,” I said to her.

It didn’t seem like we’d be able to reach a conclusion here. After this incident,

Ms. Futarishizuka would probably start maneuvering herself even more skillfully than before. Her previous remark might be true, but there was still a chance she'd place her bets on the Office's side later on.

We, on the other hand, were already dependent on her help.

The sole exception was Type Twelve. I got the feeling that Miss Hoshizaki's intentions would become more important in the future.

"Well, this leaves us in a precarious position indeed."

"I have an idea about how to keep the two of you safe," I said, addressing Abaddon and my neighbor.

"I don't want you to get hurt on our account, mister."

"That's my partner's opinion, but I'm curious about what you mean."

"I know this is a strange thing to ask," I said, "but could you refrain from trying to defeat any angelic Disciples for the time being? In exchange, I'd like to do some negotiating so that the angels and demons belonging to the Office won't pursue you anymore."

"Negotiating?" repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. "You're not asking me to handle it, are you?"

"Actually, I was thinking about going to the section chief. It's times like these when we should rely on him."

"Ah, yes. He would probably have plenty of the kind of connections we're looking for."

The website with all the grotesque images hadn't been shut down; it was still up and running, and the news was still talking about it. For that reason, I expected people high up in Japan's government were involved.

In that sense, he seemed like the best man for the job.

"Is that why you two only killed angels and demons, but not their Disciples?" asked Abaddon.

"You know about what happened back there?" I replied.

"I got progress reports on the proxy war. From the main bodies of the angels

and demons, that is—the ones you defeated on the island.”

Come to think of it, he’d mentioned something similar before. The angels and demons active on Earth were no more than Divisions split off their main bodies or something like that. He’d learned about Ms. Futarishizuka slaying an angel’s Disciple in the Chichibu mountains in the same way.

“It would have been a good opportunity for you, too,” said my neighbor. “I feel guilty you’re doing all this for us, mister.”

“That’s all right. I need you two to stay safe or the death game is worthless to me.”

“What an odd way to talk about a death game,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

As a result, we’d lost our means to revive Prince Lewis. We wouldn’t be able to rely on the rewards from angels and demons in the future. That was unfortunate, but we’d simply have to look for another way. I wondered if the mechanical life-forms’ superior technology could do something about it.

Suddenly, Ms. Futarishizuka whispered something in my ear.

“You know, I could use my reward to heal the prince you two have been worrying about.”

“Huh?”

This was exactly why Ms. Futarishizuka was so hard to deal with. She was always two or three steps ahead of us, if not more. My hand froze before it could carry the spoonful of curry to my mouth.

“You! What is the meaning of this?” demanded Peeps immediately.

The distinguished sparrow had been munching on beef atop the table. The way the curry sauce was stuck to his cheek was incredibly charming. I didn’t know about Ms. Futarishizuka’s scrap of curry, but Peeps’s was certainly a result of the unadulterated joy with which he ate his food.

“What? I’m offering out of the kindness of my heart,” she insisted.

“You cannot possibly expect us to simply believe you.”

I felt a little bad, but I didn’t trust her, either. She *had* to be plotting

something.

She and Peeps stared each other down in silence. The once-peaceful dinner table had exploded and was giving off sparks. Even those who had been enjoying their curry stopped eating and looked at the two of them.

How had she figured out what was going on in the otherworld? Aside from Peeps and me, the only possibility was Lady Elsa.

But she'd only gotten the translation device a day ago, and Lady Elsa herself had declared she wouldn't let anything about the otherworld slip. I doubted she would have told Ms. Futarishizuka about Prince Lewis.

But I could think of no other possibility.

Actually, hold on.

"Did you run conversations between Peeps and Lady Elsa through the translator?" I asked.

"Aw, come on. You could at least pretend to have a harder time figuring it out," she grumbled.

"What? You mean—surveillance cameras, then?"

"Just so you know, I didn't set them up to pry into your lives. The mansion has always had them for crime prevention. One of the videos included the girlie and the bird chatting."

Peeps and Lady Elsa stayed at the villa while we were doing our bureau work. It must have happened while we were out and they'd had the chance to talk about Prince Lewis in the otherworld's language. And they'd had plenty of such opportunities. One of their little chats must have been caught on a surveillance camera somewhere.

That meant she probably knew things about the Kingdom of Herz, too—not just the prince.

"...I must apologize," Peeps said to me.

"It couldn't be helped," I assured him. "We had no idea she'd end up with a translator."

“I’m sorry, Sasaki,” said Lady Elsa. “Have I done something terrible?”

“You don’t need to worry about it, Lady Elsa,” I told her. “I should have been more cautious.”

Likely sensing the danger in our exchange, Type Twelve—who had been silent until now—spoke up.

“By the way, the youngest daughter would like a reward of her own for trying her best to support the family.”

We’d been throwing around the word “reward” quite a bit. The way she used it to change the topic felt like her way of calming things down. Was it her emotions at work, or something the mechanical life-forms had from birth?

Regardless, upon hearing that remark, everyone’s attention turned to her. Ms. Futarishizuka turned away from Peeps and got on board with the new discussion.

“Oh, you always do this whenever you get the slightest compliment,” she said.

“I believe she’s far more modest than you,” retorted Peeps.

“What kind of reward do you want?” asked Miss Hoshizaki gently, urging her on.

Growing hopeful at her mother’s tone, Type Twelve stuck out her chest and proudly declared:

“The youngest daughter would like to go to school with her elder sister.”

Yet *another* troubling reward. Between Type Twelve’s and Futarishizuka’s remarks, I saw a rocky future ahead.



The story of Sasaki
and Peeps takes place
in many locations:
another world,
a remote island,
outer space,
the middle of the
Pacific Ocean. Now
it's time for an arc set
somewhere a little
closer to home. New
twists await as the
stage moves to
the neighbor's new
middle school.

An alien, a magical
girl, a demon, and
the demon's Disciple
all line up in the
classroom.

Their teacher is
a magician from
another world.

Meanwhile, psychics and armed
organizations lurk around every
corner, waiting for a chance to strike.

"Thank you for the
introduction. My name
is Sasaki.

As Mr. Takahashi is
out of school on leave,
I will be substituting
for class 1-A starting
today.

I'll also be teaching
mathematics.

I look forward to
working with you all."

Will Sasaki and the others be able to
protect the school and all its students?

Sasaki and Peeps 8

planned for release
in Fall 2024!!!

Sasaki and Peeps 7

*This material was originally included below the dust jacket in the Japanese version

Buncololi
Illustration by Kantoku

Fake Family Formed!

~ The Youngest Daughter Dreams of a Warm Family in This Hodgepodge Household ~



Hey, Peeps. I just got back from visiting the anime studio.



Were you attending a meeting about adapting this story into an anime?



Yep, exactly right.



How was it?



I've never been involved in an anime production before, so everything was fresh and exciting.



Can't you tell us anything more specific?



There were a ton of anime posters all over the office.



I bet that really helped set the mood.



Yes, it finally hit home that this is really happening.



On that topic, I have a question for you.



Go right ahead.



What are they working on right now at the anime studio?



They're coming up with scripts and designs.



Are you lending them a hand with anything?



I can't really help with the designs, but I participate in meetings about the scripts.



Excellent. Put your back into it.



I'll do my best not to slow everyone down.

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