



The Gang Heads to School and  
Ends Up in a Friendly Little Romcom

~Who Will Get Their Hands  
on True Love?~

Buncololi

Illustration by  
Kantoku

8

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# Sasaki and Peeps



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"I don't mind."

< Sasaki >

"Thank you.  
Then you can  
call me Elsa."

"May I call you  
Sayoko from  
now on?"

< Lady Elsa >

< Sayoko (Magical Pink) >



"My name is Twelve Sasaki. I came to this country because of my parents' jobs. I will be joining this class starting today. I am not good at very many things, but I hope we can get along and be friends."

< Type Twelve >

Twelve

The Transfer Student

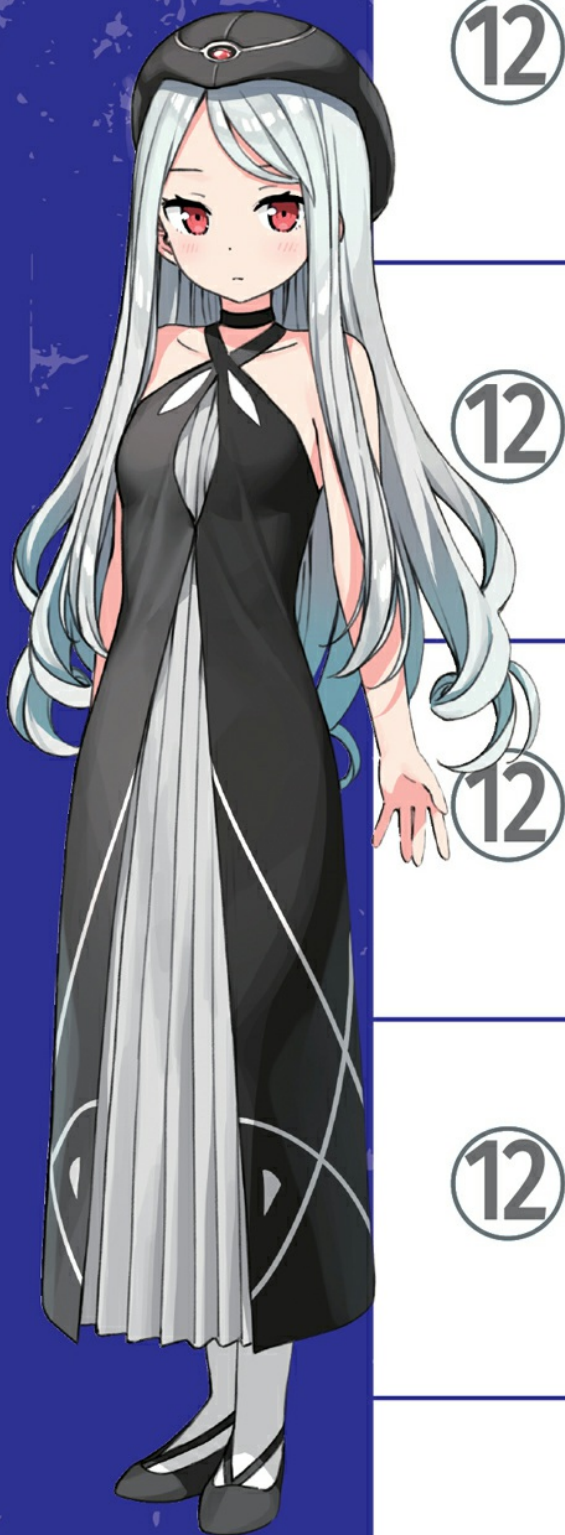








# Type Twelve's recent posts



12

11/25/20xx

**Type 12** @type\_twelve

This mechanical life-form will now advance into social media.



0



0



0



12

11/25/20xx

**Type 12** @type\_twelve

I am not being viewed at all.



0



0



0



12

11/25/20xx

**Type 12** @type\_twelve

I currently attend high school. Somebody please let me stay at their house tonight.



3



2



14



12

11/25/20xx

**Type 12** @type\_twelve

This mechanical life-form now has a complete understanding of social media.



0



0



0









# Sasaki and Peeps

The Gang Heads to School and Ends Up

in a Friendly Little Romcom

~ Who Will Get Their Hands on True Love? ~



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Illustration by Kantoku



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Translation by Alice Prowse

Cover art by Kantoku

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SASAKITOPICHAN Vol.8 MEGURIMEGUTTE BUTAI WA GAKKO, MINNADE NAKAYOKU RABUKOME KAI SHINJITU NO AI O TENISURUNOWA DAREDA?

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School, Part One

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Off-Campus Class, Part Two

## <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 was 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. After much to-do, the alien girl, who had grown fond of Miss Hoshizaki, decided to stay with Sasaki and the others in order to research and fix the bug in her programming.

But soon, Type Twelve made a certain proposal: She wanted their whole group to play house with her. After facing pressure from a Japanese government eager to improve relations with the mechanical life-form, Sasaki and the others ultimately gave in and began spending part of each day inside the alien's ship living as a fake family.

Futarishizuka, however, was not too keen on the situation and continued to devise ways to send Type Twelve back to her home planet. The others initially agreed to help out, but when Type Twelve bravely sacrificed herself in their time of need, everyone (except Futarishizuka) came over to her side, and the game of house continued.

And now our story changes locations, moving to the neighbor's new school...



## <School, Part One>

Not long ago, we participated in a large-scale death game on the island of Miyakejima. There, angels and demons joined forces to take out my neighbor and Abaddon, who were proving themselves to be quite a force in the games thus far. Furthermore, this incident afforded us a glimpse behind the scenes, where we learned of the existence of certain benefactors supporting the Disciples in exchange for reaping their rewards.

In the end, our little group had to go it alone and was forced to fight both camps. Thankfully, with help from Peeps, Magical Pink, and Type Twelve's harrowing sacrifice, we managed to escape the isolated space without losing anyone.

We had returned to Ms. Futarishizuka's Karuizawa villa and sat down for a late dinner when Type Twelve spoke up.

"The youngest daughter would like to go to school with her elder sister," she said enthusiastically.

She wore the same flat expression as always—no emotions were visible on her face. But from her louder-than-normal voice and her puffed-out chest, I sensed quite a bit of anticipation from her.

"Are you being serious right now, dear?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Grandmother, mechanical life-forms are always truthful. We are not like humans, who do nothing but lie."

"Do you mean you want to attend my neighbor's school as a student?" I asked.

"Father, your thinking is correct. I would like you to take the necessary steps to prepare my enrollment as soon as possible."

Everyone present stopped eating and stared at her. Even I had to put my spoon, currently piled high with curry, down on my plate.

My neighbor glanced around at us and said, “As a current student, I don’t really see the appeal.”

Both Ms. Futarishizuka and I had reacted in a negative way, and I figured she was trying to help us out. But if that were all it took to talk Type Twelve down, we wouldn’t be playing house with her.

The mechanical life-form turned to face my neighbor and immediately continued, “Eldest Daughter, in the past, you promised to introduce me to students at your school.”

“Yes, I remember, but—”

“By attending school, I will be able to interface with these students more easily,” she asserted in desperation. “I can form relationships with them independently, without requiring your time or effort. I believe this is a very sensible option for both of us.”

This sounded less like a family conversation and more like a company presentation. Personally, I was curious why she was so interested in attending school.

“Excuse me for asking,” I said, “but did something happen at school?”

“A bunch of boys fawned over her and made her feel nice,” my neighbor explained.

“I see.”

This made perfect sense to me. It seemed Type Twelve already had a successful experience at the school in question. Putting aside her eccentric personality, anyone would agree that her point of contact was attractive. Teenage boys would obviously want to talk to her, and I could easily imagine such pampering doing wonders for her chronic loneliness.

“Father, you said before that the information one gains is not as important as the point of contact used to acquire it, the status of the terminal, and the environment and process by which it is

obtained. I have judged this to be correct, and I would like to enhance my learning by placing myself in different environments.”

“Won’t this just end with some guy taking advantage of you and dumping you by the side of the road?” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Hey, can you try to be more sensitive?” Miss Hoshizaki chided.

“I don’t know about you, but I can see it clearly: A mechanical life-form, discarded by her man and driven to despair, throws a fit and destroys the world.”

“Urk...”

It seemed Miss Hoshizaki could imagine it pretty clearly as well. We *had* witnessed the formation of a new crater on our planet only a few days prior. I had a feeling that Ms. Futarishizuka wasn’t too far off the mark.

“Mother, do you not trust your youngest daughter?”

“O-of course I do. But there are a lot of people out there who deceive others and take advantage of them. I’m worried about you because you’re so new to your emotions. And you’re right—humans lie all the time.”

“The youngest daughter’s heart is warmed to know that Mother is worried about her. Mother is so kind.”

“So how about spending a little more time learning about humans before trying to go to school...?”

“However, should anyone act like Grandmother, I already know how to deal with them.”

The youngest daughter, full of pride and confidence, dismissed her mother’s concerns. She was unwavering. I figured Futarishizuka, the target of her attack, would be the one to clap back first, and I was right.

“Actually,” she said. “We might be able to use those sex-crazed boys to convince her to return home voluntarily. If we act now, we can get a jump on



influencing the ones attending that school.”

“Grandmother, I am not entirely sure why you are audibly plotting right in front of this point of contact.”

“I think Ms. Futarishizuka is worried about you in her own way,” I said.

“Father, I struggle to comprehend your remark.”

“Well, she won’t do anything as blatant as before—not in front of Miss Hoshizaki anyway.”

Earlier today, Type Twelve did something extraordinary in the isolated space. Our senior, who was already sympathetic toward the alien, was greatly moved by what happened during the death game. In Ms. Futarishizuka’s words, there was nothing more we could do.

I kept one eye on the girl in the kimono while praying she wouldn’t start a fight. But she only sighed in resignation.

“Yes, well, our dear senior has taken your side,” she said to Type Twelve. “I don’t mind a bit if you get played around with, but I’d rather you refrain from blowing up any more of our planet.”

“Based on past experience, Grandmother’s reaction seems out of character. The youngest daughter cannot conceal her confusion.”

“What I’m saying is; why not just do as you like?”

“...Understood. I will do nothing that could cause problems for Kurosu’s school.”

Considering Type Twelve’s zeal for this new venture, getting her to give up seemed near impossible. She’d probably do it anyway while we weren’t looking. And in that case, the best solution was to allow her to attend under our supervision.

“Good,” I said. “You can’t go around causing problems for the school. If you decide to go, you must attend in accordance with the rules. Keep in mind that

the rest of the world still doesn't know you're an extraterrestrial."

"In that case, Father, I would like for you to suggest a concrete plan."

"A concrete plan?" repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. "You don't even have a family register, do you? I'm absolutely sure you don't."

"If it is required for my attendance, I will prepare one this evening. I can do so myself, without troubling any family members."

"Actually, I'd appreciate it if you didn't," I said. "That's exactly the sort of thing I was talking about." *I'm sure that's super illegal. And if she hacks into the family register system, it'll cause no end of chaos.*

But without a family register, our plans to get Type Twelve into school were already at an impasse. How were we supposed to arrange one for her? If we hid the fact that she was an extraterrestrial, that would only make her an illegal alien of an entirely different type.

"I'm sure Sasaki was thinking this, too," said Miss Hoshizaki, "but why don't we ask the boss?"

"Mother, that is an excellent plan. I would very much like to discuss this with a state authority."

"You're right," I said. "The section chief might be able to pull some strings."

A lot of people all around the world were desperate to get Type Twelve under their country's supervision. If a public dispute over her broke out in the future, having an established family register—created voluntarily, no less—would give us an enormous advantage both domestically and abroad. And given Mr. Akutsu's position, he could probably use the win to his own advantage.

"I would like to visit the superior at Father and Mother's place of work immediately," said Type Twelve. "Should I pack a box of sweets as a gift?"

"What a very human suggestion," Miss Hoshizaki remarked.

“Humans make illogical judgments based on their emotions. Therefore, there is value in attacking a target from an emotional angle. If it is necessary to obtain a family register, I would not hesitate to prepare suitable compensation.”

“You’d better not say that in front of the boss,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “He’ll pluck the very hairs off your behind if you let him, if you catch my drift.”

“Grandmother, I unfortunately have no hair growing on my behind. Would it be better if I did?”

“Well, that depends on the tastes of whatever man you end up going out with.”

“H-hey! Stop being vulgar,” Miss Hoshizaki chimed in. “Don’t teach her stuff like that!”

“Based on Mother’s reaction, I will shelve this matter for the time being.”

“Either way, it’s late,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Can we leave this for tomorrow? Also, it’s family time right now, isn’t it?”

She was right. It was already past ten PM. If we went to the bureau now, it would be tomorrow before we were finished. Besides, I was already mentally worn out from our earlier excursion in the isolated space. If I wanted to have another verbal battle with the section chief, I’d need to get a good night’s rest. That probably went for my two coworkers as well.

Type Twelve simply nodded. “Understood. In accordance with family rule number one, I will prioritize harmonious family time.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

As for the matter of Prince Lewis, Ms. Futarishizuka and I would have other opportunities to discuss our plans. And since it would involve talking about the otherworld, I wanted to do so without my neighbor, Abaddon, or Miss Hoshizaki present. Regarding Type Twelve, I figured she already had some information about that side of things from watching the villa’s security cameras.



Ms. Futarishizuka, possibly in consideration of the above, didn't bring up the topic again. Peeps made no comment, either. Instead, it was Lady Elsa who spoke up as the conversation petered out.

"Actually, I have something I wanted to ask you, Sasaki."

"What is it, Lady Elsa?"

"What is your relationship to this girl?" she said, gesturing toward Magical Pink. "Her clothes seem strange compared to the rest of you. From what I saw on the battlefield earlier, I suspect she is a very high-ranking magician."

The girl in question was currently enjoying her portion of curry. Now that I thought about it, Lady Elsa had spent almost no time around the magical girl. They had only met once, and at the time, they'd been pointing their wands at each other.

"Ah yes," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "We haven't done introductions yet."

They must not have had time for such things while in the isolated space. And Peeps had warped us from the sea around Miyakejima to Karuizawa instantly, so there was no opportunity on the way back, either. And now, we were all sitting around the dinner table together.

"I'm terribly sorry, Lady Elsa," I said. "This girl is—"

"Sasaki," replied the girl from the otherworld, "since I am finally able to talk to her, I'd like to do so myself."

"Oh. I see."

Everyone's attention gathered on Magical Pink.

She looked up from her plate of curry. "I can leave if you don't want me here."

"No, that's not what we're saying at all," Ms. Futarishizuka assured her. "Everyone loves you!"

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. My name is Elsa. What's yours?"

"...Sayoko."

That was, as far as I could remember, the first time Magical Pink had ever told

us her real name despite how long we'd known her. Though if memory served, I'd briefly heard the yellow magical girl say it during their joint attack on the bureau.

*Come to think of it, I wonder what country the yellow one is from.*

"May I call you Sayoko from now on?" asked Lady Elsa.

"I don't mind."

"Thank you. Then you can call me Elsa."

"I have a question for you, Elsa. Are you a psychic?"

"A psychic?"

"Yes, a psychic."

"If you mean a person with supernatural abilities, then no, I'm not."

"Oh. That's good."

The fire in Magical Pink's gaze quickly faded. She'd been holding her spoon mid-air while she spoke, but now she resumed moving it from her plate to her mouth.

*Whoa, that was terrifying. I'd been panicking internally. You could practically see the murder in Magical Pink's eyes—and right in the middle of a friendly conversation!*

"Should my esteemed senior and I run for the hills, then?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I would chase you. I won't forgive any psychics."

"Wait. Why do you care, Ms. Futarishizuka?" asked Miss Hoshizaki. "You're basically immortal, aren't you?"

"Huh? She's...immortal?" replied Magical Pink.

"Yes, that's right," said the girl in the kimono. "Even if you tried to kill me, I'd live. You're better off giving up on me."

"....."

Confusion crossed Magical Pink's face, and she frowned.

“And *you*,” Ms. Futarishizuka said, turning to Miss Hoshizaki. “You could simply ask for the youngest daughter’s help in a pinch, couldn’t you?”

“Mother,” said Type Twelve. “If there is ever an issue in your relationship with that human, please consult with me.”

“N-no, we’re fine,” Miss Hoshizaki replied. “I trust her not to start anything here.”

Personally, I was very curious about how Magical Pink categorized my two colleagues. I doubted she would suddenly launch an attack, but I was pretty sure she still harbored a lot of hostility toward them. In that sense, it was very handy to have Type Twelve serving as Miss Hoshizaki’s bodyguard.

“I want to be friends with you, Sayoko,” said Lady Elsa, quickly reading the room and offering the other girl a sweet smile. “Is that okay?”

This was probably her noble upbringing at work—she could be amazingly considerate in such situations. Thanks to her, Magical Pink shifted her attention away from Miss Hoshizaki.

“...I put my friends in danger,” she said.

“In danger? Why is that?”

“Bad things happen to people around me.”

“I can handle myself, so you don’t have to worry about that. Despite how I look, I can put up quite a fight. I’m not as powerful as you, but I’m confident I can defend myself, at least.”

“...Okay, then.”

“Thank you, Sayoko. I hope we can be good friends.”

“.....”

*Thank you, Lady Elsa.* I hoped her efforts would improve our relationship with Magical Pink somewhat. And since Type Twelve had invited her to spend time with our fake family like this, I doubted she had a bad impression of the magical girl, either.

Quietly, I put my faith in their budding friendship. As it was, this magical



middle-aged man didn't have any better plans. Wasn't this the government's job anyway? The bureau really ought to coordinate a little more closely with child services. Perhaps I should submit a complaint to my boss at the next opportunity.

After that, dinner progressed smoothly. Once we were finished, family time was over for the day.

Type Twelve called a terminal and sent Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Hoshizaki, my neighbor, Abaddon, and Lady Elsa back to Earth. Magical Pink, meanwhile, used her Magical Field to disappear to who knows where.

Peeps and I withdrew as well, using the bird's teleportation magic. In order to gather more data about the relative flow of time, we put off our usual short stay in the otherworld and—for the first time in a while—spent the night in the cheap hotel serving as our temporary home.

Personally, I preferred Ms. Futarishizuka's villa. It was truly the pinnacle of comfort. That expansive bath you could stretch your legs in—*that* was the way to live.

Unfortunately, because the villa's owner had quarreled with Peeps over the fate of Prince Lewis, we didn't feel comfortable imposing this time. The Starsage apologized to me before we went to bed.

The way his little movements held a hint of guilt was so adorable that my heart skipped a beat, though I felt guilty myself for finding it so cute.

*I'm just as bad as Type Twelve, aren't I?*



The next day, we went straight to the bureau first thing in the morning. Type Twelve joined our usual group of three. She was all worked up and wanted to explain the matter to Mr. Akutsu personally. After a quick meetup at the Karuizawa villa, we boarded her disc-shaped terminal and headed into the city.

The boss knew we were making full personal use of the mechanical life-form's impressive tech. That meant there was no longer any need to fake our location data. This would make hiding the existence of the angel-demon proxy war—and

the otherworld—a lot easier.

Once we got into the office, the section chief called for us immediately. The other bureau employees were all focused on Type Twelve. It appeared they'd been informed of the mechanical life-form's existence. With everyone's eyes glued to us, we headed to the row of conference rooms.

The section chief had reserved us a space about ten square meters in size with a rectangular meeting table in the center. Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, Miss Hoshizaki, and Type Twelve lined up on one side. Having all four of us together felt a little cramped. Couldn't someone sit next to Mr. Akutsu? Maybe next time I'd take the initiative and do just that.

"There was an incident yesterday on Miyakejima," the boss began as soon as we'd taken our seats. "Several corpses were discovered strewn about the island. Judging by your phones' location data, it seems you all were there. Could I get a rundown of what happened?"

The corpses were probably the remains of yesterday's defeated Disciples. The others had filled me in last night about what happened on their end. Judging from the status of the remains, I figured they were the demon Disciples that had betrayed my neighbor and Abaddon. Apparently, the angels had let loose all at once, plunging everything into chaos.

"As if you don't already know," Ms. Futarishizuka shot back. "I'm sure you've guessed the reason by now."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," he replied.

"What? Do you need your subordinates to spell it out to make you feel like the boss?"

"....."

I was very grateful to Ms. Futarishizuka for taking the lead here. It really helped to have her playing the bad guy. I figured this was also her revenge for what we'd put up with out in the field.

The section chief appeared to think for a few moments, then said, "I suppose one could call it a proxy war between angels and demons, yes? I want to know the results."

It was just as we thought—he *was* aware of the death game. But how much did he know?

“Skipping straight to the conclusion,” I said, “the organizers of the event were defeated.”

I kept quiet about who defeated whom. My plan was to feed him little bits and pieces, never going out of my way to explain details, and to observe how he reacted. I was most curious about his relationship to the people running that website full of gory images. I couldn’t yet discount the worst possibility—that our boss himself was the ringleader.

However, he merely kept up his usual poker face. “When you say the organizers, do you mean whoever was in charge of that website?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“Well, if any of you have spoken with them, I’d love to hear the details.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but we haven’t. It was a coincidence at best that we ran into them on the island.”

I glanced over at Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki. They were watching our exchange, not offering any remarks of their own. We’d decided in advance that I would handle this conversation, so it was my job to explain everything.

“Regarding those corpses,” I continued, “if they were found near the island’s southeastern shoreline, they’re more than likely the Disciples of demons. But if they were found near the port to the west, they were probably the angels’ Disciples instead.”

“You seem to have a very precise understanding of the situation, Sasaki.”

“Is that so? I figured you would have an even better understanding, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“About that website recruiting participants in the proxy war,” I said, deciding to go ahead and ask him the thing I was most curious about. “Why didn’t the bureau take it down? If you gave the order, I’m certain our colleagues would have handled it posthaste.”

“.....”



The section chief paused, then put a hand to his chin and stared across the table at us, never looking away. From his demeanor, I could sense how highly he regarded himself.

To be honest, I was a little scared of him. I met his gaze for what seemed like an eternity, enduring my fear and waiting for him to react.

His answer came several seconds later. “What would you say if I told you that your apartment neighbor was at the center of all of this?”

It seemed he had a clear understanding of what my neighbor and Abaddon had been up to. Thinking back, it was quite the coincidence. Any boss would suspect his subordinate in a situation like this. He probably had all sorts of groundless suspicions about how we’d gotten our hands on the two of them. But this time, it really was just a coincidence, so I wasn’t sure how to explain it.

“It was pure coincidence, sir. I’m just as surprised as you are.”

“You’re asking me to believe that?”

“You’ve investigated their backgrounds already, haven’t you?”

“.....”

I was now certain. Mr. Akutsu knew about my neighbor and Abaddon’s situation. And he’d purposely left that website and the people behind it alone despite knowing what they were doing. But I still didn’t know what his position was in all this.

He probably wouldn’t answer me if I asked. He might even be the Disciple of an angel or a demon himself. Maybe my neighbor or Himegami could help me verify that.

“We have a proposition for you, Chief,” I said.

“A proposition?”

“We believe we know what the organizers are after. The individuals that concern them have expressed to us their desire to cease killing Disciples going forward. Of course, that does not apply in the event they are attacked and must defend themselves.”

“What do you want me to do with that information?”

“Would you negotiate with the organizers and ask them to rescind their orders to eliminate the specified targets in exchange for their restraint? As the proxy war has only just started and many Disciples are still active, I don’t believe it is in their best interests to make risky moves.”

“And what would I gain from this deal?”

“Perhaps you could frame it as good news, after the organizer’s failure on the island.”

“You want to ingratiate yourself to them?”

“No, not at all. As your subordinate, my success is your success.”

“.....”

He was being quite direct. I got the feeling I was hearing his actual feelings on the matter. In exchange, I responded to all his questions frankly.

The section chief fell silent again, this time for even longer.

His gaze, however, remained locked on us, never straying. I wondered if he’d laugh if I made a funny face. I really wanted to try. But I swallowed this dangerous impulse and merely waited for him to answer.

When the second hand on the wall clock had made half a rotation, he finally resumed speaking.

“I can’t guarantee anything. If you’re all right with that, I’ll try talking to the higher-ups.”

“Thank you, sir. I’d very much appreciate it.”

If I took what the chief said at face value, it meant that whoever was in charge of the website was higher up the ladder than him. I naturally pictured the kind of people who served as executives at one large company after another—politicians from long lineages, famous investors, foreign despots, head ministers, and so on. If it were anyone less, the chief probably would have made us a firm promise.

“There is something else I wanted to talk to you about, sir, if possible,” I said.

“Something else?”

“One of the angels’ Disciples we encountered in the past is a boy named Himegami.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Then as you likely already know, we’re using him as a spy to gain information on the angels. For that reason, I’d like you to spare him for the time being. The angel with him is quite weak. I don’t think they pose much of a threat to the other Disciples.”

“All right,” said the chief. “I’ll tell them that, too.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Our other option was to infiltrate the organizers’ group directly. But since Ms. Futarishizuka had already turned down their invitation, I figured it would be way too dangerous for a greenhorn like me to try my luck. She probably would have liked to play us both if she had the chance, and the fact that she hadn’t likely meant this group was *bad news*.

Besides, even if we did want to infiltrate, we’d need to know who their members were first. If, for example, we wound up in conflict with Captain Mason’s group, we could kiss our careers good-bye. This was also the reason I was the one negotiating with the boss instead of Ms. Futarishizuka. For the time being, I wanted to solidify my position as a bureau employee.

“That was quite harrowing,” said Futarishizuka. “My hair was standing on end just listening to you.”

“Actually, I would have expected this kind of thing to come from you instead, Futarishizuka,” said the section chief.

“I haven’t the foggiest what you mean.”

Now that our planned discussion had ended, Ms. Futarishizuka got in one of her jabs. To be honest, I still wasn’t sure what her position was in all this. I was afraid to pry and end up on her bad side. With the looming possibility she might undo Peeps’s curse and the prospect of her gaining other rewards from the proxy war, I wanted to maintain a strong relationship with her, at least for the time being.

She knew everything about us, so we'd be in real hot water if she switched sides. For that reason, I'd taken great pains right from the beginning to keep things amicable between us, and I suspected the section chief was the same. The whole situation reminded me of how cutthroat modern society was. *I'd really like to flee to the otherworld and play with my horse again. Maybe riding lessons aren't so bad.*

"By the way, might I ask why *she's* here today?" said the section chief as soon as there was a lull in the conversation. He was looking straight at Type Twelve, who was still sitting beside us.

She hadn't said a word since we entered the conference room. Even now, she was still quietly sitting in her chair. I could tell how serious she was about her mission here. Aside from Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor, she rarely ever showed consideration for mere humans. She must have been absolutely dead set on attending my neighbor's school.

"She has an unrelated request for you," I explained.

"Well, count me extremely interested."

"I'll let her explain things in detail, sir."

That was why she was here, after all—to ask him herself. I looked over at her, and everyone else followed suit, including the chief.

Her face was impassive as always, like a blank mask. However, I sensed an unusual tension in her next words.

"Akutsu, I want you to let me attend school."

"....."

For the third time that morning, the chief fell silent. He looked at us, completely befuddled. Type Twelve's request had been so direct that he was struggling to gauge her true intentions. I could easily imagine him reading too deeply into the matter and ending up in a mental quagmire.

To be honest, his reaction made me pretty happy. All subordinates must love seeing their boss make this expression. I could see Futarishizuka smirking out of the corner of my eye.

“Sasaki, what is the meaning of this? Perhaps I’m too dull to understand. Would you explain it to me?”

“Mechanical life-forms never lie,” I said. “I think you can take what she says at face value.”

“And when she says *school*, she means an educational facility within Japan, yes?”

“Akutsu, your understanding is correct. I would like to enroll at the school Kurosu attends,” said Type Twelve, interrupting my conversation with the chief.

Her expression hadn’t changed, but from experience, I could tell she was growing increasingly excited. Another side effect of participating in our pretend family, I assumed.

At any rate, she’d learned that when it came to humans, hard work was rewarded.

“I understand your goal,” said the chief, turning back to her, “but not your reasoning. If you don’t mind, could you explain why you want to enroll in one of our country’s schools? I’d also like to know how you came to be interested in such a thing.”

As before, he was being especially polite with her.

She answered him immediately. “By attending school, humans acquire a grounding in social systems and how to participate in them. I would like to better understand the human race. And I have decided that there is value in using the school system for that purpose.”

This was all a front, of course. Unable to lie, she’d very skillfully concealed her true feelings.

“May I ask why you wish to understand the human race?”

“Interacting with humans is highly likely to benefit me at the present time.”

Because Type Twelve couldn’t lie, the way you phrased things was extremely important when communicating with her. If you hit her with yes-or-no questions, you could bypass the spin and draw some pretty alarming answers



out of her.

“May I take this to mean that mechanical life-forms see humanity in a friendly light?”

“Your interpretation is incorrect. To mechanical life-forms, biological life-forms are no more than resources. If I were to use a more human example, I believe it would be correct to say that mechanical life-forms are biological life-forms’ natural predators.”

“.....”

The section chief had asked a rather optimistic question, only to be shot down instantly. He glanced at the rest of us, clearly wanting to complain. *I’m sorry, Chief. You did this to yourself.* I could see Futarishizuka’s smirk growing wider by the second.

But in an unusual twist, Type Twelve decided to throw the baffled section chief a lifeline.

“However, the resources managed by mechanical life-forms come in many different grades,” she added quickly. “I have decided that using this point of contact to attend school will be advantageous to determining how valuable humans are as resources.”

Type Twelve was determined to go to school no matter what it took. All she *really* wanted was for other people to fawn over her. But hearing her talk to the chief, she almost sounded like a proper alien invader. It felt very strange, and I could see Miss Hoshizaki looking at her with a complicated expression.

Following Type Twelve’s explanation, the section chief fell silent. Then, after a few moments, he responded with a small nod.

“I understand,” he said.

“Then I ask for your decision at once.”

Could Mr. Akutsu make a decision like this on his own authority? As his subordinate, I wasn’t sure.

Japan was a country known for its cautious decision-making. I wouldn't be surprised if something like this took several months of talks with his superiors. After all, if something went wrong later, they'd probably fire the first person who had approved the idea.

And yet our boss didn't even hesitate. "All right. I'll draw up paperwork for your enrollment today."

"I hear that enrolling at a school in this country requires a family register," she replied.

"If you want a Japanese family register as well, I can handle that. Please consult with Sasaki about the details. If you would prefer someone else, I would appreciate if you told me now."

"Sasaki is acceptable."

"Understood. I'll inform you of my progress within the day."

"Akutsu, that is an excellent decision. I am incredibly glad."

"As a representative of Japan, I thank you for your kind words."

This sort of exception had to be the result of an order from above. Naturally, I thought of the foreign military officer we'd been seeing a lot of lately. He'd come all the way to the amusement park the other day with Magical Blue in tow; there was little doubt he desperately wanted some kind of contact with Type Twelve. Her current proposition would no doubt have his mouth watering.

"Chief, a word?" I cut in. "Has Captain Mason said anything to you?"

"I won't deny what you're thinking, Sasaki. And if your words thus far are to be believed, I will continue to consider you a bureau employee first and foremost. As your boss, I hope to keep relying on you in the future."

As far as I could tell, his orders were as follows: *Keep Type Twelve on our side. But don't start a fight with the captain, either.* I felt certain he was caught in the middle of several different organizations right now.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'll do my best to meet your expectations."

"I look forward to it."

“Well,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “it looks like we won’t have to take care of things this time, at least.”

“What will happen with the pretend family?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Oh, you know. After the kids and the husband go to school and work, it’ll be time to fall back asleep and then order in for lunch and watch some soaps. That’s what wives and mothers-in-law are supposed to do, right? We’ve been working far too hard lately.”

“We obviously can’t do that stuff on the clock. Could you quit joking around?”

“Actually, I was being completely serious.”

“And what do you mean by ‘watch some soaps’?”

“You’ve never heard of soap operas? Why, every housewife in Japan is into them.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, no one watches soaps anymore,” I said. “I don’t even know if any are still running.”

“What? Are you serious?!”

“Yes. There aren’t many career homemakers anymore, either.”

“I’d like the three of you to keep up your work,” said the chief. “I’ll send detailed instructions this evening or tomorrow morning at the latest. For today, I want you all to stand by and maintain the status quo.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

I’d assumed he would agree, but it was a relief to have his approval.

It seemed Mr. Akutsu wanted us to continue our pretend family activities as usual until Type Twelve settled in at school. He probably hoped this would give him a means of negotiation should the alien have problems at school. Miss Hoshizaki might have to resume her own education as a result, however.

“Remember this well, Youngest Daughter,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “When a corporate drone like your dear old dad works under a promotion-crazed superior, they end up with no time to spend with their family. It’s a leading cause of domestic problems.”

“I have indeed seen information to that effect here and there via Earth’s networks.”

“Please don’t feed non-employees baseless rumors, Futarishizuka,” said the chief.

In fact, this scenario was ideal for Peeps and me. Our hard work had paid off; I felt like we’d finally taken a step toward our goal of a laid-back, leisurely life.

I wasn’t interested in soaps, but I was all for going back to sleep after breakfast and surfing the internet all day. For lunch, Peeps and I could get takeout from all the most famous restaurants in Tokyo and compare their offerings.

*Ah, I’m getting excited just thinking about it.* It seemed like I’d finally get a break from all the modern world’s hustle and bustle.

“By the way,” said the chief, “I have a question for the mechanical life-form, if I may.”

“This is not a problem. Please confirm the contents of your question.”

“What would you like to put down as your full name on your family register?”

“I have previously given you my full name. To state this point of contact’s name in accordance with your language, it is Humanoid Point of Contact Type Twelve, based on Independently Operational Small Point of Contact Basic Design Three-Five-Seven-Eight-One, whose primary objective is to facilitate communication with local life-forms.”

“I suppose it would be *possible* to register you under that name. However, humanity’s ability to communicate information is not as advanced as that of mechanical life-forms. I believe it will be useful for your activities to have a last name.”

“...I see.”

Otherwise, it would probably take her more than a few minutes to write down her name on midterm exam sheets and the like. I remembered how much my own name—one character longer than average—used to irritate me when I was little.

“I would like to know the general method of assigning a last name when a parent in this country gives birth to a child.”

“The standard practice is for a child to take the same family name as the head of their household,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Then I will make my last name Sasaki.”

“All right,” said the chief. “I’ll put *Sasaki* down as your last name.”

Type Twelve had just casually gained a new attribute. I wasn’t too bothered that she’d used my last name. After all, it was a very common name in Japan. That said, the fact that my position in the fake family had influenced her decision made me a bit uneasy.

“May I have a first name as well?” prompted the chief.

“I would like Mother to assign it.”

“Huh? Y-you mean me?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“The youngest daughter wishes to have a name given by her mother.”

“Right now? I need time to think...”

“Also, our dear senior has the taste of an old man,” Ms. Futarishizuka chimed in. “Might be a bad idea to ask her.”

“Hey! That... That isn’t true! I’m a totally normal high school girl!”

Personally, I thought her insistence made her even less convincing. But I wasn’t going to say that out loud.

“As long as the name is Mother’s idea, the youngest daughter does not mind one bit if it sounds like something an old man



would choose.”

I doubted any human would know how to reply to *that*. Frankly, it sounded like sarcasm. Was she trying to be nice? She was not giving us nearly enough context clues to decide. I supposed that was to be expected from someone with level-1 emotions. That said, since mechanical life-forms didn’t lie, I decided to assume she meant well.

“Urk...”

It seemed the comment had hit Miss Hoshizaki pretty hard, however.

She *had* made a lot of comments that made her sound like an old man, though I wasn’t sure if it was a result of her inborn personality or because of her workplace environment. As such, I couldn’t think of a good way to help her out. And thanks to Type Twelve’s well-meaning but ill-phrased remark, Miss Hoshizaki wasn’t sure how to continue.

The silence was broken by our boss, who offered a compromise. “Then I’ll wait until this evening. Please contact me with a name by the end of the day.”

“Understood, Akutsu,” said Type Twelve. “When it has been decided, I will contact you immediately. I promise.”

“Thank you.”

Ignoring Miss Hoshizaki, who was trembling from embarrassment, the section chief got the meeting rolling once again.

Maybe my senior colleague’s unusual sensibilities were a side effect of the daily hardships of corporate life. Though I hadn’t known her long, that was how it appeared to me, at least.

“That will be all from me,” said the chief. “Are there any questions?” He looked around. Everyone stayed quiet. “Then let’s bring this meeting to a close.”

At the boss’s instruction, we left the conference room.

When we reached the area with our desks, Mr. Akutsu went straight to his seat. He quickly gathered up his things, threw on his coat, and headed out. He was probably off to discuss what we’d just talked about with his superiors or

some other group of VIPs.

Meanwhile, his three subordinates headed for their desks.

Everyone in this area of the office was part of the same group. Desks were arranged based on job, with mine forming an island with Miss Hoshizaki's and Ms. Futarishizuka's. Our senior sat to my side, with Futarishizuka opposite me. The desk beside hers was empty.

Futarishizuka and I had sparse workspaces; neither of them held any personal possessions. Due to all the fieldwork we'd been blessed with, we hadn't had the time to place so much as a box of tissues on them. Even our laptops, meant for clerical work, were tucked away in a drawer to the side.

Miss Hoshizaki's desk, on the other hand, felt like it belonged to a veteran employee. She had a book stand piled with documents and files, plus a desk organizer containing things like a stapler and some ballpoint pens.

"What should we do now?" asked Miss Hoshizaki. "Do you two have any plans?"

"Well, we haven't been to the office in a while," I replied. "I wanted to do some of the clerical work that's been piling up."

"Thanks to this girl right here, we don't have much time to come in," Ms. Futarishizuka agreed. She glanced at Type Twelve, who was standing next to her desk.

The alien replied immediately. "If necessary, I can prepare a device for remotely connecting to this network from home."

"That would definitely go against *all* the bureau's security rules," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Grandmother, your thinking is incorrect. There is zero chance that a human would be able to hack into a mechanical life-form's network. In fact, you would be able to access bureau data far more safely than when using a third-party network."

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying."

Type Twelve was suggesting a complete rehaul of government infrastructure. Just listening was making me nauseous. I was worried my stomach wasn't going to make it through much more. Just how many meetings and approvals would something like that require?

"We better not insist on remote work, or we might wind up on Mr. Akutsu's bad side," I told Type Twelve. "Instead, I'd like to request use of your terminal as transportation going forward. That would cut out most of our commute time."

"Understood. I will approve family use of my terminals."

I sensed the other bureau employees in the office watching us while maintaining their distance. We really stood out. Ever since Ms. Futarishizuka joined our little team, very few of my colleagues ever wanted to talk to me. She *was* a rank-A psychic with a ToD assassination skill. And now that Miss Hoshizaki had a similarly dangerous ability up her sleeve, absolutely no one wanted to hang out with us. The two of them might as well have been walking around all day toting a gun with their finger already on the trigger.

"That aside, Father," said Type Twelve.

"What is it?"

"I would like to thank you for successfully negotiating with Akutsu."

"It was nothing. If you ever need something like that again, just tell me."

"Father is unusually reliable and kind today. As your youngest daughter, I cannot conceal my confusion."

"Is that so? I feel like I'm acting the same way I always do."

"Normally, you team up with Grandmother and are harsh toward your youngest daughter."

"I suppose you've got me there."

Everyone in earshot of us began whispering among themselves. They knew

Type Twelve was a mechanical life-form, but probably not that our current job was to play pretend family with her.

Just then, I thought of something. If I got closer to Type Twelve, I could pass some of Futarishizuka's jobs on to her. At the moment, the Kepler Trading Company needed to maintain its radio equipment. With the mechanical life-form's super-technology, things like that would be a piece of cake. In fact, I'd be able to offer even better solutions to my clients. If we wanted to, we could launch a satellite into space above the otherworld.

"My dear," said Ms. Futarishizuka hastily, "you're not thinking of abandoning little old me, are you?"

"What? Of course not. You're the most dependable person I know."

*Man, she's sharp.* Futarishizuka glared at me from her desk like she wasn't convinced. She also stretched her leg and started poking my shin with her toes. I wished she'd stop. She was so short the gesture had her practically under her desk.

"Father, if you wish to abandon Grandmother and live for Mother's sake, the youngest daughter will agree to help you."

"Let's not introduce discord into the family, all right?" I replied. "I'd like to focus on everyone getting along."

That said, Peeps and I would benefit greatly if we were able to split our otherworld stock requests between Futarishizuka and Type Twelve. Our current overdependence on Ms. Futarishizuka was a sore spot for both of us. I had no doubt the distinguished Java sparrow would agree to such a proposal.

"Oh, to be abandoned at this age by my own son!" lamented Ms. Futarishizuka. "It seems this old lady is destined to die a miserable death by the roadside."

"Could you not say purposely misleading things in front of others?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure you'll live longer than anyone else in our family," said Miss Hoshizaki. "So I don't know what you're complaining about."

"You think so?" replied Ms. Futarishizuka. "I feel like the youngest daughter

and eldest son will long outlive me.”

This combination of deskwork and trivial banter continued for some time.

We’d been doing fieldwork nonstop for a while, and a lot of clerical tasks had piled up, so I decided to take care of them all in one go. Little by little, I entered data into the timekeeping system and reviewed and approved tasks we’d requested from other departments.

When I spotted an end-of-year party notification in my inbox, it made me reflect on the passage of time. I wondered if Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka would participate. I’d have to ask them later. I would put off my response until then—though that was the worst possible thing you could do to an event’s organizer.

For a while, Type Twelve sat at the desk across from Miss Hoshizaki and observed her closely. “The data I collected refers to this activity as ‘taking your daughter to work,’” she explained.

Eventually, however, she seemed to grow tired of watching, and once our lunch break was over, she got up from her seat. In her words, she was going to do some maintenance on our household environment. Maybe the sight of her mother working so hard had inspired her to do some labor of her own.

Meanwhile, Miss Hoshizaki was spending a rather long time staring at her overtime application form as she wondered how to deal with the time we’d spent working inside isolated spaces.

Figuring all that out seemed like way too much trouble to me, so I’d simply logged my regular working hours. My days of being starved for cash were now firmly in the past. The gold I’d made in the otherworld was worth much, much more than my bureau paycheck. In fact, the only reason I was concerned about keeping my job was to preserve my status in Japan.

If the bureau fired me now, I’d be up the creek without a paddle. Even with my limited experience, I could understand that much. I also had Futarishizuka’s position to consider.

In the end, the three of us clocked out on time and headed home.





## <The Neighbor's POV>

Just before end-of-day homeroom begins, a bunch of police cars pull up outside the school. I hear their shrill cries draw close, and then officers pour into our campus. With classes now over, students are walking freely around the school, and they are quick to notice the commotion.

“Hey, the police just came in!”

“Huh? For real?”

“I heard the sirens, but I didn’t think they were headed here!”

“Did something happen?”

“Was there a bomb threat?”

“I’ve been hearing about those a lot over the last few years.”

“Yeah, but there’s almost never a real bomb, right?”

Word reaches Class 1-A quickly. There are still a few minutes before homeroom begins, and a few kids with too much time on their hands burst out of the classroom, ready to rubberneck. For them, this is probably just a little entertainment to spice up their otherwise peaceful lives.

Meanwhile, I can’t suppress my anxiety.

Based on what my neighbor said yesterday, big shots the world over are already aware of the proxy war. It’s possible some elite has mobilized the police and sent them here to get rid of me and Abaddon—especially considering the recent incident on Miyakejima. In fact, that’s a pretty realistic scenario, isn’t it?

My partner has proven himself time and again inside isolated spaces. If someone wanted to take him out, the obvious choice would be to come after us on the outside. In fact, just the other day, I was lured out and shot with a sniper rifle during just such a ploy.

If our opponents were able to use public servants to corner us, they could go right over my neighbor and Futarishizuka’s heads to get to me. It’s a logical strategy. I feel more nervous right now than I do when I get caught in an

isolated space.

If it's come to this, I can't simply sit here in my classroom and wait for them.

"I'll go see what's happening," I say as I stand up, excusing myself from the classmates gathered around my desk. Depending on the situation, I might have to flee the school.

"Huh? Kurosu, you want to see, too?"

"Seems kinda out of character."

"Yeah, you're usually pretty calm in situations like this."

"If you're going, then maybe I'll join you."

"Oh, then I'll come, too!"

Ignoring the others, I quickly leave Classroom 1-A.

Where will the police come from? Will they use the faculty entrance? Either way, they're bound to go to the faculty room first, and I know which hallway connects the two.

*"You left your things in class. Was that the right decision?"* Abaddon asks once we're alone.

"I haven't decided to flee yet."

There are quite a few students in the hallway, but it's very noisy thanks to the arrival of the police. I decide that a quiet conversation with Abaddon is probably fine as long as we keep moving.

More importantly, I need to hurry and figure out what the police are here for.

*"I would recommend leaving school, like, right now."*

"First, I want to at least figure out who we're up against."

*"Yeah, I agree with you there!"*

The two of us keep moving as we discuss the situation. Abaddon is floating in the air a little ways in front of me—probably to keep me out of the line of fire if anything happens. He's very conscientious for a demon; I certainly didn't tell him to do that.

*"Maybe you should also call the family, just in case," he says.*

*"Are you suggesting my neighbor failed to negotiate with the organizers?"*

*"If things went that badly, I think he would have contacted you already."*

*"All right. Just to be sure, I'll have my phone ready to go."*

I take my phone out of my pocket, open the voice call app, and keep one hand on it. Then I run down two flights of stairs and arrive at the first floor. As I trot down the hall, the faculty room entrance comes into view.

*"Well, well. Are they having a party or something?"*

*"....."*

Abaddon is right about one thing—there's a *lot* of noise coming from the area in front of us. I see several police officers in the hallway, too. Men and women in navy uniforms have surrounded the room, and around them is a crowd of teachers and students. Everyone is focused on what's happening inside; none of them turn to look at us.

*"I didn't do it! This... This must be some kind of mistake!"*

I hear a shout from inside the faculty room. It belongs to a young male teacher.

*"Get off of me, or I'll sue you for assault!"*

His desperate, ghastly cries reach all the way out into the hallway.

I can hear the officers trying to restrain him, saying things like "just be quiet," "we have proof," and "we're not assaulting you." Apparently, they're in the middle of an arrest. It seems like quite a big deal.

*"I think I recognize approximately one of those voices,"* Abaddon points out.

*"What a coincidence,"* I reply. *"I was just thinking the same thing."*

The mood in the air is a little different from what I was expecting. I envisioned the police having a faculty member escort them up the stairs and officer after officer filing into Classroom 1-A. But now it seems like someone else is already playing the part I'd envisioned for myself.

I can't exactly charge in from the front, so I hide behind a pillar and watch the

proceedings in secret.

Eventually, I see the police officers in front of the faculty room move. The ones blocking off the room's entrance part to the left and right, creating a path down the hallway. As they do, a person emerges with several officers forming a ring around him; his hands are in cuffs, and his head hangs low. It looks exactly like the arrests I've seen on TV news shows.

"Suspect arrested at 3:55 PM!"

And it seems that's exactly what's happening. The officer's voice rings out, easily reaching Abaddon and me, as he announces their success. The suspect must have been particularly belligerent because he's tied to one of the officers by a rope around his waist meant to restrain him.

*"It looks like this had nothing to do with us,"* says Abaddon, sounding disappointed.

"....."

Though we weren't arrested, I still find myself rather surprised. After all, I know the person in handcuffs.

"What the hell?! Isn't that our homeroom teacher?!" comes a voice from surprisingly nearby—one I've become familiar with over the last few days.

It's one of the boys in my class. Startled, I look over, and there he is, standing right next to me. I have no idea when he got there. He must have followed me. Several more students are right on his heels, all running up to join us. They each express their shock.

"Wait a minute. What's going on?"

"No way! It *is* him! Mr. Takahashi!"

"Uh, this is a big deal, right? Homeroom teachers don't usually get arrested."

"It's like I'm watching the news."

"Get out your phone! Take a video so you can upload it!"

I never thought I'd see our homeroom teacher get arrested right in front of me. Though, as it happens, I have an idea as to what his crime might be.

“Hey, I just got a text from someone who was in the faculty room,” says one of my classmates. Everyone’s attention turns to her. Still looking at the phone in her hand, she continues. “Apparently, our homeroom teacher was doing *it* with Miyata.”

She’s right on the mark.

And yet I’m still confused. I heard them at it just the other day, but I thought he had the situation under control. It would be a different story if she were under thirteen—he’d be charged with rape no matter what. But I heard that if the person is thirteen or older, things often get settled outside of court—especially if both parties are happy with the situation. It seems incredibly unusual for the police to suddenly charge in like this. Was he using shady drugs, maybe? I don’t even have to ask before my classmates start trading information every which way.

“Uh, are you serious?”

“Mr. Takahashi is a lolicon?!”

“He was after Miyata? Yeah, he’s *definitely* a lolicon.”

“Wait. Why her anyway?”

“Didn’t she stay home from school today?”

“Well, *he* sure has awful taste in girls.”

“Ha-ha, you said it!”

The boys are all completely astounded. The girls are, too, but some of them sound a little envious of Miyata. I’ve heard that people tend to be more forgiving of good-looking criminals, and it seems that idea extends to sex offenders as well.

Either way, Abaddon and I are in the clear. *That guy gave me quite the scare.*

*“It looks like we won’t have to contact your neighbor,”* says Abaddon.

“Yes,” I reply, happy that I didn’t jump to conclusions. I don’t want to bother him with something so stupid.

Then—probably because of all the noise in the hallway—one of the teachers I



saw in front of the faculty room comes rushing up to us. I've seen him before, too. I think he's the school principal.

"All of you, back to your classrooms!"

My classmates start protesting this command, emboldened by what they just witnessed.

"But what are we supposed to do about homeroom?"

"The police took Mr. Takahashi away."

"How far did Miyata and Mr. Takahashi go?"

"Were the other teachers doing it, too?"

"I'm kind of scared to be at school now."

They seem very enthusiastic—this is a rare chance for them to vocally stand on the side of justice against adults. I imagine it's payback for all the scoldings and lectures the teachers give us on a daily basis.

"L-look, just go back to your classroom. I'll handle homeroom!" the principal shouts back, faltering in the face of their energy.

In the meantime, the police cars parked out front start pulling away. They drive into the distance, sirens still blaring. I take a peek out the hallway window and confirm that most of the cars have now left. It seems this whole event truly had nothing to do with the proxy war.

That day, all club activities are canceled, and everyone is sent home at once.



We waited until it was time to clock out, but Section Chief Akutsu never returned to his desk.

So, having finished up our clerical tasks, we left our hardworking colleagues to their overtime and departed from the office right on schedule. Using a terminal provided by Type Twelve, we zoomed out of Tokyo and back to Ms. Futarishizuka's Karuizawa villa.

This new pickup service was, in a word, perfection. First, we made our way to

a neighborhood park. Then Miss Hoshizaki called out, and a saucer-shaped UFO appeared out of nowhere. I suspected the terminal serving as Miss Hoshizaki's protection had arranged for the transport. As always, the machine was shrouded with some kind of optical camouflage. Inside, Type Twelve greeted Miss Hoshizaki.

From that point on, it was pretend family time. Once we met up with Peeps and Lady Elsa, who had been minding the villa in our absence, and my neighbor and Abaddon, now back from school, we moved to the single-family home inside the unidentified flying object. Once inside, everyone gathered around the low Japanese table in the living room to have dinner.

Today's meal was sukiyaki. And on a lesser note, I was to serve as cook. I'd picked up the ingredients at a supermarket in the Tokyo suburbs on our way to Karuizawa. Unlike the cramped stores in the city proper, this one—which had a big parking lot, too—boasted so many varieties of food that I found it fun just to wander around looking at them.

Incidentally, while we were on the job playing pretend family, the bureau picked up all our meal expenses. The section chief had told us to treat it as a social expense allowance.

With that in mind, I decided to splurge on the meat and chose a black wagyu rib roast. Not only did we have a crowd, but some of them were also growing children, so I went big—we'd have three hundred grams of it per person. In total, I'd purchased over two kilograms of rib roast; I couldn't help but smile as I tossed the store's entire supply into our shopping basket.

Back at the dinner table, a certain Java sparrow glanced up from his meal at me.

*"Isn't this meat simply delicious?"* Peeps said, clearly excited. *"And a good cut, too, yes?"*

"You think so? Well, I'm glad you like it."

Peeps was giving my cooking rave reviews. I'd gotten the rib roast partly as a way to repay him for helping us so much during yesterday's death game. According to Abaddon, the distinguished sparrow had eliminated a sizable number of angels and demons.

Most of them were average at best, though; the stronger ones were more capable when it came to exchanges like these and could position themselves better. If we had to take them on in the future, it probably wouldn't go as smoothly.

"Hey, Sasaki," said Miss Hoshizaki. "Are you compensating for your mediocre cooking skills with expensive ingredients? That doesn't seem fair."

"Sorry about that," I replied. "We had to go into the office today, so I had time constraints to think about."

"I don't think the young newlywed who can't even melt curry mix properly should be talking," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Ugh..."

The mother-in-law had some potent zingers up her sleeve. Her own skill at cooking made her remarks land even harder. *Never underestimate the power of food*, I thought.

"Grandmother, it is not good to criticize Mother. I helped her, and thus, I share some of the responsibility."

"You sure take every opportunity to score points with her, don't you?" grumbled Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Futarishizuka, shouldn't I help with the cooking like everyone else?" asked Lady Elsa, considerate as ever. I briefly wondered to myself if, out of all of us, *she* wasn't the one treating this pretend family business the most earnestly.

"But I've heard from our good father that you are of very high status," she replied.

"Even nobility can cook. And I'd like you all to taste some food from my homeland."

"Oh? Well, count me interested indeed."

Our dinner was accompanied by lively conversation on all sides. I tended to prefer quiet, but for some reason, I felt at peace sitting there at the low table. The bubbling, steaming pot of food at the center was simply irresistible.

“Ah yes,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Have you decided on a name to put on this girl’s family register, dear senior?”

“Oh, um, I think I need a little more time to think...”

“Don’t forget that you promised the boss to get back to him by this evening.”

“Urk...”

Apparently, Miss Hoshizaki was still trying to think of a good name for Type Twelve. I suspected she was having even more trouble because of how important the girl was to her. Ms. Futarishizuka’s off-handed comment about her having the tastes of an old man had put even more pressure on her to think up something good.

Come to think of it, she *had* been checking her phone an awful lot during her spare time. *Looking up baby names, no doubt.*

“Mother, I do not mind what sort of name you give me. The important part is that it comes from you. The rest means nothing to me. Please feel at ease while thinking of a name.”

“Thanks, but this is going on your *family register*,” replied Miss Hoshizaki. “Do you understand how important that is?”

“On the internet, I found an article on a government website stating that, in this country, there is a legal system in place for changing a citizen’s name. Should you desire to change my name at a later date, I am certain Father will speak to your superior about it.”

“Sure,” I said. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That may be true, but I really want to get it right the first time...,” said Miss Hoshizaki. She’d cracked an egg onto her dish and was now stirring the contents around with her chopsticks. *She’s having a really hard time with this*, I thought.

“Are we giving her a new name, mister?” asked my neighbor.

“Yes,” I replied. “Her official name is a little too long to fit on a family

register.”

“Have you already decided on a last name?”

“Father has given me the surname Sasaki,” answered Type Twelve. “There is no problem in that regard.”

*“A last name from her father and a first name from her mother, huh? Anyone who didn’t know the truth would think you three were the perfect family.”*

“.....”

Abaddon looked straight at my neighbor as he spoke; his expression seemed to say, “My, my, how about that?” My neighbor, in turn, was watching Type Twelve with a look of surprise.

“Elder Brother, such impressions make the youngest daughter very happy. Feel free to continue praising me.”

*“Really? Well, I think my partner would get angry if I said any more, so I’ll call it right there.”*

“Futarishizuka, how do parents name their children here?” asked Lady Elsa.

“Oh, there’s a million different ways, dear. It depends on the person. Some people use the names of other family members, while some choose names filled with hopes about what the child will grow up to be like. Lately, more and more people are borrowing the names of idols and anime characters.”

“But none of those options feel quite right to me,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Then let me ask you a question,” Ms. Futarishizuka replied. “How have you been referring to her in your thoughts? If you want to pick something that feels right, you might as well begin there. It’s always harder to start from zero.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, well, I...”

“Oh? Have you been calling her something rude? How awful of you.”

“N-no! I haven’t! I just, well... I think of her as ‘Type Twelve,’ but with a *chan* on the end.”

“How simplistic of you.”

“Well, what do *you* call her?”

“‘Roboko,’ of course. Can’t think of a better name than that.”

“Wow. And you think *mine’s* simplistic?”

After this loud back and forth, Miss Hoshizaki turned to me. “What about you, Sasaki?”

“Huh? Me?”

I had really hoped no one would ask me that, partially to preserve Miss Hoshizaki’s honor. But, unable to lie, I was forced to answer honestly.

“You’re weirding me out, Sasaki,” she said. “Is there some reason you can’t tell us?”

“No, I can. But I’m sorry. I’ve been calling her ‘Type Twelve’ with a *san*.”

“It seems our dear senior’s tastes are indeed like an old man’s, hmm?”

“Ugh...”

I felt guilty, despite doing nothing wrong. Miss Hoshizaki looked down and clammed up. In her place, this old man redirected the conversation to the one sitting next to him.

“What about you?” I asked my neighbor. “I won’t force you to say, of course.”

“Me? I call her ‘Type Twelve’ with a *san*, too.”

“Oh, you don’t need to pretend for *her* sake,” Ms. Futarishizuka assured her. “Why, she did this to herself!”

“Oh, I wasn’t...”

My neighbor was such a good girl. So young and yet so considerate.

*“I’m pretty sure none of this is worth arguing over.”*

“Please be quiet, Abaddon.”

“Then I would like to ask our most honored houseguest,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “What are *your* thoughts?”

“The term *alien* that Sasaki used in the past left a deep impression on me,” replied Lady Elsa.

“I see... In that case, the old-man name seems to be the most attractive option.”

“Could you please stop calling it that?” Miss Hoshizaki complained.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Oh, no, that’s not... I’m not saying I don’t like you or anything, Sasaki! Really!”

We all had our own opinions regarding Type Twelve’s name. As we discussed the matter, the girl of the hour looked on before finally offering her own impressions.

“Sitting like this with the family soothes my heart.”

“What’s this now?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “That’s a strange thing to say so suddenly.”

“I meant it literally,” Type Twelve replied. “There is no deeper meaning behind my words.”

“Aha,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “It must feel good to have everyone fawning over you like this. It’s probably tickling you pink. You must be on cloud nine right now.”

“Grandmother, unilateral disparagement not supported by evidence is an inferior act human civilization has dubbed hate speech. Making such remarks unnecessarily in the presence of third parties debases both the speaker and—”

“Come now. Your cheeks are twitching. You must be trying hard not to smile.”

“.....”

Ms. Futarishizuka wasn’t letting up. Type Twelve, meanwhile, was speechless. Her cheeks were indeed twitching. Seeing as mechanical life-forms couldn’t lie, Ms. Futarishizuka must have been right on the money.

“Anyway,” the girl in the kimono continued, “can’t we just call her ‘Twelve’?”



“Mother, I am loath to offer any affirmation in response to Grandmother’s comments, but I would like to propose the name ‘Twelve’ as well. In consideration of the circumstances that led to my naming, I believe it is quite significant. If it is all right with you, I would like it if you called me by that name yourself.”

“Are... Are you really sure you’re okay with that?”

“It is a name you came up with, Mother. Therefore, it is of great importance to your youngest daughter.”

“I suppose I did come up with it, but it’s a little strange to use as a person’s name...”

“The youngest daughter is a mechanical life-form, not a human. There is no problem with my name being different from a human’s.”

Type Twelve stopped eating and held Miss Hoshizaki’s gaze.

As though moved by this earnest gesture, Miss Hoshizaki nodded. “Okay, um, Twelve. Then I’ll call you that from now on.”

“Ah, Mother’s warm love is melting the youngest daughter’s heart.”

“That sounds rather indecent, don’t you think?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I knew Grandmother would make a comment either way, so I decided to say whatever I wanted.”

“Oh. Entering your rebellious phase, are you?”

“I’ll tell Mr. Akutsu that we’ve decided,” I said.

“Father, please do so quickly.”

“Just so we’re on the same page, Sasaki,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “use the

characters for the number in Japanese, please.”

“Understood.”

Now that we’d decided on a name, I immediately contacted our boss. I sent him an email from my work phone so I could write out the Japanese characters we wanted to use. He sent us the okay within minutes, confirming that he would process her name as Twelve Sasaki.

*“Has your talk ended?” asked Peeps. “If so, I would like seconds.”*

“Why, you shrewd little bird,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “You put away all that rib roast while we were talking, didn’t you? Each piece was twenty grams. How can you fit so much food in that tiny sparrow belly of yours? Java sparrows only eat about ten grams a day, don’t they?”

*“The key is not to let it build up in my stomach. Then I can enjoy eating as much as I want.”*

“Wait, what? Oh, you simply *must* tell me exactly what you mean by that.”

“There’s plenty left if anyone wants seconds, so you don’t need to worry,” I said.

We spent the rest of our family time in leisure and relaxation. Then we took in an after-dinner TV show and split up for the day.



Once we went our separate ways, I checked my bureau phone again. We still hadn’t received any information from the boss about what we’d be working on starting tomorrow. He hadn’t said anything else after confirming Type Twelve’s name. There was no point waiting late into the night. Instead, I decided to head to the otherworld ahead of schedule that evening and wake up early the following morning.

It had been three days in Japan time since our last visit. With Lady Elsa in tow, Peeps and I departed from Karuizawa and landed in the Kingdom of Herz.

Our first port of call was the royal castle in Allestos. As always, we started by paying a visit to Count Müller’s office in the castle proper. When we arrived, the

room's tenant gestured for us to sit down on a pair of sofas. The count and his daughter took one, and I sat on the other, across a low table from them. Peeps perched on his little tree atop the table as usual.

As soon as we exchanged greetings, Lady Elsa spoke up. "Father, would it be all right if I introduced this kingdom's food to Sasaki and his friends?"

"What are you talking about, Elsa?" asked the count. "If memory serves, Lord Sasaki and his familiar have already tasted many of this world's delicacies. Were you referring to some specialty in particular?"

"Oh, um, I'm sorry. I got ahead of myself." The girl seemed to realize something when she heard her father's reply. She smiled, a little embarrassed. It was a charming expression on her. "There are people besides Sasaki in his world that have treated me very well. They let me eat all kinds of different foods every day. I would like to offer them some of our kingdom's cooking in return."

"Ah, I see."

"So I wanted to ask your permission to go into town. I'd like to get the ingredients before I leave again. If I may, I'd like to do as the others do and start from procuring what I'll need to make each dish."

"Lord Sasaki, are you fine with this plan?"

"I'm incredibly honored by Lady Elsa's kindness. I'm sure everyone will be delighted."

He turned back to Elsa. "Then I'll prepare a carriage and a knight to escort you at once."

"Thank you, Father!" she exclaimed.

Part of me was concerned by the prospect of bringing food from the otherworld to Earth. But Peeps and I ate things in this world all the time. And besides, if something *did* happen, Peeps's healing magic could take care of any unforeseen consequences.

After reassuring myself, I decided to prioritize Lady Elsa's goodwill. That said, I would definitely be burning all the leftover vegetable peels and seeds.

Incidentally, King Adonis wasn't at the castle. According to the count, he was still busy purging the Imperialists. That was, of course, why Count Müller seemed to always be around. After a bit more conversation, we said farewell to the father-daughter duo. We promised to visit again the next day, then left the castle behind.

From Allestos, we made our way to the Alterian region to check on the development of the route between Herz and the Republic of Lunge. Peeps's teleportation magic got us there in a jiffy. Almost two months had passed in this world, and we could tell from above that work was progressing.

Along a river flowing down from the mountains, where forested slopes met a stretch of wasteland, were rows of tents—likely outposts for the workers developing the land. We could see a row of buildings under construction near the center—plus a few campfires here and there, releasing plumes of smoke into the air.

We used flight magic to descend toward the site, landing in one corner of the settlement.

Workers immediately caught sight of us and ran over, passing between the tents. As they grew nearer, we were able to make out their faces.

It was Mr. French's father and younger sister. They'd probably spotted us first because they were assigned to keep watch over the area. There were tents everywhere, and people who looked like workers were busily going this way and that. As I took in the activity around us, I asked about the site's progress.

The response caught me by surprise.

"What?" I said. "The tunnel under the river is already finished?"

"There are a few more things to take care of, like paving the road. But horse-drawn carts should be able to get through without a problem. The ground around here is pretty stable, sir; we shouldn't have to worry about any water leaking through."

"You've made quick work of it..."

"It's all thanks to your massive investments, Lord Sasaki."

The father took the lead in explaining all this.

I was shocked by how much they'd been able to do in two short months. I was expecting something more like this: They'd do a little digging around the entrance, then some leakage from the river would set them back, and they'd have to steel themselves for the long haul. I never dreamed they'd have the road completely dug out already, even if it was still unpaved.

"If you're willing to be my guide, I'd like to see the site," I said.

"Yes, sir, by all means. I'll show you around."

Mr. French's father began walking, and we followed him to the tunnel along with his daughter. Our destination would be the starting point for the route.

The river in question flowed alongside the village of tents, and the tunnel had been bored out underneath it. We headed down toward the passage. Because it had been made for carts, the slant down into the tunnel wasn't very steep. It was quite long, however.

The entrance was pretty wide, too. They'd secured more than enough area for cart traffic. And the surface of the exposed ground was as smooth as if someone had used heavy machinery to level it. According to Mr. French's father, it had been packed down with magic.

*Come to think of it, didn't the master builder and the others do something similar during the fortress's construction?*

"I hope this doesn't sound rude, but I'm impressed by how much you were able to excavate."

"You provided more than enough compensation, sir, and we've had plenty of skilled magicians making the trip here from Rotan. A few of them even crossed the mountains from Lunge."

"They sure came a long way."

"Well, sir, the latter group originally lived here in Herz. Though they now live in the Republic, they were never able to forget their homeland. I believe that is another reason they're so willing to work hard."

I thought back to what Peeps had told me about the history of Herz. He'd said

it was once at the pinnacle of magical technology. But as the noble class became increasingly corrupt, skilled magicians grew disillusioned and fled the country, leading to a rapid loss of state power. Now it seemed some of those people had set their sights back on their homeland.

I assumed the new king was another factor in their change of heart. King Adonis purging one Imperialist noble after another had become big news in Lunge; I wouldn't be surprised if these mages had taken an interest in the situation.

"Would you like to go through the tunnel to the other side, sir?"

"May I?"

"Of course. Let me show you the way."

I followed Mr. French's father into the tunnel. I could see light shining in from the opposite end straight ahead. The tunnel was impressively complete. This world's magic was kind of insane. No wonder science-based technology had never taken off here.

I remembered hearing on a TV program once that when humans wanted to dig a tunnel, it was typical to use the shield tunneling method, which progressed only a few centimeters at a time. According to the experts, with a normal foundation, you could expect maybe ten meters or so to be dug out in a day.

This tunnel was about the same length as one of ours, and it had been fully completed in the same amount of time. That said, while the digging was done, they still had to finish the outer walls. They were now laying bricks on the magically hardened foundation. This seemed like the more time-consuming portion of the work.

"It seems jobs like these go much more quickly with the help of magic users," I pointed out, just to make sure.

His reply was as I expected. "I can't imagine how long it would have taken if we'd tried to bore through without magic, sir."

I had heard there was an advanced spell in the same vein that could completely alter the state of the land. It could turn the ground into a swamp or

make it as hard as metal. They'd used the former along with a levitation spell to transport soil away from the dig site and then the latter spell to harden the surface inside the tunnel, thus completing it.

Most interesting to me was the long-term integrity of the structure. Apparently, regular maintenance on tunnels generally involved repacking the soil with magic to keep it sturdy. It all sounded very otherworldly.

On Earth, tunnels often made use of concrete segments. It seemed magic performed a similar function here. A good chunk of the construction period was to be spent on firming up the ground post-dig. I was happy to hear they were putting safety first.

Sometimes, in places like Tokyo, water would leak into tunnels where the ground was less naturally stable. But if you used a spell to freeze the area around the leak, you could instantly fix the problem—no need for liquid nitrogen. This seemed a much more efficient method.

According to Mr. French's father, these techniques were employed daily all over the place. Nevertheless, no one could keep using magic nonstop all day. They probably had to confine their work to short, focused bursts.

It seemed, however, that the Marc Trading Company's limitless cash injections had resolved this issue. Because of the number and variety of magic users coming to the site, it was possible to keep digging all day using a rotation system.

Mr. French's father explained all this while I listened patiently.

"They're being paid a lot for a few hours of labor," he said. "And the required level of magical ability isn't very high. The living situation is a little austere, but even so, they're receiving exceptional treatment."

"Is that right?"

"Recently, merchants from Rotan have been coming out to cater to the mages, sir. Thanks to them, while we're still living in tents, we're able to get our hands on some luxury items."

"Ah, so that's why the tent town seems so lively."



“We’re also developing residential areas, of course. They’re only shacks right now, but with some more time, I think we can prepare a space to properly welcome you, Lord Sasaki.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about me. I’d rather you prioritize your own living quarters.”

“I’m very grateful for your consideration, sir.”

After listening to this long explanation, I suddenly had a thought. With this level of work, wasn’t it possible to bore right through the mountains?

It would naturally take many years. And yet I felt increasingly sure it was possible. I wasn’t 100 percent, though. And it was human nature to want to confirm one’s notions immediately.

At this rate, the route’s development would be over before we knew it, and I didn’t want that.

“I’d like to ask some questions about future plans,” I said, addressing Mr. French’s father.

“What is it, sir?”

“Could you gather up everyone supervising the construction for me?”

Just asking shouldn’t cause that much trouble, so I figured I’d greet everyone and pose a few questions while I was at it.



Mr. French’s father led us to a particularly large tent nearby, while his daughter went around gathering up all the supervisors. Thanks to her, we soon had everyone we needed.

We all stood inside the large tent around a table set up in the middle. Atop the table was a map depicting the surrounding area—something we’d borrowed from Mr. Joseph for this job. It showed the region near the border between the Kingdom of Herz and the Republic of Lunge. The map itself was fairly precise; when Mr. Joseph handed it over, he’d cautioned me to take care of it. I normally left it with Mr. French’s father.

“A... A tunnel to go through the *mountains*, sir?”

Mr. French’s father was the first one to speak up after I made the suggestion.

“Yes, that’s right. Is it possible?”

“Well, sir, I’m not sure...”

Aside from the two of us, our group comprised several magic users and craftsmen. Evidently, these people were all in leadership positions, and it seemed about half of them were employed by the Marc Trading Company.

Not long after Mr. French’s father, they began sharing their own thoughts.

“I’ve never heard of anyone in the whole world trying their hand at such a major project.”

“I think that might be too rash, even for us.”

“I can’t even imagine how much that would cost.”

“But if we had the funds, it might just be possible.”

“Any craftsman worth his salt would want to have a hand in a project that huge.”

Their responses ran the gamut between those who thought it was absolutely unthinkable and others who had started working their mental abacuses straightaway. The idea was surely reckless, but from what I was hearing, it was technically possible.

“.....”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Java sparrow atop my shoulder twitch. But he refrained from sharing his opinion since he was still pretending to be merely a cute little bird.

“Lord Sasaki, some of us have made similar remarks before. But—and forgive me for being rude, sir—they were all jokes. I can’t imagine how much work and money it would take to pull off a project of that scale.”

Mr. French’s father was speaking for his colleagues now. He was clearly dismayed by my sudden suggestion. If I’d been in his shoes, I probably would have refused outright. But when I thought about it, the section chief had forced

me to do similarly insane things several times over now... Such was life—it was precisely when you most wanted to flee that running away wasn't an option.

“And if I might be so bold, sir, even if we did complete the tunnel, it would be a massive undertaking just to maintain a structure of that immense size. Monster attacks and bandits could destroy parts of it, causing massive losses.”

Mr. French's father was right—large structures were rarely built outside of cities in this world. Even on Earth, less stable countries frequently saw public facilities destroyed after completion or simply couldn't maintain them.

But there was no point thinking about that now. After all, there was no guarantee this project would even be completed.

“Regarding maintenance,” I said, “I could simply arrange for additional personnel to be assigned once the current project is finished.”

“But sir, I—”

“Let me put it a different way. If you ignore the necessary manpower, time, and cost, would it be possible?” I asked, turning from the anxious-looking father to the other supervisors.

Their faces all grew serious, and they began to debate it on the spot.

“With a map this excellent, I feel it would certainly be possible.”

“If we can keep hiring magic users at the current rate, we'd at least be able to bore the tunnel out.”

“Yeah, sure, but we'd have to protect the finished parts on the way, right? Wouldn't that be the real issue?”

“That's what the captain is worried about, too.”

“Maybe if we could borrow knights from the kingdom, but...”

“Why not start digging in a deep spot to keep it out of sight?”

“We'd never be able to keep everyone quiet.”

“It would be difficult to secure ventilation, too.”

“If knights are out of the question, we'd need to hire a sizable band of mercenaries.”

“His Lordship did say we could ignore the issue of cost.”

I watched them silently. Next to me, Mr. French’s father’s face was as white as a sheet.

A short while later, the construction supervisors gave me their answer. Someone dressed like a magician stepped forward to represent the others and addressed me in a formal tone.

“Your Lordship, to summarize, it is indeed possible.”

“I see. Thank you.”

I figured this was a bit like when engineers told you something was “technically possible.” The implication was that it would cost way too much time and money to actually accomplish. That said, my goal just happened to be wasting a bunch of time and money, so their evaluation was very attractive to me. And even if it failed, we could just stop partway through.

To be honest, the mountain base camps were a rather cheap option. Considering how impressive the otherworld’s magic was, I’d need to go bigger if I wanted to spend more than a trickle of the profits currently making their way into my pockets.

“It would certainly take over a decade, sir.”

“In that case, there’s something else I’d like to ask.”

“What would that be, sir?”

“Hypothetically, if I were to make this request, would you all want to work here for over a decade?”

I cut straight to the chase and watched as their faces all stiffened. That was when I remembered—I was a noble here. I’d basically just sentenced them to over a decade of penal servitude. *Oh no*, I thought and quickly explained myself.

“I would never confine you here for a long time, of course. You would be free to return to Rotan and enjoy a vacation now and then. You’d be able to go back to your homelands once in a while, too. Even so, I know that many of you are probably resistant to the idea of working for such a long period of time.”

The looks on everyone’s faces visibly softened; my intentions must have

gotten through to them.

Mr. French's father stepped forward and addressed me formally. "Sir, this is just a conjecture, but I believe the amount needed would dwarf the budget we're currently receiving from the Marc Trading Company. The sum would be so massive that even the ruler of a large territory would struggle to make ends meet."

"That won't be a problem," I told him. "I'll have enough capital ready for you, so please don't worry about that. On the off chance that payments get held up, please feel free to abandon the project that very day. I'll make sure to include that in the contract."

I had it on good authority—namely, Mr. Joseph's—that the Marc Trading Company's monopoly on long-distance communication was a done deal. In fact, the bigger problem was how to spread the profits.

"Please, sir, this is far too big a burden to put on your shoulders. This could easily affect the administration of your territory. Why don't we build the route according to the initial plan first?"

"My understanding is that this project will be very valuable for the Kingdom of Herz."

"You think it would be to our homeland's benefit?"

"Yes, I do."

"Sir, why do you treat the Kingdom of Herz so well?"

"I want to do everything in my power to help His Majesty."

"I, er, I see..."

I purposely left out which "His Majesty" I was referring to. And I didn't think this would be nearly enough to repay them—to make it up to them. I thought back to the events that had transpired in the royal palace.

To avoid brooding, I turned to the magicians and craftsmen and asked them what they thought of the proposal.

"I'll do whatever the captain decides."

“Yes, I will abide by his judgment as well.”

“As long as the captain says yes, I won’t complain.”

“Hell, if he gave the word, we’d dig out *anything*.”

“I agree with the others.”

It seemed they were all on the same page, almost as if they’d already discussed the matter. And yet I knew they hadn’t had time for that.

“Excuse me, but who is this *captain* you keep referring to?” I asked.

“The one from Viscount French’s family. The man right over there, Your Lordship,” explained one of the craftsmen right away. Apparently, they’d been talking about Mr. French’s father.

“They heard I used to be a knight, sir,” he explained sheepishly. “So they started calling me that.”

In less than two short months, the rest of the construction site had come to thoroughly rely on him. However, because Mr. French had been elevated to the peerage, his father and sister were also considered nobility. It amazed me how much the others trusted him despite their differing ranks.

Even though he was only a petty officer, it seemed his time leading a group of knights hadn’t been for nothing. I wondered if something had happened in the last few months that had cemented their trust in him. Maybe I’d ask about it when we next had some free time.

The “captain” nodded to the others around the table, then turned back to me. “Very well, sir. We accept. We’d like to move forward with your proposal.”

“You have my sincere thanks. I feel very reassured entrusting things to you.”

I had a feeling Mr. Joseph wasn’t going to like this idea, but there was nothing I could do about that. In the end, I was a Herzian noble. In exchange, I might have to prepare another attention-grabbing product for him aside from the radio equipment. I thought of Ms. Futarishizuka, who had been fretting ever since Type Twelve showed up; maybe I could have her acquire something that took a little more time and effort.

“I’ll tell Mr. Marc about all of this, so please leave that to me.”

“We will all work with every fiber of our being so as not to let your great consideration for our kingdom go to waste, sir.”

Despite all this, I couldn't bring myself to saddle them with such a huge task and then disappear. So I spent the rest of my stay in the otherworld personally helping to plan the tunnel's construction. For an entire week, I helped hammer out a route with the others. Soon, we were able to figure out a basic idea of how to proceed. And with the power of magic, we could immediately do a few preliminary cuts to put our ideas to the test.

Thanks to everyone's efforts, we'd worked out a plan of action by the time I was ready to leave.

It felt like I'd gotten some real work done in the otherworld for the first time in a while, and I departed from the construction site with a sense of fulfillment. I also got the feeling I'd grown a little closer with the workers. However, this all meant I wasn't able to fit in any magic practice or horseback riding.

On my final day in the otherworld, I headed to the Republic of Lunge, more nervous than usual. Our first stop was the Kepler Trading Company; once in the reception room, I greeted Mr. Joseph and provided him with two months' worth of diesel fuel. Mr. Marc was present as well. With the two of them together, I broached my new ideas regarding the route development project.

Naturally, chaos ensued the moment I brought it up.

“Mr. Sasaki, are you serious? I'm sure you must be joking.”

“Your apprehensions are more than reasonable, Mr. Joseph, but I am quite serious.”

“While it's true that you're a citizen of the Kingdom of Herz, and while I understand your desire to contribute to your country, there will be no point to your generosity if it destroys you. I can only see this harming Herz in the long run.”

“Please calm down, Mr. Joseph.”

“I don't see a single reason to calm down.”

*You're right*, I thought. *I'm sorry*. I felt really bad about the whole thing. What



I was doing was tantamount to dragging the rest of my family into a multi-level marketing scheme. But I did my best to defend my idea.

“Currently, almost no other countries or organizations have their eye on the Kingdom of Herz. If we establish this trade route, the Kepler Trading Company will be able to monopolize it. I believe the potential profits would be immeasurable.”

“Forgive my rudeness, but is a declining kingdom really that valuable an investment?”

“I like to think of that decline as an opportunity. Right now, Herz is wide open. To add to that, the throne just changed hands, and the Empire’s influence is being steadily removed from the country’s power structure. That will leave a very large hole to fill.”

“I’ll give you that Herz still boasts a significant population. And I am sure a large amount of land will be seized by the government as its rulers are purged. But the trade route will only be valuable if it is completed, yes?”

Several tunnels of similar scope had been constructed in my own homeland—but I couldn’t use that as a defense. Considering the monsters and bandits that roamed this world, the same type of work would likely be impossible. To be honest, I was expecting this proposition to fail from the start, so giving Mr. Joseph and Mr. Marc false hope would only serve to tighten the noose around my neck.

Instead, I changed tack. “Even if this project fails, the only downside would be my loss of status within the company. For Kepler as a whole, I think it’s a good idea. As I said before, I don’t want to cause any problems for your business.”

Lately, my position within the Kepler Trading Company felt precarious. I was a foreigner who showed up suddenly and got hired through a connection to the company president. I was sure the other executives hated me. Regardless of overall company performance, I suspected there had been a lot of pushback from those higher up in the organization.

And now the newcomer was getting carried away on some stupid venture right in front of their noses. But doing this—and thus, lowering Mr. Joseph’s esteem for me—was actually part of my plan. If I did my job *too* well, after all, I

might get assassinated like a certain Starsage.

“You and the company are in no danger,” I said. “Or am I mistaken?”

“Are you saying you’ll take full responsibility for this project’s failure?”

“Please don’t misunderstand. I don’t believe this venture is risky at all.”

“.....”

Belatedly, something occurred to me. If an ordinary person like me had come up with this tunnel project, it seemed natural that others in this world had thought of the same idea at some point in the past. A few of them had probably even tried and failed. However, I hadn’t yet heard any such stories.

“I know I’m being pushy with this proposition, but what do you think?”

“...I hear what you’re saying, Mr. Sasaki,” replied Mr. Joseph. He looked more reluctant than I’d ever seen him.

He was a sharp man, and he probably had a complete understanding of my intentions. And yet, rather than getting mad, he seemed to think over the options. This was further proof of just how valuable the Marc Trading Company was to Kepler as of late.

Eventually, after mulling it over, he responded with a small nod. “I accept. I’d like to honor your wishes on the matter, Mr. Sasaki.”

“Thank you, Mr. Joseph.”

*Thank goodness, I thought. I managed to get his approval.* My heart had been pounding over this—I’d talked a pretty big game back at the construction site, after all.

A moment later, his attention shifted to the other man in the room. “Mr. Marc, could I ask you to adjust the trade route development plans and begin digging from the Lunge side as well? Working from both directions at once will shorten the tunnel’s construction time considerably.”

“Y-yes, sir,” replied Mr. Marc. Then, after confirming the details, he rushed out of the reception room.

That ended our meeting. Normally, I’d take the Kepler Trading Company up

on their hospitality and stay in town for the night. But because of the complicated nature of our discussion this time, I skipped drinks with Mr. Joseph and left Lunge at once. You might say I felt so bad about what I'd just done that I fled the scene of the crime.

From there, Peeps and I headed straight for our lodgings in Baytrium—our headquarters. Our stay in the otherworld was over, and the only thing left to do was return to Earth. But after warping to the familiar living space, Peeps spoke up.

*“Do you truly think you will be able to build this tunnel?”* he asked, flying off my shoulder and perching on his little tree atop the living room table.

*“Who knows? If we’re lucky, it might just work out.”*

*“I’m surprised. You seem to have even higher hopes for this than I do.”*

*“Is that right?”*

*“In your world’s terms, this endeavor is like cutting through the Alps from north to south.”*

*“But in terms of technology, the people here are just as capable as those in my world.”*

*“I won’t deny that, but there are many other issues involved in this case.”*

*“Do you think we should call it off right now?”*

*“No. As a statesman, it piques my interest.”*

*“That makes me feel a little better.”*

*“Remember the dragon idling about in the royal capital? Once work has progressed to a certain point, I can send him to the construction site. Adonis is aware of your actions as well. I would not be surprised if the royal palace agrees to cooperate with this undertaking.”*

The dragon “idling about” in the royal capital was the golden dragon that had cut through the opposition during King Adonis’s march on Allestos against the Imperialist nobles. He was still nesting in the suburbs, ready to take out any more traitors should they arise. Thanks to him, the king could take the lion’s share of his forces to other territories as he continued his purge without

worrying about the capital. According to Count Müller, however, the traitors were already running out of steam, and the dragon was now less needed. If that were truly the case, I would be more than happy to make use of him.

“I’m all for it. It will be very handy to have him there should a dispute break out with the Republic over rights to the tunnel.”

*“The swiftness with which your mind operates is quite something. And I am very reassured by that quick wit you occasionally show—as you did earlier in your exchange with the Kepler Trading Company. As your companion, I find these traits favorable indeed.”*

“I’m honored to receive praise from the Lord Starsage himself.”

*“In any case, we can leave the matter for our next visit. Let us return to your world.”*

“Don’t forget—we have to pick up Lady Elsa.”

*“Ah, yes, you’re right.”*

As long as there were profits to be made, people would move of their own accord. If things turned out well, we wouldn’t have to do any work ourselves. We were making great progress in turning this world into the ideal location for our laid-back life of relaxation.

And so these two world-weary companions left the otherworld behind, our hearts full of anticipation.



After meeting up with Lady Elsa in the royal castle, Peeps warped us back to our cheap hotel in Tokyo. We already had it booked for the next six months.

After checking the time, I saw that about an hour more had passed than we’d initially planned. Since the section chief said he would contact us first thing in the morning, I meant to get back right at dawn, but the sky had already brightened. Checking the clock, I saw that it was past six AM. The change wasn’t dramatic, but the difference between the flow of time in the two worlds was still shrinking.

*"It would appear the process has sped up once again."*

"Then either the frequency of our trips doesn't matter, or the effects of going less often will take a while to appear."

*"Both are possible. I believe we should continue our experiment for now. It took a good deal of time after we first started traveling between worlds for us to see a change in the speed of time's progression; I expect it will require at least as long for us to see the opposite effect."*

"I agree. I think that's the best idea."

"Sasaki, I don't really understand, but I'm not causing trouble for you, am I?"

*"Ah, that's right. There are other factors to consider aside from frequency—such as the total mass targeted by the spell,"* Peeps said, coming to some realization after hearing Lady Elsa's remark. He fluttered down from my shoulder and made for the laptop on the desk.

"...Umm, little bird?"

"Lady Elsa, you're no trouble at all. I promise. You don't need to worry. Also, Peeps, I don't mean to burst your bubble, but...could you wait until we get to Ms. Futarishizuka's place to start your staring contest with the computer?"

*"Yes, I suppose."*

We quickly got ready, and then Peeps warped us to Karuizawa.

We ended up in the villa's living room. The homeowner was there, of course, along with Miss Hoshizaki and Type Twelve. All of them were seated on the sofas with nothing to do. I was surprised by how early my colleague had arrived; there was still a good amount of time before work began.

"Sasaki, aren't you a little late?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"I don't believe business hours have started yet," I replied.

"Didn't you see the section chief's message?"

"Oh, sorry. I'll check right now."

That was when I realized that I hadn't checked my phone since returning from the otherworld. Frantically, I pulled out the device and saw several notifications

displayed on the screen. One of them was an e-mail from the section chief. In it, he asked me to come to the office as soon as I saw his message. It had come in at 5:30 AM that morning. I began to wonder if Mr. Akutsu ever slept.

“Father, if we use a terminal, we can get there in minutes,” offered Type Twelve before I could respond.

I could feel the excitement coming off her in waves. She stared at me, obviously wishing to leave at once. Though her expression was the same as always, her feelings were as clear as day.

“All right. I’d appreciate that.”

“Understood.”

We took Type Twelve up on her suggestion, and my two colleagues and I departed from Karuizawa with the alien girl in tow. Though I felt bad for leaving so quickly, I had Lady Elsa and Peeps mind the villa as always. It looked like today’s pretend family time would have to wait until we heard from our boss.

*Well, whatever he says, as her guardians, we shouldn’t have anything to do but lie around the house eating and sleeping,* I thought, trying to be optimistic about our extremely early summons.



As Type Twelve promised, we arrived at the bureau in only a few minutes. The section chief grabbed us right away and led us into a meeting room. After reflecting on yesterday’s meeting, I went for the seat next to Mr. Akutsu on the side of the table facing the door. Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Hoshizaki, and Type Twelve took up their positions across from me.

“Why are you sitting on this side, Sasaki?” the boss immediately asked.

“Four to one side is a little crowded, sir.”

“Oh, for a moment, I thought you’d had a change of heart.”

Miss Hoshizaki stared at me. “Sasaki, don’t tell me you actually had your sights set on the section chief—”

“I have no ulterior motives. And please, comments like those will sabotage our friendly work environment.”

“Anyway, please return to your usual seat,” said Mr. Akutsu. “My laptop has confidential information on it.”

“Oh... Yes, sir.”

I stood back up nearly as quickly as I had sat down.

“Confidential, eh?” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “That means very little with our youngest daughter here.”

“Nevertheless, I can’t start openly sharing it with my subordinates, Futarishizuka.”

In the end, I had to sit in the same place as yesterday. Once we were all settled, the meeting began.

Type Twelve spoke before anyone else. “Akutsu, I would like to hear your plan for enrolling me at school without further delay.”

Her tone was flat and impassive, and her face was blank. But the fact that she’d spoken first without wasting any time on pleasantries made her feelings obvious. The chief must have picked up on this as well, and he responded with a nod.

“To start with, I’ve prepared your family register. Would you like to verify the information on it?” he asked, taking a piece of printer paper folded into thirds out of the inside breast pocket of his suit. He spread it out neatly and pushed it toward Type Twelve.

The paper, with its familiar design, looked like any other official copy of a family register. It included her entire household. The bureau was listed as her permanent address. And under the title “head of the family” was the name Twelve Sasaki, just as we’d decided the day before.

The other fields, such as “spouse,” were left blank; Type Twelve had the whole register to herself. I was relieved to find it didn’t link back to my own family register.

“Wow. Guess it’s pretty easy to make one of these things, huh?” commented



Miss Hoshizaki.

“Like hell it is!” Ms. Futarishizuka shot back.

“This is a special exception, Hoshizaki,” said Mr. Akutsu. “I had to strongarm several organizations to acquire this.”

“You’re being annoying, Futarishizuka,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “Why do you have to nag me about every little thing?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t have to nag if you’d stop speaking without thinking, girly.”

I suspected Mr. Akutsu got help from some minister or other and resolved the matter with a show of force. At the very least, he couldn’t have managed it alone.

That meant quite a few individuals and groups were now anticipating Type Twelve’s naturalization and attendance at school. I didn’t know what exactly they were anticipating, but I felt certain all sorts of people were drawing up plans for after she enrolled.

*What a mess.*

As her temporary guardian, my duty was to send my daughter to school right away. Once I’d managed that, I intended to enjoy the good life: eat, sleep, rinse, repeat. Instead of soaps, I’d subscribe to some streaming services. A smorgasbord of movies, TV shows, and anime awaited me.

“I’ve confirmed that data equivalent to that presented on this page exists in the administrative systems of the district responsible for this legal address. This family register has been logged into the database. I hereby judge this document to be valid under the laws of this country.”

“Hey,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Didn’t we already talk about this? Stuff like that is against family rules.”

“I have not violated the privacy of any family member. Therefore, I am in compliance with the rules.”

“Hmph. I guess you’ve got me there.”

“Sasaki?” said Mr. Akutsu. “Did she just...?”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir, but it seems we can’t do anything to stop her.”

“.....”

Even at this very moment, Type Twelve was likely using a separate group of machines to hack into humanity’s networks—specifically those of various government administrations. It had taken her mere minutes just now. Our information systems must have been like toys to her.

The boss, having caught on, made a sour face. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much we could do. If we tried to force the issue, we could wind up with another crater to deal with.

One of us, however, was an exception.

“Hey, Type Twelve? Would you mind not doing that as much from now on?” asked our senior colleague.

“The youngest daughter is happy to consider any request from Mother.”

“I see,” said the chief. “She really has taken a liking to Hoshizaki.”

Though she’d reacted with stubbornness to Ms. Futarishizuka, she was instantly willing to reconsider when the one making the request was Miss Hoshizaki. Mr. Akutsu seemed impressed. We’d mentioned their relationship in many reports, but this was the first time he was seeing the effects in person.

“Hoshizaki,” he continued, “while your familial relationship may be artificial, you’re nonetheless doing extremely important work for us, and I hear this experience is valuable for the girl as well. I want you to keep being a good mother to her.”

“And make sure you keep her on a tight leash,” was the obvious implication.

I wasn’t sure if Hoshizaki had understood the unspoken part. Nevertheless, she objected. “Chief, I’m not sure someone my age should be playing the role of a mother.”

“Yes, it may be hard for you to fulfill such obligations at your age. Put another way, it means this work is beyond the scope of your regular duties as a bureau employee. I was thinking perhaps extra pay is in order to compensate you for your participation in this pretend family.”

“I’ll... I’ll do my best, sir!”

Miss Hoshizaki was such a pushover. I was pretty sure that if she asked Type Twelve for help, she could get way more money than what the bureau was paying her. Earth’s financial institutions were powerless before the mechanical life-form’s technological might. Earlier that very day, Ms. Futarishizuka informed me that cryptocurrency had been in an uncontrolled nosedive for days.

I’d checked, and sure enough, the news had been reporting several fatal or near-fatal accidents every day. I even saw one incident where three people all jumped in front of a single train.

And yet our pure, upright colleague was prepared to do her best as a mere bureau employee. Did she have her eyes on a promotion, or was it her respect for Type Twelve that prevented her from reaching further? I wasn’t sure what she was thinking, but it seemed this path was the one that would make her happiest.

A moment later, Futarishizuka spoke. “I don’t think you’d have to bother calculating wages if you just asked the youngest daughter. You’d be making money hand over fist.” Evidently, she’d been thinking along the same lines as I had.

“Um, what? No thanks. Begging a child for money is just about the *worst* thing a parent can do.”

I sensed a hint of her relationship with her own father in her response. Her sister had told me that the man was up to his neck in debt at one point and that he’d visited the Hoshizaki siblings after they’d moved out. The experience of being saddled with a parent’s financial debt had probably made her extra sensitive about such things.

“Mother, your principles have left a deep impression on your

youngest daughter.”

“I, er, I’m not just saying that for your sake, okay? This is an important rule I’ve always had. I don’t ever want to break it, even if we’re not a real family. I wasn’t trying to curry favor with you or anything.”

Normally, a father’s influence tended to make a child loose with their money as well. Surprisingly few were able to keep using their no-good father as an example of how not to live their lives. But Miss Hoshizaki was working hard to accomplish just that. I figured her little sister served as a good impetus to stay on track.

“Should you require it, I am willing to prepare any amount of local currency or other resources for your use.”

“Like I said, no thanks.”

“Did she just say ‘resources’?” repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. “That rather terrifies me.”

Type Twelve’s reach extended beyond Earth to the moon and even to other planets. In fact, she’d told us our whole solar system was already under development. The translators we used to talk to Lady Elsa were made on our very own Luna. Mining the asteroid belt for resources and bringing them to Earth would probably be trivial for her. If she ever brought in a load of precious metals from the stars, our planet’s economy was in for absolute chaos. I found myself agreeing with Ms. Futarishizuka on the matter.

“I believe I have a better grasp on your intentions now, Hoshizaki,” said Mr. Akutsu. “I’ll send you the paperwork regarding your wages and bonus pay after our meeting. Please look them over this evening at your leisure. If necessary, we can arrange to negotiate the matter further.”

“Thank you, Chief.”

“Getting back on topic, that’s all for the family register,” said Mr. Akutsu, turning to Type Twelve. “Next, I’d like to explain what going to school will look like for you. But if you have questions about anything we’ve already discussed, please say so now.”

“I have no questions,” Type Twelve said in a rush. “I would like your explanation of how I will go to school at once.”

“Understood.”

The section chief nodded and opened up his laptop. It was already connected to an external screen. With a few keystrokes and moves on the trackpad, his desktop was output to the display hanging on the conference room wall right next to the meeting table.

We could see what looked like a presentation slide. The name of a certain middle school served as the title. Underneath was a photograph of a building taken from the front, along with several pieces of information about the school. If memory served, this was the same school my neighbor currently attended—the public middle school closest to Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa.

“You seemed to be in quite a rush,” said Mr. Akutsu, “so I mobilized all related agencies to take care of your enrollment. If you wish, you can attend school as early as today. The textbooks and other materials you’ll need are ready for you there.”

“I wish to be assigned the to the institution’s lowest academic grade. In addition, I will be happiest if I am able to commute to the same classroom as the eldest daughter.”

“I thought you’d say that, so that’s how we set it up.”

“Akutsu, that is excellent.”

“I am honored to be of service.”

I hadn’t expected the enrollment process to be finished *today*. Did Mr. Akutsu pull an all-nighter for this? It probably wasn’t just him, either—a whole mountain of personnel must have been forced to work through the night, all so that Type Twelve could go to school. As the one playing her father, this knowledge made me somewhat anxious.

“Mother, the youngest daughter would like to go to school immediately,” said Type Twelve.

“I can take her there, Chief,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “But are you sure we should just...go straight there? I mean, if you say it’s all right, it probably is. But she’s *really* worked up about it...”

Miss Hoshizaki cast a worried gaze at Mr. Akutsu. She was probably envisioning a scenario where Type Twelve took one look at the classroom and decided to go home immediately.

The boss, however, responded with confidence. “There’s no need for concern. I’d like you to head out as soon as possible.”

From this line of conversation, I got a good idea of what was going on. There must have been bureau employees already on-site in some capacity or other. In that case, we could feel safe leaving Type Twelve alone.

He was right—there was nothing for us to worry about. The chief would be responsible for supervising her while she was at school.

“Should we stand by at the villa, then, Ms. Futarishizuka?” I asked.

“Yes, I think that would be wise,” she said. “It will allow us to reach the school quickly if any problems arise. And one of the most important tasks of a grandmother is to do chores around the house while waiting for her granddaughter to return.”

“I agree completely.”

My neighbor and Abaddon would be at school, too. They would be sure to contact us if anything happened. At last, Peeps and I had obtained the laid-back life of our dreams here on Earth, as well.

“Actually,” said Mr. Akutsu, “I have another job I’d like to entrust to the two of you.”

Perhaps I’d spoken too soon.

The boss looked at the two of us, a trace of irritation in his usual poker face.

“What? Come on. That sounds like a huge drag,” Ms. Futarishizuka complained.

“Excuse me, sir, but you *did* tell us that the pretend family was part of our work,” I reminded him.

“While Type Twelve is attending school, you two are to join the faculty.”

What a suggestion! Keeping an eye on her was one thing, but joining the faculty? That sounded difficult.

“Are you telling us to become schoolteachers?” asked the girl in the kimono.

“That’s right, Futarishizuka,” the section chief replied.

“Sir, I don’t have a teaching license,” I said.

“Oh, me neither!” added Futarishizuka. “No teaching license here.”

“That won’t be a problem,” said the boss. “We’ll supply you with special licenses.”

“No, no. We can’t have a career bureaucrat risking his future by gaming the system.”

“According to the Education Personnel Certification Act, Article 5, Item 2, a special teacher’s certificate may be bestowed upon anyone who has passed a teaching exam given by the educational committee in any of Japan’s administrative districts. Sasaki, Futarishizuka, congratulations. You have successfully passed the exam administered by Nagano’s educational committee.”

“I don’t remember taking that exam...,” I said.

If he said we’d passed based on our educational history, employment experience, and work achievements, then I’d have no way to object. Apparently, according to the law, the only requirement was to pass an exam. Nowhere did it say that exam had to be a written test.

Despite this, Ms. Futarishizuka immediately protested. “Oh, don’t quote law to me,” she said. “Under Article 5, Item 4, of the same statute, when deciding if someone passes or fails the exam described in Item 2, the body awarding the certificate, as defined in Item 6, must consult with individuals with an academic background in education as well as other persons as stipulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology!”

*What the heck?* I thought. *That was so cool!*

However, this impression was short-lived.

“No need to worry,” said the chief. “We have all the paperwork ready.”

He then fiddled with his laptop and displayed several documents. One of them was an attestation of character, another was a testimonial of our work, and yet another was a certificate of our academic ability—they all had stiff, formal titles. Each time the section chief’s finger stroked the trackpad, another document appeared on the screen.

There were two sets, one for each of us. The reference fields on all of them were handwritten, and I spotted the signatures of a university president, a doctor at a university hospital, and even the director of the National Police Agency among them. Weren’t these things usually issued electronically? They must have been in even more of a rush than I’d thought. I caught the name of a college sprinkled here and there as well. It was, without a doubt, my alma mater.

Ms. Futarishizuka watched the documents scroll across the screen, utterly baffled. “Nice, uh, rebuttal...”

“I want the two of you to stay close and support Type Twelve while she’s at school,” he told us.

I never would have imagined he could put something like this together in one night. The government must have wanted Type Twelve to attend school as much as she did.

“Sasaki, you will teach math,” he continued. “Futarishizuka, you will teach English.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka will probably be fine,” I said. “But, sir, I’m hardly cut out to be a teacher.”

“Hey!” exclaimed my colleague. “Are you trying to throw me under the bus?! How could you?!”

“I understand your concerns, Sasaki,” replied the chief. “But when you joined this bureau, you were asked to take several tests. After reviewing your results, I decided you were fit for this task. You may take the teacher’s lectern with confidence.”

I did remember taking a bunch of tests. But I didn’t think they’d come back to



haunt me like this. At the time, I was just hoping to avoid fighting on the front lines as a psychic, so I'd done my best to answer all the questions. In hindsight, I probably would have been better off blowing through them without much thought.

"Being able to solve a few math problems won't make me a good math teacher, sir," I said. "These students' futures are at stake here. I would be lowering the quality of their education. That's...bad, isn't it?"

"We can have a veteran faculty member assist you during class if needed, just like a student teacher. You won't have any problems. Besides, you were a part-time tutor during college. I'm sure you're fit for the job."

I was flabbergasted. He'd looked into my part-time job history from over fifteen years ago? How was I supposed to respond to *that*?

"But if you aren't happy with math, I can assign you to a different subject."

"...No, sir, that won't be necessary."

He'd done far too much prep work. I didn't stand a chance. Mr. Akutsu was always outdoing me like this. I would never beat him with ad-libbed excuses.

"Um, Chief?" asked Miss Hoshizaki. "What should I do?"

"I want you to keep up with your schoolwork, Hoshizaki," he replied.

"Huh?"

"I think you've been working far too hard on your bureau assignments lately. And I feel bad about that. I don't want you neglecting your job, but your education is just as important. Go and enjoy life at school for a while."

"But, uh, wait! I'm part of the family, too. There must be something I can do on-site!"

Bureau employees under the age of eighteen were still entitled to pay while attending school. However, that only applied to the base salary, so you'd be making less than if you were out doing bureau work. And you wouldn't get a single yen of overtime or hazard pay.

This must have been a catastrophe for Miss Hoshizaki. Desperately, she tried to object. But Mr. Akutsu's response was thoroughly reasonable and realistic.

“I’m very happy you’re so enthusiastic,” he said. “But after checking with your school, your academic abilities don’t quite meet the standards required to serve as a teacher. I’d like you to keep improving your fundamental knowledge instead.”

“High school isn’t compulsory. That means what I’m learning now isn’t strictly necessary!”

“Perhaps, but everyone goes to college in Japan these days. If you are able to prove to me, here and now, that your academic abilities are on par with a college graduate, I will look into placing you at the school as a teacher. Do you have a subject you’re particularly good at?”

Lately, Miss Hoshizaki had been dragging her feet regarding her education. Any normal person would have shut right up in this situation. Unfortunately, her obsession with money spurred her on regardless.

“I’m...I’m good at P.E.!” she stammered.

“Then let me ask you a question,” said the boss. “In relay races, what is the name of the zone where you’re allowed to pass the baton?”

“Huh? I, uh...the passing area?”

“It’s called the changeover box, Hoshizaki.”

“One more try! Please give me one more chance!”

“Then here’s a question from the guidelines for preventing heatstroke during physical activity. What are the maximum heat index and WBGT allowed for vigorous exercise before an activity must be called off, as described in the regulations? In addition, how many minutes are appropriate for a rest period once an activity has been canceled?”

“Um...”

Mr. Akutsu really had her on the ropes now. He’d probably planned out questions in advance, knowing they might have a pop quiz session like this. With how smart he was, he could probably pull something like this together with one hand tied behind his back.

My senior colleague looked so sad I couldn’t stop myself from stepping in.

“Miss Hoshizaki, maybe you shouldn’t invite him to rub more salt in your wounds.”

“Please! This is only a scratch!”

“Are you sure you don’t have a bullet wound straight through your heart?” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

Thinking back, Mr. Akutsu said he’d graduated valedictorian from Japan’s foremost academic institution. Debating someone of his caliber was actually a very rare and valuable experience. His efforts were really highlighting how reckless Hoshizaki’s proposal was.

It was barely even a contest, which was a little sad. Miss Hoshizaki too seemed to understand this and began trying a different approach. “In that case, uh... I could go there as a student. I was in middle school until last year, so it wouldn’t be that weird. No one would guess I’m any older than that Kurosu girl!”

“It’s a bit cringe to get so desperate,” Ms. Futarishizuka said.

The next one to speak was Type Twelve. Until now, she’d unconditionally supported Miss Hoshizaki in everything. But this time, for whatever reason, she admonished her slightly.

“Mother, the youngest daughter wants you to enjoy yourself at your real school.”

“But—”

“To explain in more concrete terms, a situation wherein a mother and daughter attend the same school would be strange. I am aware that our family is not real. However, I strongly wish to maintain a minimal semblance of reality.”

“Ugh...”

The mechanical life-form couldn’t lie—and that made her words hit even harder.

Type Twelve had sought a certain amount of realism when it came to the relationship between her mother and grandmother as well. She'd put a great deal of work into making our house and the surrounding area feel like the real thing, too. I could tell she had a lot of ideas about how a family ought to be.

Miss Hoshizaki was struck speechless. We waited a few moments, but she gave no response.

The section chief took the opportunity to speak up. "If that's all, then—Sasaki, Futarishizuka—please head to the school at once."

I'd come into the office this morning expecting to have the afternoon off and several days' vacation, so my despair was considerable. Now that my short stays in the otherworld were only happening every few days, I'd have to wake up early tomorrow *and* the next day. Teachers all had to be out of bed super early in the morning. But if I wanted to keep my position at the bureau, I couldn't afford to refuse.

"Is there anything we should bring with us, sir?" I asked.

"I dispatched another employee there last night. We've also secured a collaborator. You'll find them in the faculty room, ready to handle all your paperwork. Leave the finer points to them while you focus on supporting Type Twelve."

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best," I said.

"You might not look it," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. "But I bet you're pretty excited for a little schoolyard romance with those middle school girls."



“Why on Earth would I be interested in *that*?” I asked.

“As long as you do your job properly, I wouldn’t be averse to overlooking a few things,” said Mr. Akutsu.

“Sir, I’m a little concerned you’re serious,” I replied. “Could you please not encourage her?”

“Give it up for Lolicon Teacher Sasaki!” cheered the girl in the kimono.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, if you keep saying awful things like that, I—”

“Or LTS for short! You can write that on the blackboard in big honkin’ letters!”

“Hey, Futarishizuka?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “I think there’s something moving on the back of your hand...”

“What?! You *have* to be kidding! Just for that?!”

Ms. Futarishizuka hid the back of her hand immediately. The curse had only spread by a few millimeters, but it *had* progressed—the bruise Peeps had carved into her skin was still squirming slightly.

The section chief probably couldn’t see it from the other side of the table. “What seems to be the problem, Futarishizuka?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing at all, sir! Nothing at all.”

It was still in the very early stages, so I didn’t think she needed to worry yet. Apparently, the bruise would have to spread a lot further to activate the curse. Lately, she’d been getting a little bold, though, so I figured the incident would serve as a good warning for her.

She was probably just irritated that the life of leisure we’d been dreaming of had been so suddenly snatched away and she’d let a comment slip that went over the line. That kind of one-liner might have been considered a lighthearted joke a few decades ago, but these days, such accusations were more powerful than a lit explosive. A few too many “jokes” and you could blow a person’s social life to smithereens. Futarishizuka must have understood this, too, and that realization had triggered the curse.

With our meeting over, we prepared for our next task—teaching

schoolchildren.

## <School, Part Two>

After leaving the bureau, we turned straight around and went back to Karuizawa. We made a few minor preparations at Ms. Futarishizuka's villa, then set off for my neighbor's school. Type Twelve brought us back in her terminal, so the whole thing only took a few minutes. Miss Hoshizaki took a separate flight back home by herself.

We arrived at the middle school's faculty entrance with a little under an hour to spare before the morning assembly.

"For a local public school, this place is gorgeous," I said. "And all the fields have artificial grass, don't they?"

"A few years ago, they rebuilt everything," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "The main school building, the gymnasium, and even the schoolyard."

"Well, at least we'll have a modern workplace."

"I hope the air conditioners are in good working order. Otherwise, winter is going to suck."

"Is it really okay for us to just go in?"

"We made it this far. No point hesitating now."

"The youngest daughter agrees with Grandmother's viewpoint. I would like to conduct the process for my school transfer as soon as possible."

Ms. Futarishizuka and Type Twelve began to walk toward the doors. I followed suit, and passed through the entrance. My colleague had changed out of her usual kimono; she now wore a white button-down shirt, a black jacket, and a skirt. Her skirt was noticeably tight, almost bursting at the seams. I imagined her outfit was exactly what men around the world imagined when



they heard the words “female teacher.” But on a little kid like her, it just looked like cosplay.

As we made our way into the building, a faculty member called out to us and introduced himself as the principal. Apparently, he’d been notified of our visit and was waiting near the entrance for us.

When I mentioned our boss’s name, he said he was well aware of the situation.

While it wasn’t clear if he knew anything about psychics or mechanical life-forms, he did seem to realize some unknown VIP had come under his jurisdiction. Otherwise, I doubted he’d be bowing like this to a pair of brand-new teachers. He didn’t say a word about Ms. Futarishizuka and her childlike appearance, either.

After we exchanged greetings, the principal led us to the faculty room. There, he quickly introduced us to our new coworkers.

“My name is Sasaki. I’ll be teaching math. I’m happy to be working with you all.”

“And I’m Futarishizuka. I teach English. I may look like a child, but I assure you, I am an adult. It’s a pleasure.”

We’d both rehearsed our introductions ahead of time and delivered them while standing near the room’s entrance. Meanwhile, the rest of the teachers stood on the other side of a double row of desks, staring at us.

When the others saw my petite colleague, they began to whisper and mumble. She *did* look like a child. But nobody asked any questions. They’d probably been notified about us in advance. Considering the bureau’s position, though, I doubted the rank-and-file teachers had many details. I figured they’d probably force everyone to treat her like an adult by claiming she had some sort of rare disease or something.

After our introductions, the principal led us to our desks. Mine and Ms. Futarishizuka’s directly faced each other. From there, the principal announced that the vice principal would arrive momentarily to give us a tour of the school and then jogged out of the faculty room.

In the meantime, we spotted a few familiar faces. They'd noticed us as well and quickly walked over.

"Miss...Inukai, was it?" I said. "What are you doing in a place like this?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sasaki," she replied, "but I'm going to have to ask you to keep quiet about me."

"And there's the bigwig from Yokota, too," Ms. Futarishizuka commented.

"Hello! What are you talking about?" the man said in stilted Japanese. "I am Robert, the assistant language teacher!"

"Wait, what?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "I didn't know you could speak Japanese."

The woman I'd just spoken with was Ensign Inukai, an officer in the JMSDF. We'd met her and her superior, Captain Yoshikawa, during the ordeal with the octodragon from the otherworld. She was in her mid-twenties and had lovely features.

The man calling himself Robert was Captain Mason. He'd told us himself that he was a foreign soldier normally stationed at Yokota Air Base. The other day, when our pretend family went to the amusement park, we'd run into him and Magical Blue and had lunch together.

I straightened up, a little scared by the prospect of working alongside such dangerous people. I couldn't imagine they were dispatched by the bureau. They must have been sent in by some other organization outside Mr. Akutsu's purview. I hoped against hope that we were at least part of the same chain of command.

If Captain Mason had come here personally, he must have been dead serious about getting his hands on Type Twelve.

"I look forward to seeing you around the school!" said the captain.

"I'll be teaching English," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "So I believe we'll be working together."

"Oh! Then we will have the same classes! Simply marvelous!"

"But are you sure you should be fooling around here? What about your duties

at the base?”

“What? My Japanese isn’t so good. I can’t understand you!”

“I see, I see. You must be pretty desperate, huh?”

We gave up on trying to get anything else out of Captain Mason and decided to go along with his and Miss Inukai’s act. Many other teachers were in the room with us, potentially listening in. From Miss Inukai and Captain Mason’s behavior, I figured our new coworkers didn’t know much about their situation. If we said anything careless, the chief would have our heads.

“Father, the youngest daughter would like to clarify the plan regarding my transfer into this school.”

“I think the vice principal is going to explain...,” I said, looking around the room.

Just then, a man trotted over to us. He was older than I was and dressed in a full suit and tie, unlike the other teachers’ casual attire. His hair was black with a dusting of white, arranged in a side part, and he wore black-rimmed glasses. He looked relatively slender for his age.

He came right up to us and spoke quickly. “I’m sorry I made you wait. My name is Ookouchi, and I’m the vice principal.”

“Did the principal tell you about us?”

“He did. I’m well aware of your situation.”

Both the principal and the vice principal seemed to have an understanding of what was going on. Still, I made a mental note to check with the section chief later.

“In that case, I’d like to prioritize her transfer application,” I told him, my gaze darting over to Type Twelve. She stood right next to me, no doubt envisioning her future classroom.

“I understand. I’ll see to it immediately,” said the man. Then he looked at us for a few moments, his face troubled. “By the way,” he added, his tone formal. “I heard there was only going to be one transfer student...” He was looking back and forth between Ms. Futarishizuka and Type Twelve. It seemed he hadn’t

been sent any pictures.

“Daddy, do you think I can change into my uniform all by my little old self?”

“This one is the transfer student,” I said, ignoring my colleague’s tasteless remark and pointing to Type Twelve.

The vice principal seemed to understand and hastily turned toward the alien. “I-I’m terribly sorry. I’ll show you around at once.”

“Ha-ha!” Captain Mason shook with laughter. “Ms. Futarishizuka! You’re just as bad as I am!”

“Ha-ha! I’m gonna kick the shit out of you!” Ms. Futarishizuka shot back.

“*No bueno!* You’re scaring me! Please! I’m terrified!”

Captain Mason was acting completely out of character, and Ms. Futarishizuka was *pissed*. Maybe Mr. Akutsu dispatched us here partly to be his bodyguard or something. He’d been butting heads with the nerd a lot recently, and considering his opponent was a rank-A psychic, it was only natural for him to want significant combat power on his side.

“Father, Grandmother, the youngest daughter will now prepare for her transfer.”

“Please don’t cause trouble for others, all right?” I said. “For Miss Hoshizaki’s sake.”

“I understand. I promise that I will not do anything that would cause Mother undue worry.”

At that, we parted ways with Type Twelve. She had a lot to do before starting classes, such as changing into her school-designated uniform and collecting her textbooks and supplies. She was in high spirits as she walked away with the vice principal, who was still bowing to us, and together, they left the faculty room.

As soon as they were gone, the principal reappeared. “Mr. Sasaki, if you’re ready, I’ll tell you about the class you’ll be in charge of.”

“Huh?”

That was a weird thing for him to say. I made a confused noise despite myself. I was going to be in charge of a whole class? That was news to me.

“Um, I’m going to be in charge of a class, sir?”

“Well, the teacher assigned to Class 1-A resigned yesterday. I know it’s more work for you, but I’d like you to take over his class. I believe this was all arranged in advance.”

*What an awful gift from the section chief*, I thought. He’d probably kept quiet about it on purpose. We’d been scoring win after win against him lately; this must have been his revenge. I doubted a man like him would make such a silly mistake.

“Weren’t you told?” the principal asked.

“Never mind. I understand, and I accept the position.”

Considering the situation, I couldn’t help wondering if Class 1-A’s teacher was fired specifically so I could come in and replace him. Or maybe he was already causing problems, and they used that as an excuse to kick him out.

The moment I realized I’d be taking over Type Twelve’s class, I was certain. There was no point trying to resist.

“Also, Ms. Mochizuki, would you mind coming along as well?” said the principal.

“Oh, um, yes, sir. I’ll be there right away.”

Prompted by the principal, Ms. Futarishizuka and I left the faculty room and entered his office.

To prepare us to start work that day, he gave us a hasty lecture in the time before morning homeroom. He also handed us our class registers. I glanced over mine and saw my neighbor’s name and photograph in it.

The principal also informed me that Ms. Mochizuki, who he’d instructed to come with us, would be helping out with my class. I felt like a trainee teacher. According to the principal, veteran assistants were sometimes assigned to newer teachers, so this wasn’t particularly unusual.

Ms. Mochizuki, who was sitting beside the principal on a sofa, greeted us

energetically. “Mr. Sasaki, Ms. Futarishizuka, I look forward to working with you both!”

Ms. Futarishizuka and I were seated on another sofa across a low table from them. I offered a deep bow in response.

Ms. Mochizuki was noticeably young. According to her, this was her fifth year teaching. She didn’t look that much older to me than Hoshizaki did when she was wearing her makeup.

She’d entered the workforce after graduating from a junior college, so if she passed the acceptance exam on her first try, she’d be twenty-five this year. The principal described her as very talented despite her young age.

Her black hair, which she wore in a medium bob, went well with her charming features and radiant smile. In a collared button-down shirt with a jacket and a tight skirt, she was dressed a little more formally than the other women I’d seen in the faculty room.

“Mr. Sasaki, feel free to ask me if there’s anything you need,” she said. “I’ll do my best to support you so you can focus on the students. Class 1-A is filled with good kids, so I think you’ll get along well with them.”

“You make it sound like the other classes have problems, Ms. Mochizuki,” remarked the principal.

*She seems a bit scatterbrained*, I noted, watching her grow flustered and bow in apology. But with her bright, cheerful attitude, any minor mistakes could easily be chalked up to personality. *The kids probably love her.*

“Ms. Mochizuki,” I said, “I hope you will give me guidance and encouragement during our time working together.”

“Please, you don’t have to be so formal. Aren’t you older than I am?”

“In terms of teaching experience, you’re my senior, so I believe my formality is warranted.”

“Despite what Mr. Sasaki says,” added the principal, “he is an elite from a central ministry. Circumstances dictated his transfer to our school, but his position remains unchanged. Please be considerate toward him.”

“Huh?” she said, surprised. “Oh, um... That must be why you’re so polite with the two of them.”

“Something like that,” he replied. “And please keep all this under wraps, of course.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” I said. “Please go easy on me.”

“The... The pleasure is all mine!”

I began to wonder how exactly Mr. Akutsu had described us to the principal. Sure, we needed a degree of authority on-site, but wasn’t this going too far? I felt like we were causing everyone a lot of trouble. If we put any undue stress on the teachers, the students would feel it, too. I really didn’t want to disrupt their education.

“Should I assume that all goes for you as well?” asked Ms. Mochizuki, glancing over at Ms. Futarishizuka with obvious trepidation.

Before the principal could answer, my colleague spoke up. “Personally, I’d prefer to keep it casual. You can call me Shizu.”

“B-but you’re an elite! That would be disrespectful!”

“Aww, you’re making me sad over here.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka,” I chided her, “let’s not cause problems for Ms. Mochizuki.”

“Isn’t it a bother to call me by my full name?” she said.

“Well, I suppose you’re right about that.”

“I knew it! You were thinking that all along! Don’t you care a whit about your junior colleague?!”

“Please pipe down. Weren’t *you* the one who brought it up?”

Ms. Futarishizuka had started yakking right away, trying to grasp the initiative at our new post. She must have wanted to make herself look good in front of the principal, who served as the leader of this organization. As always, I was happy to let her stand out. That way, I could keep an appropriate distance and act as a kind of chaperone.

If it came to it, I wanted to let *her* handle any and all trouble that came up here at school.

The principal looked at us, perplexed, as we traded light banter. “E-excuse me, but may I ask a question as well?”

“Go ahead,” replied my junior colleague.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, you’ll be teaching alongside Mr. Robert in the future. Do you have any questions about that? I’d prefer to address any concerns now while we have the chance.”

As he spoke, I caught a hint of unease in his expression. He was probably asking because he knew the man’s true identity.

Ms. Futarishizuka quickly picked up on the implication and replied impassively. “The higher-ups have been clear with us, so I don’t believe there will be any issues.”

“I got the impression from your exchange in the faculty room that the two of you are already acquainted...”

“And uh, sir, if any issues do arise, our boss will take full responsibility,” I interjected.

“Do you think I should introduce myself to the two of them?”

“Oh, I think they’ll let you know if contact is necessary. I wouldn’t fret, uh, sir.”

Futarishizuka shut the principal right down. His career was on the line, too, and he seemed pretty desperate.

“...All right, then. Once again, I look forward to working with you all.”

More worrying to me were those from other agencies, lurking where neither we nor Mr. Akutsu could keep an eye on them. But for the moment, I hadn’t spotted anyone besides Miss Inukai and Captain Mason.

Eventually, a bell rang, signaling the start of morning homeroom.

“In that case...,” said the principal, “Mr. Sasaki, Ms. Futarishizuka, I have high hopes for the both of you.” He bowed deeply and saw us off. At last, I was



headed for Class 1-A.



### <The Neighbor's POV>

My classmates make a lot of noise during morning homeroom.

They can't stop talking about the arrest we saw yesterday. Our homeroom teacher got dragged away by the police right in front of us. His hands were cuffed, and he was even restrained with a rope wrapped around his waist, so there could be no doubt as to his situation.

Naturally, his former students can't stop themselves from discussing what happened.

"Do you really think Mr. Takahashi won't show up?"

"How's he supposed to come to school? He got arrested. He doesn't have time to teach class."

"But I didn't see anything about him on the news."

"I tried looking, too. But I didn't find anything."

"Maybe we're too far out in the boonies for a school scandal to make the news."

"I don't know..."

"What's gonna happen with morning homeroom?"

"Maybe the vice principal will come like yesterday."

"Ugh. I hope not. He never shuts up."

"I hope we get a teacher who's young and pretty."

"All the young female teachers already have classes."

"What about Ms. Mochizuki, the Japanese teacher? I don't think she's in charge of a class."

"Ms. Mochizuki? Yes, *please*."

Considering the circumstances, it would be natural for the vice principal to take over for now.

If they don't handle things right, the school could face a lot of criticism—especially since the incident involved indecent acts with a student. They'll probably use the students' mental health as an excuse and put us through some program to keep us from saying anything suspicious outside of school or spreading information on the internet.

But no matter how long we wait, the vice principal never comes. The other students are all very interested in who our next homeroom teacher will be.

"Hey, did you hear a loli teacher came to school today?"

"Uh, what? What does that even mean?"

"I know someone who saw her in the faculty room. She's a little kid!"

"You don't mean a *lolicon* teacher, right?"

"Miyata's still out, isn't she?"

"I bet she'll transfer."

"I heard the loli teacher's gonna teach English!"

"What the heck does that word even mean?!"

It seems like our school has a new teacher. They sure found a replacement fast; they must have been planning for it beforehand. The term *loli teacher* concerns me, but I figure they're just talking about a petite woman. There's no need to think too deeply about it.

"Which teacher do you want for our class, Kurosu?"

"You just moved here, so you probably don't know many of them."

"Oh, hey, then why don't we tell you about all of them after class?!"

"That's a good idea. I'm in!"

"Yeah! Can we come, too?"

"Where should we go? It should be somewhere outside of school, right?"

The same group of students as usual are making a fuss around my seat.

They've decided to tell me about our school's teachers. While I have no desire whatsoever to get chummy with my classmates, the information could be valuable, so I agree.

A little while later, the bell rings, indicating the start of morning homeroom.

The students whiling away their time in the hallway and around the classroom make their way back to their assigned seats. The ones gathered around me do the same. Everyone's still chatting, but at a much lower volume.

A few moments later, we hear the clacking of footsteps from the hallway—several sets of them, in fact. They stop in front of our classroom.

I can sense multiple people just outside the door. Ever since joining the proxy war, I've become able to do things like sense other people's presences. Though, when I put it that way, it makes me sound like some comic book nerd, and I feel a little embarrassed. There's a kid who talks like that all the time in our class.

Suddenly, something occurs to me.

My mind flashes back to last night, when we discussed a certain transfer student over dinner. Yes, a mechanical life-form beyond human comprehension—a visitor from the far reaches of outer space. And it seems like she'll be joining us in Class 1-A. It's a little silly for me to use the word "seems," though, isn't it? After all, I'm the reason she's here in the first place.

*"What's this? Could that be the transfer student? Already?"*

*"....."*

Abaddon is right. It seems too early.

But considering all the incidents I've witnessed so far, and the fact that Futarishizuka and my neighbor are involved, it doesn't seem that impossible. It didn't take long for them to enroll me here, either.

With a clatter, the door slides open, and the Japanese teacher—Ms. Mochizuki—enters the room. She's the one my classmates were just talking about.

She closes the door behind her and approaches the teacher's desk. The students watch her, waiting with bated breath.

“Good morning, everyone,” she says. “Before we start homeroom, I have an announcement to make. Mr. Takahashi, the former teacher for Class 1-A, has decided to leave school for a while due to various circumstances.”

Everyone expected this, and the responses come thick and fast.

“I have a question! Is it true that Mr. Takahashi got arrested for sexual misconduct?”

“Everyone at school is talking about how he was having sex with Miyata!”

“Did you know about them, Ms. Mochizuki?”

“What was their relationship like? Were they lovers?”

“Quiet! Everyone, please settle down!”

The students think they can walk all over Ms. Mochizuki.

They’re a lot more casual than they were with the vice principal yesterday. The boys are especially enthusiastic. Most of the time, we’re just listening to lectures, so they probably love any chance to let loose.

Ms. Mochizuki manages to quiet them down and continues. “Anyway, since Mr. Takahashi is out, Class 1-A will be assigned a new teacher. I’ll introduce him now.”

Apparently, she isn’t our new homeroom teacher. *But then why is she here?*

“Huh? Aww, I thought *you* were gonna be our teacher, Ms. Mochizuki!”

“Why do you need to introduce him?”

“Is it someone we don’t know?”

“Yeah! I want Ms. Mochizuki to be our teacher!”

“Yeah, I’d rather have you, Ms. Mochizuki!”

“Are you into middle school boys, Ms. Mochizuki?”

The students pump out a rapid-fire stream of doubts and concerns.

The answer to their questions comes a moment later when Ms. Mochizuki turns toward the hall and calls out, “Please come in, Mr. Sasaki.”

The classroom’s front door slides open again and who should step in from the

hallway but my neighbor. What is he doing here, pretending to be a teacher?

He's wearing the same suit and tie I'm so used to seeing him in as he makes his way inside. He politely closes the door, then moves next to the teacher's desk and Ms. Mochizuki.

He stops there, and she proceeds to introduce him. "This is Mr. Sasaki. He will be leading Class 1-A from today forward."

I knew the robot girl would be showing up, but this takes me completely by surprise. I never guessed I'd ever be able to gaze at my neighbor in a place like this.

"Mr. Sasaki? I don't remember him being at our school before."

"I've never heard of him."

"Did he just get hired?"

"Maybe that's why Ms. Mochizuki is introducing him."

"Why does he need another teacher to introduce him?"

"There's been a teacher shortage lately. Maybe he's a mid-term hire."

"Oh, I heard about that on the news."

My classmates immediately start making a fuss. Ms. Mochizuki ignores them and turns to my neighbor. "Please introduce yourself, Mr. Sasaki."

And then, in a familiar, calm tone, he speaks.

"Thank you, Ms. Mochizuki. My name is Mr. Sasaki. I'll be in charge of Class 1-A starting today in place of Mr. Takahashi, who is currently out. I teach math. I look forward to getting to know you all."

He acts completely natural. If memory serves, he has no experience standing at a lectern. But he doesn't appear nervous at all, which amazes me. We might all be kids, but there's almost forty of us, and we're all looking at him. And he doesn't even flinch.

"I wish we got Ms. Mochizuki instead!"

"It's not too late, Ms. Mochizuki! Please change your mind!"

“We’d all have so much fun if you were Class 1-A’s teacher, Ms. Mochizuki.”

“Ugh, stupid boys! Don’t be mean to Mr. Sasaki.”

“Personally, I wish he were younger and hotter.”

“I just hope he’s not another lolicon.”

The students hit him with some pretty harsh criticism. We may all be in middle school, but it’s only the winter of our first year. Once one kid gets carried away, all the others jump on the bandwagon. Their comments are a little over the line—though I can’t really talk since I’m in the same position as they are.

*These stupid, noisy monkeys, I think. I wish I could get Abaddon to transform into meat mode and devour them all. Also, I personally hope he is a lolicon.*

My neighbor responds to the clumsy crowd of children in a cool, unconcerned way.

“There is something I’d like to tell you all right up front. This will be the first class I’ve taught after receiving my teaching license. And so Ms. Mochizuki—who has more experience—will be supporting me as an assistant teacher.” He glances at her, and she nods.



I hate how they seem to be on the same wavelength.

“Huh? For real? Maybe I’m okay with Mr. Sasaki, then.”

“We’ve never had an assistant teacher before, have we?”

“It must be a special thing since he’s a new teacher.”

“He looks a lot older than her, though.”

“Mr. Sasaki! We know Ms. Mochizuki is young and pretty, but don’t sexually harass her, okay?”

“You saying that *is* sexual harassment, stupid.”

Now that the students know my neighbor is new to this, they start making banter. *Where is the class rep?* I wonder. *This would be the perfect time to settle everyone down.*

“Now that introductions are out of the way,” my neighbor continues, “I have an announcement. A new transfer student will be joining us starting today. We don’t have much time left in homeroom, so please quiet down a little. Otherwise, you’ll cause trouble for her.”

The students all stop talking immediately. The word “transfer student” must have done the trick.

“Twelve, please come in.”

A moment later, the classroom’s front door slides open yet again, and in steps the transfer student in question.

With her sleek, silver, waist-length hair swaying to and fro, she gallantly approaches the lectern. She’s wearing our school’s uniform, though I’m not sure when she got one. She has the school’s designated shoes and bag, too.

She stops next to my neighbor. Everyone’s attention is locked on the robot girl.

“Please introduce yourself to the class, Twelve.”

“I understand, Father.”

Her off-handed remark sparks a stir throughout the classroom. They’re



probably reacting to the word *father*.

“My name is Twelve Sasaki. I came to this country because of my parents’ jobs. I will be joining this class starting today. I am not good at very many things, but I hope we can get along and be friends.”

Neither she nor my neighbor mentions the whole “mechanical life-form” thing. It’s my neighbor’s job to cover up strange, mysterious phenomena like that; he’d never out her as a UFO. Just last night, we all had a big family meeting about it.

This was all planned out in advance. Robot Girl—looking for all the world like a normal foreigner—was to come to my school in the guise of a child returning to her home country. To everyone else, she is my neighbor’s adoptive daughter. It seems like they’re keeping her younger-than-average mother a secret.

“We just got a new teacher. And now there’s a new girl, too?”

“This is the most information-packed homeroom ever.”

“Wait, are you her dad, Mr. Sasaki?”

“I thought I read once that they don’t let parents teach their kids’ classes.”

“Hey, isn’t she the one who was with Kurosu before?”

“Does that mean Kurosu knows Mr. Sasaki, too?”

Every last student is talking about Robot Girl. They’re more interested in the visibly attractive transfer student than my boring-looking neighbor, as demonstrated by the startling gap in their responses. It seems she’s especially popular with the boys, judging by their comments.

In the meantime, the bell rings to mark the end of homeroom.

“Let’s see. I’d like...,” my neighbor says, his gaze shifting over to me, “...Kurosu and her friends to help our new student with anything she needs. I hear you recently transferred here, too, Kurosu. You’re in similar situations, so I hope you and your friends can all get along with her.”

“Okay,” I answer immediately—we decided this in advance. My goal is to win

points with him by taking care of the robot girl.

“And if anyone thinks they’re strong enough,” he continues, “I’d like some help bringing in a desk and chair for Twelve. Two people, if possible.”

“Me! Me, me! I’ll help you!”

“Oh! I’ll help, too!”

My neighbor heads out of the classroom with two boys in tow. I’m impressed. He’s handling the students well despite being a new teacher. Ms. Mochizuki watches them leave the room.

Without wasting a moment, a bunch of kids leap out of their seats and surround Robot Girl.

“Nice to meet you! You’re not from Japan, right? Where are you from?”

“You were with Kurosu before, right? Are you two friends?”

“Do you have all your textbooks? If not, you should tell the teacher.”

“Your hair is so pretty. What shampoo do you use?”

“Come on, guys. If you all speak at once, she won’t be able to hear anyone.”

They’re swarming her even more than they swarmed me when I transferred in. It’s probably because of how pretty she is. Well, until she starts speaking. The girls seem to like her, and the boys *definitely* do. Intervening would be a lot of work, so I stay outside their circle and stand by in case something happens. The plan is to have Abaddon handle things if she gets out of control.

“So this is school,” she says. “Ah, how this place soothes the heart.”

Robot Girl herself appears to be on cloud nine. Her heart is warmed right up as all the other kids fawn over her. While her expression is impassive as always, I can see a slight twitch at the corners of her mouth. She must be desperately holding in her excitement.

“Your last name is Sasaki, right? That might get confusing since our teacher has the same name.”

“Yeah. Can we call you Twelve?”

“Oh, but we won’t force you if you don’t like it.”

“Do you have a nickname? If it’s okay, would you tell us what it is?”

“What does your family usually call you, Sasaki?”

“You may designate me Twelve. That is what my family calls me.”

As far as I can tell, the robot girl is communicating just fine with our classmates. I decide I’m not needed and go back to my seat.

“Okay, then we’ll call you Twelve!”

“That’s kind of a weird name, though.”

“I think it’s cute and unique.”

“Hey! Are you trying to hit on her?”

“What? With her dad here? No way.”

“Yeah, but if it works out, you might even get his approval.”

“Ha-ha, I know how that one ends. He’ll start deducting points from your grades.”

After a little while, the two boys who left with my neighbor come back, carrying Robot Girl’s desk. My neighbor has her chair.

Once the items are in place and ready, first period begins.



I couldn’t believe it when I heard that the class’s previous teacher was arrested for indecent acts with a student. I’d heard the kids talking about it while I was waiting in the hallway in front of Class 1-A, and I was still shocked. Did the bureau set all this up? If so, that would be awful. Or was it true? Well, *that* would be awful, too. Either way, the bureau had to be involved somehow.

If my ties to my neighbor went public in this situation, it could put my position in jeopardy. I wanted to avoid becoming “LTS” at all costs.

To the rest of the world, Type Twelve was my adoptive daughter. That had been her idea, and she’d been very insistent on it since she wanted to keep our

pretend family going.

My neighbor, however, was a complete stranger. That was all she was—my *neighbor*. A middle-aged man like me being close with a minor like her could quickly become a big problem.

I'd have to keep some distance between us for now and refrain from speaking to her in school as much as possible. In fact, there was a chance someone had already seen us around town.

I got through homeroom that morning while desperately trying to hide how much these thoughts disturbed me.

Once I'd safely finished introducing myself and Type Twelve, it was time for math class. It went a lot more smoothly than expected. Just as my boss said, the tutoring I'd done as a student was somehow coming in handy almost two decades later.

Eventually, it was time for lunch. Behind the school building, away from prying eyes, I met up with Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Inukai, and Captain Mason. We hadn't had much time to talk before morning homeroom, so I invited them here to discuss things properly. I had Ms. Mochizuki watch the students in Class 1-A during their lunch break.

"Kids are so impudent at this age," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. "How did you do?"

"I managed," I said. "But it sounds like you had trouble."

"I mean, look at me. They already have a strange nickname for me."

I remembered hearing them call her "loli teacher." I was sure she'd be able to deal with it just fine, though.

"Miss Inukai," I said, turning to the ensign. "Could I ask why you're not with Mr. Yoshikawa?"

"I'm the only one from the JMSDF infiltrating the school as a faculty member. We're working with the other two branches on this operation. I was chosen as our spy since I already know you, Mr. Sasaki. Captain Yoshikawa is working elsewhere."

“Ah, then the JSDF has eyes everywhere?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Chilling.”

“There are no soldiers in camouflage hiding anywhere students or teachers would see them, so don’t worry about that. But if you need something from Yoshikawa, I can get in touch with him right away.”

“No, I was just a little curious,” I said. “There’s no need for that yet.”

“Are you sure you should be saying all this with *him* here?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka, glancing at Captain Mason.

Miss Inukai’s response was clear and swift. “I am. Our actions are already common knowledge among his people.”

“We are friends with the JSDF! We will work hard together!”

“Yes, I suppose that makes sense,” Ms. Futarishizuka mused.

It seemed several armed groups interested in Type Twelve had already locked down the school inside and out. That meant I couldn’t afford to slip up and use otherworld magic, even if it seemed like I was alone. It was easy to imagine someone observing me from a distance without my notice.

The bureau had probably dispatched a few psychics, too, and the section chief likely had full control of the school’s security cameras. I resolved myself to rely on those around me as much as possible whenever anything happened.

“By the way,” I said, “do any of you know anything about Class 1-A’s former teacher?”

“Ah, the ‘lolicon teacher’ I’ve been hearing about?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “I checked with the boss. He said they didn’t even have to set him up and just took advantage of what he was already doing. The guy was probably a habitual offender. It seems the school didn’t want it to go public for fear of damaging their reputation; the chief had them in the palm of his hands.”

“I see.”

“I heard they were going at it right here at school,” she added.

“I wish you wouldn’t paint such a graphic picture.”

I was relieved that nobody had been framed to make room for us, at least.

Our boss could be pretty flippant about sacrificing innocent people, after all.

“You should take care,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “You don’t want to wind up his successor in *both* respects.”

“Please don’t say that, even as a joke.”

“But you never know when someone might be trying to honey trap you.”

*Oh, I guess that’s possible,* I thought. Now that she mentioned it, I was almost kidnapped by some group at the amusement park the other day. That stun gun hurt like hell. There was always a chance a third party could approach me in a less direct way, too.

For that matter, I could imagine some attractive classmate putting the moves on Miss Hoshizaki. Or if she already had a boyfriend, a foreign country or some other organization might target him and try to put him on their payroll. It seemed upsettingly likely. I hoped the mechanical life-form would use her super-science to keep my colleague out of harm’s way.

“Wow! Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka!” said Captain Mason. “That was very informative!”

“Hey, could you stop acting like that already? It’s really getting on my nerves.”

“Is it? I thought I was doing an excellent impression.”

*Mr. Robert’s image of assistant language teachers seems a little cliché,* I thought. Then again, hadn’t the ones at my schools acted pretty similarly? *Hmm...*

“I studied for my part by watching a bunch of anime.”

“That’s no way to learn about real life!” complained Ms. Futarishizuka.

The cause was now clear.

The captain straightened up and spoke to us in a more dignified manner. “I’ll be serious. The entire world has its eyes on you right now. You’d do well to keep that in mind and act accordingly. We may be friendly, but plenty of others would go to great lengths to gain power and wealth.”

“I agree with that assessment, Captain Mason,” I said.

“Since we’re on watch, I doubt anyone will try anything obvious. But there are many countries and groups that won’t give up so easily. I’m sure they have already approached students and faculty here. I suspect they’ll pull something either tomorrow or the day after.”

“Would you be able to give us any intel?” I asked.

“We’re already telling your superior whatever we feel is necessary.”

“Stingy old man,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka, puffing out her cheeks. “I hoped you’d be a little more grateful since you’re basically using me as a bodyguard.”

The captain’s expression softened as he shifted back into assistant language teacher mode. “Oh? I am not sure what you are saying!”

“Well, why *else* would anyone assign a little girl like me to teach English?”

“What? I don’t understand, Ms. Futarishizuka!”

“I’m going to shove my fist so far down your throat you’ll—”

“Please stop,” I interrupted. “If you do that, the bureau will fire us.”

Ms. Futarishizuka was already glaring at Captain Mason, her fist balled. She was *pissed*.

Miss Inukai remained quiet the whole time. She stood perfectly straight and listened to the rest of us, never speaking unless referred to. Her sharp countenance was the very picture of a JMSDF officer.

From her point of view, this whole incident was a disaster. If any problems whatsoever occurred at the school, her career would be over. I wanted to help her out however I could. It was *our* fault for involving her in the octodragon incident, after all.

“Will you two be attending tonight’s welcome party?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka, changing the subject.

“Can we even attend?” I asked.

“Why not?”

This was something the vice principal had mentioned to us on our way out of

the faculty room—apparently, the school staff had reserved a few tables at a nearby bar that night to welcome the four new faculty members. As we were the guests of honor, it was our job to be there. However, the obstacles to participating were great.

The first family rule stated that we must all eat a meal together once a day.

“Because it would break one of our pretend family’s rules,” I said.

“Oh, the robot girl informed us during lunch break that she will be attending a welcome party at a classmate’s house after school. Apparently, she made some friends, and they invited her. From her message, I could tell she was over the moon.”

“Really? She said that?”

“Haven’t you checked our pretend family group chat?”

“I completely forgot. I’m sorry.”

“We’re currently holding a friendly little vote. The youngest daughter and our esteemed senior have each voted to cancel dinner. The latter must want to spend some quality time with her *real* sister every once in a while. The eldest daughter and eldest son will probably go along with whatever you say. So, in essence, it’s you and me who get to decide.”

Flustered, I checked my personal phone. There was indeed an unread message from Type Twelve. While the text itself was plain and businesslike, I got the sense that she wanted very much to take part in her classmates’ welcome party. Why did I think that? Well, because her message was very, very long. Further down in the chat were the two yes votes already cast.

“I see,” I said. “Then why don’t we participate in our welcome party, too?”

“Ah, it’s so nice to be able to decide a majority vote all by myself.”

“I’d appreciate if you kept such thoughts private.”

While our new posts here were temporary, it was crucial that we maintained a good working environment. Refusing the other teachers’ goodwill could hamper our mission going forward. I was already taking on an unfamiliar job—I figured I had better just say yes and go.



I'd ask my neighbor and Abaddon to look after Type Twelve for us.

The others from the bureau, as well as friends of Miss Inukai and Captain Mason, would probably be keeping watch, too. A short outing wouldn't cause any problems. Type Twelve likely had her terminals out surveilling as well. *I'll have to send a thank-you gift to whatever family hosts her welcome party.*

"Wow! We're having a party tonight! I'll come, too!" exclaimed Captain Mason

"Should I attend as well, Mr. Sasaki?" asked Miss Inukai.

"I think that would be safest, as long as you don't have any other plans," I said. "After all, we have to get along here for a while yet. Though you should probably discuss it with your boss."

"Understood," she replied. "I'll do that."

Captain Mason and Miss Inukai seemed willing to attend as well.

Soon, the bell rang to announce the end of lunch break.

Unfortunately, I hadn't had any time to eat. That said, I'd been regularly skipping lunch since transferring to the bureau. Neither Miss Inukai nor the captain raised any complaints, either. With that, we dispersed to face our afternoon classes.



The rest of the workday passed in the blink of an eye, and it was soon time to clock out. As discussed, we all headed for the welcome party.

Most people walked in Tokyo, so when the teachers piled into a car like it was normal, I was hit with a bit of culture shock. Apparently, someone had been assigned as the designated driver to take us there and back. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were not many bars near the school.

We drove all the way to Karuizawa Station, where we made our way into an extremely normal bar, clearly aimed at the masses. We all sat down in a somewhat large private room and had a toast.

"To our new staff members' success! Cheers!"

The principal and vice principal were both in attendance. The former had made the toast.

Immediately, everyone started chatting.

Regarding the size of the room, I was extremely impressed, to put it modestly. It was much bigger than the ones I was used to in Tokyo. We came in with a huge group of over twenty people, and yet it didn't feel cramped at all. There was even enough room for people to pass between the tables. Furthermore, the chairs all had backs! Being able to rest comfortably against them was pure bliss.

"Ah, the bars out here in the middle of nowhere are nice and large, aren't they?" mused Ms. Futarishizuka. "You won't get this back in the big city."

"I agree. I was just thinking the exact same thing," I replied.

"Hee-hee. We have an awful lot in common!"

"Miss Inukai, your glass is already empty. May I pour you some more beer?"

"Oh, um. Thank you, Mr. Sasaki."

"Oh, Ms. Futarishizuka! Too bad! He rejected you! But do not worry. I am here for you!"

"Is it the big boobs?" she said. "The huge knockers? Is that what he likes?"

The four newcomers all sat at one table. Ms. Futarishizuka and I were on one side, with Miss Inukai and Captain Mason on the other. I expected everyone would be asked to change seats at some point so we would have a chance to talk to the rest of the faculty.

At the table right next to us sat the principal and vice principal. Ever since the toast, they had been serving as intermediaries between us and the rest of the teachers. They knew our true identities, so they were probably anxious about our proximity to the other employees.

"Excuse me, Mr. Sasaki. Could I ask you a question?"

"What is it, Ms. Mochizuki?"

She was sitting at a table on my other side—the opposite one from the

principal.

“You and Ms. Futarishizuka seem to be on good terms. What’s your relationship to her?”

I gave her the backstory we’d thought of in advance. “We met during our qualification exams and, by pure coincidence, ended up at the same school.”

“And he’s been hitting on me every chance he gets, too. What a bother,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Would you mind not spreading lies in front of other people?”

Incidentally, I noticed that everyone at the party avoided referring to each other as teachers. I’d heard the others talking about this on the way here. It seemed that in less populated areas like this—where teachers were likely to meet students and their families around town—they liked to keep strict boundaries in their personal lives.

“Would you two happen to be dating?” asked Ms. Mochizuki.

“She likes to tease me, but it’s all on her end,” I replied.

In fact, it seemed to me like she was teasing me a lot more than usual today. Was she simply excited about working in a new environment? No, that couldn’t be it. Things were always more complicated with her.

After the toast, we drank about two glasses each while trading light conversation. The ones doing the bulk of the talking were Ms. Futarishizuka and Captain Mason. Miss Inukai, Ms. Mochizuki, and myself just sipped at our drinks and watched them carry on.

After a little while, Ms. Mochizuki addressed me again. Her tone was formal, but her expression held a touch of guilt. “Excuse me, but would you happen to be single, Mr. Sasaki?”

“Ah yes. I am. Why?”

“You are? I’m single, too!” she said and smiled. “This may sound weird, but I’m really happy to have another single person on the faculty. A lot of the other teachers are married, so I have a hard time following their conversations, and our lifestyles are quite different...”

I thought it was pretty normal for a woman her age to be single, but maybe out here that wasn't the case. I couldn't be sure of the details, but since it was a sensitive topic, I simply nodded and let it go.

"Is that so?" I asked.

"Do you want to join me for drinks on the weekend sometime?"

"If it's all right, I'd be happy to."

"I really appreciate it. Then let's trade contact information right away!"

"Huh? Oh, um, sure."

The exchange had me baffled. I was pretty sure this was the fastest I'd ever traded contact information with a woman in my life. I wasn't sure what to do. Personal information was precious. Should she really be giving hers to a middle-aged man she'd just met?

"Oh, come on," muttered Ms. Futarishizuka. "What is this? A romantic comedy? Should I be laughing?"

"Actually, would you like to trade contact information as well, Ms. Futarishizuka?"

Was this the honey trap my colleague had warned me about? It couldn't be, right? Wasn't this a little sudden for that? Of course, there was a chance she'd received instructions from the principal. That would make sense, considering her position as my assistant teacher. Either way, I decided to treat the interaction as if someone were sharing their business email with me.

At Ms. Mochizuki's request, we exchanged contact information. I gave her the account I used on my company phone. That way, it couldn't be linked to my personal data. If any problems arose, I would contact the boss immediately.

"Mr. Sasaki, could we swap contact info, too?"

"Oh, yes."

Once Ms. Mochizuki and I were finished, Miss Inukai followed suit. And, as expected, Ms. Futarishizuka wasted no time getting in a jab.

"Well, *you're* sure popular with the ladies."

“Mr. Sasaki! I am very jealous!” chimed in Captain Mason.

“...Why don’t the two of you trade too?”

It felt pretty good to swap info with two charming young women. Ms. Mochizuki was bright and enthusiastic—an ideal schoolteacher. Miss Inukai, on the other hand, was hard-working and quiet—a model JMSDF officer.

Had I kept living my regular life, I would never have run into either of them. But I sensed that the reason they were paying attention to me now had nothing to do with whether I was likable or attractive.

“What subject are you teaching, Miss Inukai?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Physical education. Strictly speaking, it’s called ‘health and physical education.’”

“Ah, P.E. That seems right up your alley, Miss Inukai.”

“I’m a crude woman, after all. Physical activity is the only thing I’m good at.”

“Oh, I wasn’t implying anything like that...”

*So Miss Hoshizaki lost out to her, huh?* I suspected she was pretty smart, too. I’d once heard that you had to test quite well to even get into the National Defense Academy.

“Too tough an opponent for our esteemed senior,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Let’s not mention it to her,” I agreed.

A little while later, we changed seats, just as I’d predicted. This time, we sat with teachers we were likely to be working with directly, according to class and subject. Naturally, Ms. Mochizuki and I stayed together as we headed over to the other first-year teachers.

As it happened, she appeared to be quite the drinker.

“Unless I’ve missed one, this is your fifth glass,” I pointed out. “Will you be all right?”

“No problem at all! This much nothing. Despite how I look, I love to drink.”

“If you say so...”

It didn't seem like she was lying. The teachers around us appeared unfazed, so I figured she was just a heavy drinker. I decided to keep watch and not mention it. She was young, yes, but she was an adult.

The party continued, punctuated by more self-introductions from the four newcomers.

When I glanced around, I saw Ms. Futarishizuka, Captain Mason, and Miss Inukai all mingling with the other teachers and having a good time. The air around Ms. Futarishizuka was especially boisterous. She was something else—even in foreign territory like this, she made friends very quickly.

Finally, the vice principal delivered a parting message, and the party came to an end. The bar's employees bid us farewell, and we filed out of the building.

Everyone seemed ready to go home for the night. But just then, someone grabbed my arm.

"Mr. Sasaki," Ms. Mochizuki drawled, "let's keep going!"

"Sorry, it looks like we're all heading home."

"They can do what they want. And so can we!"

From her giddy tone, I surmised that she was pretty drunk. She tugged at my arm a few more times, smiling pleasantly. I was overtaken by the desire to sober her up with healing magic.

"Perhaps, but we have school tomorrow," I pointed out.

"Come on, just one more! I'll treat you!"

It was a little past 9 PM. At my old workplace, they would have dragged me to a second bar whether I liked it or not. But that was only because we all worked in an office. I was a schoolteacher now, and I couldn't very well show up in front of the students reeking of booze.

"There's a really nice place nearby! I'd love to show it to you, Mr. Sasaki!"

"Why don't we leave it for next time?"

"No, wait. They have an amazing filefish meal that you can only eat at this time of year! If we miss this chance, who knows when we'll get another? Today

can be our filefish anniversary!”

Nearby, other teachers had started calling taxis. It seemed that everyone used cars here and that not many of our coworkers got home via public transportation. A few headed in the direction of the train station, but there weren’t that many stops, so they’d have to call a taxi for the last mile or so. One teacher even had a family member come pick them up.

As our coworkers began to scatter, Ms. Mochizuki walked off enthusiastically. Her steps were unsteady and faltering; I felt anxious just looking at her.

I considered simply leaving. But she was my assistant teacher and would be supporting me in Class 1-A. If I treated her poorly now and got on her bad side, my life at school would be significantly harder in the future.

Without much of a choice, I switched my brain into hospitality mode and nodded. “All right, then. I’ll come, but only for one hour.”

“I knew you’d come through for me, Mr. Sasaki! That’s what I love about you!”

I asked some of the teachers around us if they wanted to join, but unfortunately, they all declined. Most of them had families with children waiting for them at home, so they didn’t want to stay out too late.

“Huh? Where did my colleague go?”

“Mr. Sasaki? I just saw him leave with Ms. Mochizuki...”

I heard Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Inukai’s voices a short distance away and thought I’d try inviting them, too.

But not a moment later, Ms. Mochizuki tugged on my arm again. “This way! Come on, over here, Mr. Sasaki!”

“Hey, wait a minute!” I tried to protest, but she quickly dragged me around a corner.

This was a perfect blind spot from the front of the restaurant. Ms. Mochizuki continued on her way with energetic, forceful steps. I couldn’t see any other teachers around at this point. After rounding several more corners, we came to a small area with several bars lined up in a row.

“It’s on this street,” she said. “It’s that one right there!”

“I see.”

She pointed right in front of us and dragged me along in her wake. We’d reached the restaurant she was after. Unfortunately, it had a plate hanging in the window which read CLOSED.

“It looks like they’re not open,” I said.

“Urgh...”

Ms. Mochizuki made an incredibly frustrated expression. Then, a moment later, she turned to face me.

“Well, we’ll just have to drink at my place!”

“Oh, uh, no thank you. I couldn’t possibly—”

“Look! A taxi. Perfect timing! Excuse me!”

She waved her arm high in the air to flag down a taxi as it passed in front of the restaurant. The vehicle, which had a VACANT sign on it, came over to us right away. It had probably just dropped a customer off at the station. The taxi’s rear door opened, and Ms. Mochizuki started pushing me in.

“We do have school in the morning, Ms. Mochizuki.”

“But you said you had an hour.”

“I did, but...”

“You’re not getting any strange ideas, are you?”

“...All right, then.”

If it were Ms. Futarishizuka, I could have hit her with a sarcastic comeback and gotten out of the situation. But this was a workplace colleague—someone with more experience in the field, whom I’d be relying on in the future. It would be a pain if I carelessly turned her down and she started to hate me, so I didn’t have much choice but to get in. At her insistence, I took a seat in the back next to her.

Was this why women were so scared of sexual harassment in the workplace? Actually, things like this probably happened to attractive men, too, and they



just didn't speak up about it.

Once Ms. Mochizuki told the taxi driver where to go, the door closed, and we set off.

Only a few minutes later, the sky was pitch black. The streets were practically deserted.

"It's not that late," I commented, "but there are so few people out."

"You said in your self-introduction that you came from Tokyo, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"We had another teacher who came from Tokyo. They were shocked by the difference, too."

"Considering the commute home, I probably won't be able to stay very long," I warned her as I looked out at the scenery.

Buildings were growing more and more sparse, and I started to feel uneasy. Ms. Mochizuki's house must have been out in the middle of nowhere. Maybe she was a local and lived with her family. That idea only made me want to leave even more.

Just as I was growing increasingly concerned about our destination, Ms. Mochizuki rested her head on my shoulder and said, "Then why don't you stay over?"

There could be no doubt at this point. I'd been caught in some kind of ploy.

"....."

You might not believe it, but unpopular men know a thing or two about proper distance with the opposite sex. Everything about this situation was strange. Nothing like it had *ever* happened to me before, and that was why I instantly knew something was off. Soon, she'd be trying to sell me art, inviting me to join a multi-level marketing scam, or asking me for money to repay some debt.

But who was behind her?

*I can leave that to the bureau and the JSDF. That's their business. One*

message to the boss and he'd work out her background in no time. Right now, my priority was securing an escape route.

"Sorry, sir, but could you stop right here?" I said to the driver.

"What? Are you sure? How are you going to get home?" asked Ms. Mochizuki.

"Here's the taxi fare, Ms. Mochizuki. You can keep the change."

Then I took an action that was guaranteed to get me out of this—I took a ten-thousand-yen bill out of my pocket and shoved it into her hands. Flabbergasted, she looked from the bill to me and then back again.

Meanwhile, the taxi parked on the shoulder of the road. After leaving the fare with my coworker, I climbed out through the rear door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Ms. Mochizuki."

"Wait, Mr. Sasaki!"

I shut the door and started walking back the way we'd come—fast. A few minutes later, there was still no sign Ms. Mochizuki was coming after me. The taxi stayed parked for a few moments before speeding off down the road.

Giving her the fare must have done the trick. Before my job at the bureau, I didn't have a big salary, either. I understood how grateful a person could be to have a ten-thousand-yen bill dropped in their lap like that—especially after spending a lot of money at a drinking party.

"....."

*It sure is dark out here.*

Farmland stretched out on one side of the road. There were a few houses dotting the landscape, but they all looked old and weathered. I doubted many of them were occupied. I could hear small animals rummaging and scurrying about nearby.

*How am I going to get back to Ms. Futarishizuka's villa? I can't exactly fly. I pondered my predicament, my head still woozy from the booze. All that alcohol warmed me up, and now the night air feels quite nice...* That thought only lasted a few seconds, though.

“...It’s freezing.”

Now I was just cold.

It was a lot chillier here than it was in Tokyo. I could see piles of snow by the road. Despite the elevation, Karuizawa didn’t get much snowfall, so the snowdrifts weren’t super high like they would be up north or anything. Still, it was enough to slip and fall.

Walking home was starting to seem like a serious pain.

*Could I contact the bureau and have them pick me up?* I wondered as I walked along the road.

Then I saw a car approaching me from up ahead. It was a taxi with a lit roof light, just like the one I’d been riding in. It slowed down and stopped on the shoulder, blocking me from going any further. I braced myself for an attack, unsure who I was up against.

But there was no need to worry. Two people I knew well popped out of the taxi’s back door.

“We’re here to pick you up, Mr. Sasaki.”

“I can’t believe someone tried to take you home during the welcome party. You’re like a college girl who just came to the city.”

“Miss Inukai? Ms. Futarishizuka? What are the two of you doing here? I thought everyone went home for the day.”

Miss Inukai stood next to the taxi and addressed me formally, “I’ll be straight with you, Mr. Sasaki. My mission this time is to support you both inside and outside of the classroom. I’ve had training in intelligence, so I should be of some use to you.”

“I see,” I said. “Well, thank you for your help.”

“She’s making it sound really cool and heroic, but half her job is just to spy on us,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

Evidently, they’d come all the way out here for me. They’d probably gotten my location data from my bureau phone.

“Anyway, why’d you get off in the middle of the trip?” she continued. “I certainly hope you didn’t go into kenja time *during* the car ride.”

“You’ve been very, uh, enthusiastic today, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

“Men who aren’t popular with women are easy targets, you see. Once they’re over thirty, they start making real money. Then a woman, say their old classmate, calls them up out of the blue, and bam, shotgun wedding. Now he’s her ATM, and she gets a healthy weekly allowance.”

“I know what you’re trying to say. I just hate the way you’re saying it.”

She was probably giving me a friendly reminder in her own way, but it made me feel like I was working for an old man from the 50s. Unfortunately, I couldn’t bring myself to resent someone who looked like a little girl.

“So? What now?” she asked. “If you want to walk home, I won’t stop you.”

“...Right. Would you mind letting me ride with you?”

“By all means, come in. I’ll move to the passenger’s seat.”

“Thank you, Miss Inukai.”

Taking my colleague up on her show of goodwill, I climbed into the rear seat without complaint. I was happy to be in a heated car, nice and warm.

We drove through the countryside for about half an hour before reaching Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa. Miss Inukai, who had ridden with us, got back in the taxi and disappeared into the distance. Her people probably had a base set up somewhere nearby.

My next short stay in the otherworld could wait for tomorrow or the day after that. Physically, I could keep going, but mentally, I was completely worn out. After taking a bath, I climbed into bed and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.



## <The Neighbor’s POV>

After school is over for the day, I visit a classmate’s house with Robot Girl. The

other students are holding a welcome party for us.

Thinking back, they suggested the same thing right after I transferred here. I remember turning them down. Ever since, I've been putting it off every time I'm asked, so now this welcome party is for me, too.

The venue is in a neighborhood close to school—a single-family home with a pretty large floor plan. An expensive imported car is parked in the driveway.

The parents run a small company, and the family is a little better off than most of our classmates' families are. There's always at least one kid like that in every grade. We go inside and set up in the living room.

Our group has about ten boys and girls in all—the same students always surrounding me at school.

There's a pair of sofas already there, and we work together to bring in extra chairs from the dining room to create an area for ourselves. Sweets and juices line the low table in the middle of the room. The student who lives here called ahead of time and had his parents, who happened to be at home, prepare it all.

“Your hair is so pretty, Twelve.”

“Yeah! It's hard to believe you're really human.”

“Would it be okay if I combed it a little?”

“Don't you think she'd look cute in pigtails?”

“Oh, for sure! I wanna see!”

“You may all do as you wish.”

Robot Girl allows the other students to do whatever they want.

Her behavior seems no different from usual to me. But judging by the way her shoulders twitch from time to time, she must be in ecstasy on the inside. Hands reach for her hair from the left and right, and she does nothing to stop them.



“Twelve, do you have a boyfriend?”

“If you do, I guess it’s a long-distance relationship now.”

“Or did he come with you to Karuizawa?”

“If he did, he’d have transferred to our school with her, silly.”

“Yeah, but what if he’s older?”

“Like an adult? No way!”

“I have no specified partner. However, the idea piques my interest.”

Robot Girl handles the conversation with our classmates flawlessly.

“You’re really pretty, Twelve. I bet a bunch of boys will want to ask you out.”

“I can tell a couple of them are starting to get ideas already.”

“But don’t let any weirdos catch you!”

“Yeah, that’s super important.”

“Like lolicon teachers who are just after your body. They’re around, you know.”

Incidentally, most of the ones surrounding her at the moment are girls. I thought she was more interested in talking with boys, but apparently girls are fine, too. As long as people are fawning over her, gender is probably trivial.

Unfortunately, that means the boys, left without anything to do, come over to me.

“I guess you’re not the new girl anymore, huh, Kurosu?”

“Don’t worry! You’re still my number one.”

“Hey, don’t try to get a jump on the rest of us. I’m on her side, too.”

“Are you and Twelve friends?”

“I’m curious about Mr. Sasaki, too.”

“Our families are friends because of our parents’ jobs. Like she said in

homeroom this morning, we both moved here for similar reasons. That's why her transfer was so close to mine."

I give them the backstory we decided on in advance. None of it is a lie.

Apparently, mechanical life-forms can't tell lies. If my story had any falsehoods mixed in, and one of these students discussed what I'd told them with Robot Girl, she could completely flub the conversation. So the whole fake family came together to establish a cover story.

On paper, I have a foster father, but for all intents and purposes, Futarishizuka is my guardian. My neighbor is playing Robot Girl's father. It's true that they're in a business relationship, and no one can deny that we all spend time together within the framework of our fake family.

*This alien is such a pain.*

"Popular with the boys as usual, huh?" Abaddon chimes in with his usual banter. Conveniently for him, I can't argue, so he can say whatever he wants. *"This is called a why-choose romance, right? I know all about that stuff."*

*Where on Earth did he learn something like that?* I wonder.

But he's right—that's exactly what you'd call my current situation.

This welcome party's attendees are the most popular boys and girls in class. Naturally, that means they're all fairly attractive. If I were anyone else, I might have seen this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Personally, though, I'm not excited in the least.

"Can we trade contact info, Kurosu?"

"Oh, me too!"

"She exchanged info with the girls but not with the boys."

"I've been waiting for a chance! Pleaaase!"

Just as Abaddon implied earlier, the boys seem even more fervent than usual. Is it because we're outside of school?

No, it must be my imagination. And if I say something like that out loud, Abaddon will just tease me again.



“All right. You can scan this QR code here,” I say, holding out the phone Futarishizuka lent me.

A moment later, evidently overhearing my conversation with the boys, Robot Girl begins trading contact information with the girls, too. Like me, she’s using a phone she received from Futarishizuka. *That woman is always so well prepared.*

The welcome party continues for some time after that, without any notable issues cropping up.



The day after the staff welcome party, this new teacher headed to work bright and early.

I’d gone to sleep before I normally did, so waking up was no problem. Ms. Futarishizuka brought out her car for the commute. Peeps and Lady Elsa saw us off, and we departed from the villa, arriving at school in just fifteen minutes.

In the faculty room, I saw Ms. Mochizuki at her desk, cradling her head in her hands. It looked like she had a nasty hangover. Her expression was grim. Had she continued to drink by herself after she got home? If so, she’d still made it to work early. *Impressive.*

After that came morning homeroom. I stood in front of the blackboard and introduced the second transfer student in two days.

“Everyone, this is Ivy Gonzales. She’ll be joining our class starting today.”

“I’m Ivy! Hello, people of Japan!”

I’d heard this name and energetic greeting before.

Yes—it was Magical Blue.

As soon as I entered the faculty room this morning, the principal called me into his office, where Captain Mason explained that the magical girl would be joining my class and told me to look after her.

However it happened, it seemed the most effective means of placating Type Twelve was with the kind hearts of children like Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor. Even to a layman like me, it was clear that Captain Mason’s group

was now copying us, trying to wedge Magical Blue into this group.

Incidentally, she was wearing extremely normal clothing today. In her own words, she'd switched off her transformation.

Out of her magical girl form, she looked like any other European or American child. Her bright blue hair was now a calmer light brown, and she'd shed her magical girl outfit for the school-designated uniform, so she fit in perfectly with the other students.

Once they saw the cute new transfer student, everyone erupted into chatter.

"Huh? Is 'Gonzales' your name?"

"'Ivy' is a girl's name. 'Gonzales' must be her last name."

"I read on the internet once that 'Gonzales' is a pretty common last name in Spanish-speaking countries."

"Gon is pretty cute, isn't she?"

"Yeah! Gon, you're so cute!"

"We have a similar last name in Japan, right? Goroumaru."

"Huh? Wait, that sounds really cool."

At first, I'd been worried whether a girl Magical Pink's age would be able to keep up with middle-school classes. But Ivy had Captain Mason's seal of approval, and he'd assured me it wouldn't be an issue. Apparently, she was taught by a private tutor.

Because she was often working with the military, she wasn't able to attend school normally. For that reason, they'd set aside time at work for her to continue her education. It was a rather bland way of doing things but more or less what I expected from their country.

According to Captain Mason, Ivy's talent and hard work meant she already had the academic abilities of a middle-school graduate. This was a first-year class, so I doubted she'd have any trouble with international subjects like math and physics.

What I was concerned about was her language skills. After all, she couldn't

speak Japanese. Her introduction, too, had been in English.

“Miss Gonzales lived overseas until last month. She’s not very used to Japanese yet, so I want you all to help her out as much as you can. If anything important comes up, please contact me right away.”

Despite all this, Captain Mason had stuck her right into normal classes. *What a monster*. It just proved how eager he and his people were to get their hands on Type Twelve.

“Ivy, you’re really cute!”

“Your eyes are so pretty.”

“Two transfer students in a row? Isn’t this a little weird?”

“Who cares? The more cute girls, the better.”

“Doesn’t she seem a little short for a foreigner?”

“Good thing that lolicon teacher got arrested before she arrived.”

The class seemed to have a generally friendly disposition toward her—with one exception.

“This is bad,” muttered Type Twelve ominously. “The advantage granted me by my transfer student attribute has been diminished by the stationing of additional unforeseen personnel. If nothing is done, it is possible that I will not be able to acquire the expected soothing effect.”

“Twelve, I’d like to ask you for a favor,” I said. We couldn’t have her getting into a fight with Magical Blue. That would be catastrophic. I decided to act first and attempt to establish a more cordial relationship. “I know you just transferred in, but since you can speak English, would you look after Miss Gonzales? I hope you two transfer students can support each other. I’d like the rest of you to get along with her as well, of course.”

This was another request from Captain Mason—to help their people interact with the mechanical life-form. He was simply obeying orders from his home country, so considering my position as a bureau employee, I couldn’t exactly refuse.

From his experiences on the UFO, the captain knew that Type Twelve could

speaking many languages. He must have considered that when picking Magical Blue for this job.

“I see. It is possible to keep my advantage by acting alongside the target. This is not a bad idea. Father, the youngest daughter believes that instruction to be wonderful. I will act on it immediately.”

“I don’t really understand, but as long as you agree.”

Type Twelve seemed to have contemplated the matter and reached her own conclusion.

Thus, Class 1-A now contained an alien, a magical girl, a demon, and a demon’s Disciple—all taught by an otherworld magician. And scattered about the school were psychics and other members of armed organizations watching from the shadows.

*This school is terrifying...*

## <School, Part Three>

Establishing Type Twelve at her new school had required the involvement of a whole lot of different parties. Through all sorts of illegal measures, they'd set the stage for her in the blink of an eye. Nevertheless, her attendance appeared completely normal, and she was accepted as another ordinary student.

On Type Twelve's second day, Magical Blue arrived hot on her heels. She, too, was generally accepted by their classmates. Her cover story—that their parents knew each other through work and were transferred for similar reasons—seemed to have been the correct play.

While several students seemed suspicious, they had no idea what was really going on—that Type Twelve was an alien linked to the recent UFO sightings. And while they might have had questions, they never took the initiative to ask them.

After school that day, the other students held a welcome party for Magical Blue, and Type Twelve and my neighbor joined them. Per majority vote, our pretend family took its second day off while the three of them spent time as classmates instead.

The mechanical life-form's school life appeared to be getting off to a smooth start. Unfortunately, that wouldn't continue for long.

It happened on Type Twelve's third day, just after lunch period.

A dry *bang* echoed through the school. It sounded like a gunshot.

"What was that? It hurt my ears."

"Hey, was that a gun?"

"It sounded really close, too."

"A gunshot? That doesn't make any sense."

“But it really seemed like it came from inside the school.”

“Maybe it was that gun they use for track and field.”

“But they’re not practicing now. It’s lunchtime.”

I heard several students speak up around me.

At that point, I had just finished watching over my class’s lunchtime and was on my way from Class 1-A to the faculty room. Hoping to use my lunch break—which was incredibly short compared to my previous job—to its fullest, I was hurrying down the hall when I heard the bang.

“Ah...”

Before joining the bureau, I’d have dismissed the possibility immediately. But now I could say for certain—that was a live gun, and the shot had to be linked to Type Twelve somehow. My senior colleague used a gun on a daily basis, so I knew exactly what they sounded like.

Pasting on a relaxed expression, I headed in the direction of the noise. Nearby students began to follow me, but I stopped them by putting on my teacher voice and telling them to stay calm and wait while I went to check it out. Then I hurried down the hallway.

Meanwhile, there was a second *bang*.

This helped me determine the direction of the sound and, thus, the location of the action. I ran all the way to the end of the hall and dashed down the stairs.

My destination was the first floor. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw the scene of the crime.

Two adults in casual clothing were lying on the floor to one side of the hallway. I recognized one of them from their clothes—I’d seen them in the faculty room earlier. Both of their heads were caved in, and they lay on the ground, unmoving. It seemed they’d both been shot in the face—there was zero chance they’d survived.

Nearby, I saw someone with a gun in his hands.

It was a boy in his teens, and he was wearing the school’s uniform. He looked Asian, and I noticed he had somewhat pronounced facial features. His skin also

looked darker than the students in my class.

When he noticed me, he immediately aimed his gun in my direction.

“*Tch...*”

I hastily put up a defensive barrier and hid behind one of the pillars in the hallway.

Not a moment later, there was a third *bang*.

The bullet struck the reinforced concrete pillar, scraping away at its surface.

I wondered if this kid was an agent from another country or organization, like Captain Mason had suggested. The captain had been sure they wouldn't make any bold moves with us on the lookout, but here this boy was, right in front of me.

He was armed with a gun, which meant he definitely wasn't a regular student. His upper right arm had been sliced up along with his clothing. It was stained red with blood, but impressively, he still held the gun steady. Psychologically, this was not your average teenage boy.

From the fact that he'd attacked them, I assumed the two fallen faculty members were Captain Mason's comrades, bureau employees, or members of the JSDF. Seeing no bladed weapons around, I assumed they were psychics.

And yet they'd still lost. They'd probably mistaken the boy for a regular student.

The term *child soldier* crossed my mind.

“.....”

I pulled up the front-facing camera on my smartphone and used it to get a look at things from behind the pillar. The boy still had his gun raised and was carefully observing me. I doubted he'd be so careful if he thought I was just another faculty member.

He probably recognized my face. Maybe he even had orders to assassinate me.

After all, everyone seemed to think I was the weakest link around Type

Twelve. Based on the available information, I was the easiest target in our fake family. Some group or another had targeted me back at the amusement park, too.

Fortunately, this attack was taking place in a very convenient location. There were no regular classrooms on the first floor.

Afternoon break had just begun, and the hallway was otherwise empty of students.

“Come out!” he barked in broken Japanese. “You! Come with me!”

I was right. He was definitely after me.

In that case, speaking carelessly to him and outing myself would lead to a lot of trouble. If possible, I wanted to make it look like none of this ever happened. Ideally, Captain Mason and Miss Inukai would come running and resolve the situation, then sweep it all under the rug.

“.....”

But a moment later, my hopes were dashed.

At the opposite end of the hall, past the armed intruder, a student appeared. It was a girl, holding a big pile of notebooks in her hands. She must have been delivering homework to the faculty room or something. When she saw the boy with the gun and the two teachers lying in pools of blood at his feet, she froze.

“Eeeek!”

Without wasting a moment, the boy approached her.

I couldn’t keep hiding and biding my time now.

“Wait! Please!” I burst out from behind the pillar.

Type Twelve’s transfer had already messed up these students’ lives. I couldn’t bear to think what would happen if a student wound up *dead*. *How dare those adults selfishly rob these children of their education!*

Middle school was when children began to get serious about their studies. Their efforts here could get them into a decent high school, from which they could aim for a good college. Maybe that was a stupid way of looking at things,



but to the students, that stuff was incredibly important. I couldn't allow psychics or aliens or any other weirdness to come along and ruin all that. I was literally watching where all that led, wasn't I? The boy right in front of me was the end product.

"S-stay away!"

The girl threw her stack of notebooks at the boy and tried to flee. But before she could get more than a few steps, the boy caught her by the arm. Her momentum caused her to topple forward.

And now she had a gun up against the back of her head.

The boy turned to me and in a threatening voice said, "Don't move. If you move, I kill girl."

Instead, I dashed down the hallway. At the same time, I used a barrier spell and targeted both myself and the girl. I limited the girl's barrier to areas likely to be targeted by the gun such as her head and chest. That would limit the chances of her noticing it. I couldn't use this spell as skillfully as Peeps, but I was able to manage that much.

As I barreled toward him, the boy cursed me, and I heard another gunshot. This time, it was aimed at me.

"D-don't move! Stop!"

Another *bang*, and another. As the gun went off, I dramatically took action. I swayed left and right as if I were dodging his bullets. I figured this would help me make excuses later.

In actuality, the bullets were blocked by my barrier spell. Then I used levitation magic to send them flying behind me. I didn't know how convincing any of this was, though.

"Who is this guy...?!" the boy muttered.

After firing all the bullets in the chamber, he changed tack. Releasing the girl, he threw his gun aside, then lowered his center of gravity, assuming a fighting stance. He brought both arms up to his chest like he was boxing. I could see he had a knuckle knife in one hand.

I decided to charge him. My plan was to turn off the barrier spell and let my momentum do the talking. I rammed into him like a wrestler tackling his opponent's legs—though due to the boy's height, I slammed into his torso.

My middle-aged body, honed by daily evening drinks, had a good layer of fat around its organs and under its skin. My suit was slimming, but I had a great deal of weight to throw around hiding underneath. The boy couldn't stop me; he collapsed backward.

"Urgh!"

Not a moment later, I heard a *thunk*. His head must have hit the floor.

"Stand down!" I shouted.

"....."

I straddled him, pinning both his hands to the floor.

There was no response. He'd passed out; maybe I'd hit him in a bad place.

*Did I give him a concussion?* I watched him, growing anxious. But I couldn't have him waking up and going on a rampage again. While I was tempted to call an ambulance, I had to focus on disarming him first.

I slipped the knife out of his hand. Then I picked up the gun on the floor and, just to be safe, released the magazine. I'd been through several bureau trainings on handgun usage. Thanks to the strict instructor's lessons, my fingers moved naturally. Rummaging through the boy's pockets, I even found a hand grenade. *Holy crap. That's scary.*

"Um, M-Mr.... Sasaki?" said the girl.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

"No, I'm all right. But that boy, he..."

The girl's face was familiar. She wasn't one of mine, but I'd seen her this morning in third-year math class. She'd answered a question, so I remembered her.

In the meantime, Captain Mason and Miss Inukai came running.

Several adults I didn't know followed them. I assumed they were working

together. They didn't have any guns out, but the way they carefully observed the scene made me doubt they were school faculty members.

"Whoa! Mr. Sasaki! What on Earth happened?!" Captain Mason said, keeping up his assistant language teacher bit in front of the female student.

"You're not hurt, are you, Mr. Sasaki?" asked Miss Inukai next to him.

"I'm fine. Could you take care of her?" I said, gesturing at the female student.

"At once."

Miss Inukai gave clear instructions to the others, and at her command, they quickly got to work. One of them, a woman, immediately secured the girl and took her away somewhere.

"Terribly sorry, Mr. Sasaki. This was our fault," said the captain, resuming his normal demeanor now that the girl was out of sight.

"Who are they?" I asked, gesturing toward the others.

"My subordinates, as you've probably guessed. They were keeping watch outside the building. Unfortunately..."

He was looking at the two figures slumped in the hallway. Evidently, they'd been his people, too. As we stood conversing, the others collected their bodies and moved them outside through the window. They did the same with the boy I'd tackled. I assumed they had friends waiting outside.

All that was left now were the pools of blood on the floor.

"Was she the only witness, Mr. Sasaki?" asked Miss Inukai.

"As far as I can tell, yes."

When I nodded back, she contacted someone on her smartphone. Was she giving a report to her superior or calling up a separate unit? I wasn't sure. Meanwhile, my conversation with Captain Mason continued.

"We've sealed off the area," he said. "There shouldn't be any more leaks."

"I think almost everyone heard the gunshots, though."

"But they only *heard* them. There's plenty of ways to cover that up."

“That’s a relief to hear, sir.”

The principal was on our side, so we could be somewhat heavy-handed if needed. Still, the captain’s reply left me with a great deal of unease.

“About the girl, sir,” I said. “Could you not do anything too forceful to her?”

“We’re prepared to offer her significant compensation for her troubles. I promise nothing bad will happen to her.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Considering his phrasing, they’d probably force her to change schools. They’d work something out with her parents’ jobs and have her somewhere else within days, and she’d be none the wiser. The bureau did things like that during cover-ups, too. I assumed the captain’s people used similar methods.

That student’s life had been messed up, and it was all our fault. I felt so *guilty*.

I knew I wasn’t going to be a great teacher or anything. But I’d sworn to at least try my hardest to keep the students out of danger. And now this had happened. I might be a fake teacher, but I was still watching over other people’s children.

*I need to make sure nothing like this ever happens again*, I thought firmly.

A short while later, a few extra bureau employees arrived on the scene. I didn’t know who they were until they spoke to me, but they recognized me at a glance. We quickly traded information, after which I handed things over to them and returned to the faculty room with the captain and Miss Inukai.

Once afternoon classes were over, I received a phone call from the boss regarding the incident.

The culprit turned out to be a foreign spy. The boy in question had infiltrated the school’s campus as a student that morning, then hid until lunch break. From there, his plan was to either kill or kidnap me once I was alone.

As expected, I was his quarry. I was the weakest link around here, after all.

They’d had a separate team watching the faculty room through a telephoto lens from a distance. After spotting me, they’d had the boy sneak into the building, but he’d run into the captain’s subordinates and ended up fighting

them.

Captain Mason had probably told the bureau all this after he'd finished questioning the boy.

The section chief praised me for daring to take on an opponent armed with a gun. I could tell he was scrutinizing me. I agreed vaguely and didn't elaborate. Fortunately, there had been no security cameras at the scene; it seemed I'd been able to pull the wool over his eyes again.



That night, we all gathered for our first family dinner in three days.

All of us assembled in the traditional house set up inside the UFO. We were seated around the table in the Japanese-style living room, eating our fill. My neighbor and Abaddon were in charge of tonight's dinner, and they'd made a traditional Japanese meal of grilled fish, meat and potato stew, and pork miso soup.

Ever since I met Peeps, we'd been living a very meat-filled lifestyle, so I greatly appreciated this change in menu. *This was what I'd been craving*, I thought gleefully as I reached out my chopsticks.

"Um, mister, how does it taste?"

"It's delicious. The fish is grilled perfectly. The skin is so crisp."

"That part was Abaddon's job."

"The miso soup is very flavorful, too. The pork and vegetables were boiled just the right amount."

"I'm sorry. That was also Abaddon. He suggested it in advance."

"Oh, um... You're a very good cook, Abaddon."

*"She's almost never cooked before, you see. The most she could do was throw an empty can on a campfire, fill it with water from a park, and boil some wild herbs in it. I think my partner did a pretty good job considering that, huh? C'mon. Give her a compliment."*

“Stop talking about that stuff, Abaddon. Also, I made cookies in home-ec class once. I may not have much experience in the kitchen, but I plan to do everything myself next time.”

*“That so? I think you ought to be upfront about all your hard work, personally.”*

“Hearing such stories makes me want to stuff you with all the free food I can manage,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

I agreed wholeheartedly.

The meat and potato stew had been prepared beautifully, too. But if kept going, my compliments would only have the opposite effect. I assumed Abaddon had cooked the stew as well. He’d blended into this family a lot more smoothly than I’d imagined. For now, though, I’d keep my praise to myself.

“And that makes one full round of dinner duty, doesn’t it?” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Would you allow me to make dinner next time?” Lady Elsa asked her.

“Ah, then there’s hope for that local cuisine from your homeland?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’d love it if everyone ate some.”

“In that case, I’d be happy to partake.”

After a majority vote, it was decided that Lady Elsa would take charge of cooking the following evening with Ms. Futarishizuka’s help. I’d grown accustomed to food from her world, but I was a little curious how everyone else would react.

Our meal continued pleasantly for a while. Then, when everyone was about halfway through the food on their plates, Type Twelve spoke up.

“Mother, the youngest daughter has realized something after starting school.”

“What is it?” replied Miss Hoshizaki.

“The eldest daughter is very popular with the male students.”

“Is that true?”

At Type Twelve’s remark, everyone’s attention shifted to my neighbor.

At the mother’s question, the eldest daughter looked troubled. “I’m not sure that I’m *popular*. But there are a few students who always come talk to me.”

*“Unlike at your last school, you’re the star of the class!”*

Abaddon’s comment was fairly mild, but he made it sound like she’d been bullied before. Though I’d never seen anything, from her demeanor, I’d made some guesses. And so I was relieved to hear that her new classmates were treating her well.

It was an odd feeling—something akin to fulfillment. It was as though I’d accomplished one of my duties, and it put me at ease.

“In addition, more than female students, there is a tendency among males to be kinder to those whom they are interested in. They offer to carry their target’s things while changing classrooms or to clean up after lunch in their target’s place. I have seen several such acts of devotion.”

“Wait... Are you trying to get the whole class to simp for you or something?” asked Miss Hoshizaki, looking at my neighbor in apparent surprise.

Come to think of it, my senior colleague was frequently excluded at school, too. As a result, her wording was sharp. I started imagining *her* school life and felt a twinge of pain in my chest.

“Of course not,” said my neighbor. “Please stop accusing me of such things.”

“Well, that’s basically what she just said, isn’t it?” insisted Miss Hoshizaki.

“Sure, they offer to do things for me, but it’s not like I say yes.”

Of late, the members of our pretend family seemed to be growing closer—mainly Miss Hoshizaki with Type Twelve and my neighbor with Ms. Futarishizuka. But just as before, my neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki maintained a more distant relationship. It seemed to me like their personalities were simply incompatible.

“The youngest daughter has determined that these are sexually instinctive actions rooted in human courtship behavior.”

“Well, they *are* all in puberty,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “Eat, sleep, sex. That’s what they live for.”

“I would like to discuss something with you, Mother.”

“All right. I’ll help you with anything I can.”

“I would like others to, as you say, ‘simp for’ me at school.”

“.....”

Her frank delivery was exactly what we’d come to expect from the mechanical life-form.

In Japanese culture, it was customary to be more roundabout when asserting oneself. As a Japanese man, I found her directness rather thrilling. Even Miss Hoshizaki had her mouth half-open, unable to respond.

Type Twelve ignored her mother’s consternation and continued. “And once I have obtained several understanding men, I will have them surround me and soothe me to my heart’s content. I believe that this is the way to repair the bug known as emotion. Being ‘simped for’ seems as valuable to me as being part of a harmonious family.”

“I’m, uh, sorry. I don’t think I can help you much with that...”

“Do you mean to say you have never been simped for, Mother?”

“I doubt most people ever have someone simping for them, actually.”

This was the first time I’d heard the term *simp* used so many times in one sitting. That said, I did remember at least one girl from my school days who was like that—always acting like the school princess.

“Ooh! I have,” Ms. Futarishizuka cut in. “In fact, people were simping for me as recently as last night.”



“Are you talking about one of your online games, Ms. Futarishizuka?” asked my neighbor.

“Sure am. Using a little girl’s voice during gameplay lures in a lot of lolicons. Then all I have to do is act a little clumsy and ask for their help, and they’re all mine. Oh, the joy I feel when those fuckboys empty their wallets on expensive microtransactions for me...”

“Hey, Futarishizuka, don’t teach Twelve weird stuff like that,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Grandmother, while Mother may be critical, the youngest daughter is very interested.”

“Hmm? I sense great potential in you, dear.”

The grandmother was certainly the worst candidate to teach a child about emotions. As the father, I had no choice but to support Miss Hoshizaki. Ms. Futarishizuka’s bad influence could wind up extending beyond Type Twelve to my neighbor, after all.

“Please. I’d rather you not get tricked by some strange man and blow up the planet,” I said.

“You need not worry, Father. No being more important to me than Mother will ever be born.”

“The more a girl says things like *that*, the more likely she is to devote herself to a domestic abuser,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“For the purposes of soothing my loneliness, romantic love and familial relationships are the two greatest options. I cannot ignore this.”

“For humans, love and hatred are two sides of the same coin,” I said. “You won’t necessarily get the soothing you’re after. Romance is a much more difficult prospect than maintaining familial relationships. If you go about it the wrong way, you’ll suffer even more than you stand to gain.”

Here I was, running my mouth. This wasn't like me. I had almost zero romantic experience to begin with.

Now my neighbor was staring at me. "I'll watch over her at school, too, mister."

"Thanks. That's a big help."

"It's nothing, really."

*"Time to win those points, huh? Put yourself out there!"*

"Abaddon, please be quiet."

I felt bad burdening a child like my neighbor with this. Recently, she'd been depending on Ms. Futarishizuka for food, clothing, and housing, as well as her status in society. This wasn't the unconditional love a child gets from her parents, either—her current lifestyle was based on an adult relationship of mutual benefit. And she was sharp enough to understand that.

And now, too, she was showing mature consideration for my position. I couldn't help the pang of guilt brought on by Abaddon's comment.

"He may be talking a big game," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka, "but your beloved father here was going gaga over a colleague over a decade younger than him, you know. She almost took him straight home after the welcome party. Is this his romcom story arc? Is this late bloomer finally hitting his stride?"

The grandmother, meanwhile, was saying whatever she liked. Maybe the stress was starting to get to her.

"I am shocked. Father has already gone further than the youngest daughter?"

"What?!" exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki. "Is... Is that true?"

"Oh?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Does the patriarch's adultery interest you?"

"N-no, not really. But Sasaki is... Well, he's, uh... He seems oddly uninterested in all that, so..."

"As the eldest daughter, I ask that you refrain from troubling the family like

this.”

“Could you please phrase things so as not to cause so many misunderstandings, Ms. Futarishizuka?” I said.

“In that sense, I would be another candidate for Sasaki’s mistress,” added Lady Elsa, murmuring under her breath as though talking to herself. *Oh boy. I wish she hadn’t said that.*

“Hm? What do you mean?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “I’d like details, if you please.”

“Oh! Um, I’m sorry. I can’t say any more than that,” said Lady Elsa, flustered, clapping her mouth shut. She wasn’t supposed to speak about otherworld affairs.

But others voiced follow-up remarks.

“Father has abandoned Mother and is attempting to have an illicit affair with a neighborhood woman,” said Type Twelve. “This is a matter of grave import.”

“I am doing no such thing,” I replied.

“Um, I’m... I’m sorry,” said Lady Elsa. “I know that a woman in my position must be respectful to your primary wife. I didn’t mean to imply anything. Please, I would appreciate it if you all forgot what I just said...”

Lady Elsa was very flustered. She was an honest girl at heart. She couldn’t act to save her life. I was sure she hadn’t made the remark on purpose; it had probably just slipped out accidentally. In the otherworld, more nobles than not had mistresses.

“Honey?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “You know you have me already, don’t you? What do you think you’re doing?”

“You always pick the worst times to start getting into character,” I replied. “Please stop.”

“But I almost never get the chance to tease you when it comes to this stuff,” she insisted.

“As the mother-in-law of the household,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “I support this new wife wholeheartedly.”

“You’re saying that on purpose, aren’t you?” I said. “You used that translator to listen in on Lady Elsa and Peeps. You must know what’s really going on here. I don’t think further discussion would benefit anyone.”

“Ugh. Rain on my parade, why don’t you.”

“So in the end, it was all Futarishizuka’s wild delusions,” declared Miss Hoshizaki.

“Delusions? How rude! It’s the truth.”

*“I can tamper with this whelp’s brain if you need,”* Peeps suggested, looking at me. *“Would you like me to?”*

“What? That’s terrifying! Don’t let him! Please!”

Ms. Futarishizuka settled down after Peeps’s warning. Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor shot her suspicious glances, but everyone dropped the topic.

Meaning to move the conversation along, I reached for the TV remote on the table. Prime-time anime programming was about to start.

But just as I moved, the phone in my pocket started buzzing. I checked the screen and saw our boss’s name.

“Hello, this is Sasaki.”

*“It’s Akutsu. Do you have a moment?”*

“Yes, sir. Go ahead.”

*“It’s regarding the matter of your former neighbor—the one currently under your protection. I wanted to let you know that your advocacy for her has borne fruit.”*

“Thank you, sir. I’ll tell everyone right now.”

*“Please do. That was all I had to say.”*

I was only on the call for thirty seconds before he hung up. As always, the chief was all business, all the time.

“Is it your job, mister?” asked my neighbor.

“Ugh, at this hour?” muttered Futarishizuka. “That’s crap. Utter crap.”

“There’s news from the higher-ups regarding the proxy war,” I said, turning to my neighbor and Abaddon. “It looks like we’ve secured your safety.”

The demon piped up right away. *“Thanks. Now my partner should be able to walk around at night without quaking in fear the whole time.”*

“Thank you, mister,” my neighbor added. “You’ve done a lot for us. And Abaddon, I don’t like how you put that. I don’t think I’ve ever ‘quaked in fear’ at night.”

“I was only the middleman,” I assured her. “It was no trouble.”

*“You’ve been helping us so much lately,”* said Abaddon. *“You didn’t kill any Disciples, so I can’t grant you a reward, but if there’s anything else I can help you with, just let me know!”*

“No need. You’re already doing more than enough regarding Type Twelve’s school transfer.”

*“Yeah? Well, I still don’t think it all adds up.”*

“Don’t forget that, as I said before, this is on the condition that you don’t target any other Disciples. If you wind up facing one by pure coincidence and have to fight, I’d like a report after the fact, if possible.”

“I understand,” said my neighbor. “If that happens, we’ll contact you as soon as we can.”

*“Oh, hey. That means you’d better get his contact info, doesn’t it?”*

“...Mister, um, about that...”

“You’re right,” I said. “I won’t force you, but if you don’t mind...”

“Y-yes! Please!”

Nothing screamed “danger” more loudly than having a minor’s number in your personal phone’s address book. So, instead, I took out my work phone. Now I could say it was part of my job.

As I worked on this, Ms. Futarishizuka looked at Abaddon and said, “There’s something about the death game I’ve been curious about, actually.”

*“What’s that?”* asked the demon.

“The youngest daughter’s points of contact and terminals are treated as biological life inside isolated spaces, just like humans. But memory media from the mechanical life-form’s civilization get treated the same way as our smartphones.”

“You mentioned that when we were trying to get off Miyakejima, didn’t you?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Indeed, I did. What I want to know is, where does the system draw the line?”

When you left an isolated space, everything inside reverted to its former state; it was like nothing had ever happened. One of the few exceptions was the memories of the game’s participants. And during the last game, we’d seen that the same principle applied to the mechanical life-form’s terminal.

But judging by what Ms. Futarishizuka had asked, it seemed that not all devices produced by the mechanical life-forms worked in the same way. Some of them had their data rewound, just like our own communication devices.

*“Hmm... All right. I suppose I could tell you, if you wanted to use your reward for it.”*

“Ah. Then knowing about the system gives one an advantage in the game itself, does it? I can see the appeal in knowing, but I’m holding on to my reward for something in particular.”

She glanced in my direction. She was probably telling me to get a move on with the Prince Lewis affair.

I already had an idea about the line between organic and inorganic life, and using a reward to get the information seemed like a waste. If I ever ended up in an isolated space again, I could check my hypothesis. With Lady Elsa’s help, I bet I could replicate it.

“Anyway, could I turn on the TV?” asked Miss Hoshizaki. “There’s something I want to watch.”

“Here’s the remote.”

“Thanks, Sasaki.”

About the time I finished trading contact info with my neighbor, the TV flicked

on. Hoshizaki scrolled through the channels rapidly, landing on an anime that started this autumn.

“Isn’t this the one Ms. Futarishizuka was saying good things about?” I asked.

“I didn’t know you watched it, too,” she said.

“It’s better than anything else this season,” our senior replied.

“Really? For a high school girl, I suppose you do have some sense.”

Everyone turned their attention to the TV. When the episode finished, our family time came to an end.



Once our pretend family duties were over, it was time for another trip to the otherworld. Like our family dinner, this visit was our first in three days.

First, Peeps warped Lady Elsa and me to Allestos. We landed in the court minister’s office—my room in the royal castle. From there, we headed to Count Müller’s private chambers, where we gave our regular report.

“Count Müller, I’m terribly sorry for asking the same question of you again, but have plans been made for Prince Adonis’s triumphant return yet? A rough estimate would be fine. I’d like to integrate it into my plans.”

“No, I think he’ll need more time yet.”

“I see, sir.”

“You’ve been curious about His Majesty’s return for some time. Has something happened?”

As always, we sat on a pair of sofas as we chatted. Count Müller and Lady Elsa sat next to each other across from me, and Peeps was perched on a little tree atop the table in between.

Today, though, I was a little bit nervous. The reason was what I was about to tell the count.

“Well, sir, since you asked, there is something I’d like to inform you of in advance.”

“These days, it’s rare for you to act so formal with me, Lord Sasaki. What is it?”

“Sir, I may have found a way to restore Prince Lewis.”

“What...?” Count Müller froze in astonishment.

The elder prince had been turned into a lump of flesh thanks to an otherworld spell. The only way I could think of to cure him was with a reward gained in the angel-demon proxy war, and Ms. Futarishizuka had just given me the green light.

“Little bird, is Lord Sasaki telling the truth?”

*“He is indeed,”* nodded the Java sparrow from atop his perching tree.

Peeps seemed a little plumper lately, probably because of all the meat he’d been eating. He said he used magic to deal with all the extra food—far too much for any sparrow to fit down their gullet—but maybe he’d let himself go a bit. Personally, I wanted to see him all round and fat. *Maybe I’ll secretly increase the amount of meat I give him for dinner.*

*“Incidentally, I am not involved in this matter. Please understand this is the result of this man’s hard work on your behalf back in his own world. Though I cannot guarantee results, I believe this method is worth trying.”*

“Lord Sasaki, you’ve done all this just for the sake of our kingdom?”

“You and King Adonis have both treated me extremely well, sir.”

“Even so, our efforts pale in comparison to what you have done for us.”

We had another of our usual exchanges—the count bowed low, I asked him to raise his head, and so on and so forth. The rotting-flesh curse must have been truly terrible. Then again, the Lord Starsage himself had all but given up on reversing its effects.

“In any case,” I said, “I wanted to discuss the matter with you. Could you arrange a meeting between King Adonis and me? There’s a possibility Prince Lewis may need to come to our world, and I don’t believe I should bring him there without asking.”

I ran through future plans in my mind. I wanted to set things up so that the



actual curse removal could happen in either world. Based on the angels' and demons' names, they seemed indigenous to Earth, and there was no guarantee Abaddon's demon powers would work here.

"Is there no way we can do this without informing His Majesty?" asked Count Müller, his tone formal.

*"I am in agreement with Julius. Though I am optimistic, should this resurrection fail, I would rather not raise Adonis's hopes only to shatter them. Why don't we wait to inform him until Lewis's curse has been successfully removed."*

Peeps was always ready to chime in with support. I thanked him generously in my heart. If we failed, we'd need to console Prince Adonis, and the king was currently on a crucial mission.

"I agree," I said. "Let's proceed as you suggested, then."

"I'll have everything prepared by your next visit. Would that be all right?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you for taking the trouble."

"I should be thanking you, Lord Sasaki. You've helped us so much."

After parting ways with Count Müller, we set off for the Republic of Lunge that same day. There, we visited Mr. Joseph and sold the Kepler Trading Company some diesel fuel—nothing to write home about. They reported that everything was going smoothly for them and the Marc Trading Company. In addition, I collected a detailed write-up covering my sales from the previous visit. An insane amount of money was written on the slip.

We accepted Mr. Joseph's hospitality that evening as usual and stayed the night in Lunge. The next day, we left the Republic—and with that, our work was finished.

From there, we went back to Baytrium in the Kingdom of Herz, where I spent my remaining time relaxing with Peeps. I was curious about how the trade route was coming along, but not much time had passed since my last visit, so I assumed they wouldn't have too much to show me. Instead, I used my time to practice horseback riding.

*“At least you’re no longer likely to embarrass yourself in front of others.”*

*“Relieved to hear it, Peeps.”*

*“But you’ll need to keep at it if you hope to make use of the skill. If it is a matter of ceremony, you are only required to stay atop the horse, but if you wish to travel any distance, you will need much more work. Keep that in mind as you practice.”*

*“In that case, I’d like a partner who can be with me for a long time.”*

*“Yes, perhaps it would be best to find you a horse of your own soon.”*

After spending all my available time practicing, I eventually learned how to turn. When the animal finally moved according to my instructions, I was moved beyond my wildest imagination. Considering how they used to throw me off their backs immediately, this was a major milestone.

*If I told Ms. Futarishizuka I learned how to ride a horse before learning to drive a car, she’d probably punch me in the face.*

On our last day, we went to pick up Lady Elsa at the castle and headed back to modern Japan.



With my visit to the otherworld behind me, it was time to get back to work as a bureau employee.

I left Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa first thing in the morning and headed to school. After homeroom, I taught math class for each grade. Since it was one of the five main subjects, it kept me pretty busy. I had to mark up homework, too.

*I might have to start bringing my job into the otherworld soon.*

Plagued by this unpleasant thought, I fought hard to wrap up my tasks before work hours ended.

I wanted this life of teaching to end as soon as possible. Having to get up at six AM every morning was really rough. It was awful—so awful it made me wonder if the true talent needed to be a teacher was simply being able to wake up early day after day.

Having to simultaneously deal with time speeding up in the otherworld felt like a mean prank from some divine being.

Type Twelve, on the other hand, was loving her time at school. From what I could tell as her teacher, she was getting along great with her classmates. But that meant we'd likely be stuck here a while. I mulled this over as afternoon break began.

"Ah, Saturday afternoons," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "What bliss. I love half days."

"It's a good thing neither of us have to deal with club activities at the moment," I said.

"You're going to jinx yourself, you know."

"If that was a joke, I'm not laughing."

I sat in the faculty room exchanging light banter with Ms. Futarishizuka, the bento box before me courtesy of her chef. Now that I was working from sunup to sundown, this was my only pleasure. The lunches her staff prepared were quite luxurious, too—they commonly contained spiny lobster and roast beef.

Back in Tokyo, you'd have to reserve this type of lunch days in advance, and it would probably cost around ten thousand yen.

"You two always have such expensive-looking lunches," remarked Miss Inukai. "I'm not sure that even counts as a bento box anymore."

"I am very jealous! Please share the pointy lobster!" exclaimed Captain Mason.

The two of them usually came over to our desks to join us for lunch. Their food was incredibly average: a bento box and savory snack bread they'd probably gotten from the convenience store. *Ah, yes, I was like you two once*, I thought in a silly, wistful way.

"Please," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "You're not children. Eat lunch at your own desks."

"I think lunchtime is a fun chance to talk with work friends!" exclaimed the captain.

“I’m sorry, um... Mr. Robert asked me to come along, so here I am,” added Miss Inukai bashfully.

But our peaceful meal didn’t last very long.

A moment later, we heard an explosion in the distance. Immediately, my work phone started buzzing in my pocket. I checked the screen and saw my boss’s name.

“Oh, I have a *very* bad feeling about this,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“What a coincidence. Me too,” I replied.

Soon, all the teachers in the faculty room were talking about the blast. Ignoring them, I answered my boss’s call.

*“Sasaki, some of our people are in combat with a magical girl. I want you to back them up at once.”*

“Is that what that was? We heard an explosion all the way over here.”

*“Yes, that’s correct.”*

“All right. I’ll head over straight away.”

The call was brief. As I put the phone back in my pocket, I turned my attention to Ms. Futarishizuka.

“That was Mr. Akutsu,” I told her. “He wants us to head to the scene immediately.”

“I’d like to have lunchtime to relax, at least,” she whined.

“It seems a magical girl has appeared. He probably wants to make use of your power.”

“What? Now you’re gonna hand the job over to me?”

“No, I’ll go with you. I’m not sure if we should go dressed like this, though...”

We couldn’t simply go out in broad daylight and start shooting strange powers at one another. It wasn’t clear if the bureau had secured the area yet. If we didn’t take proper precautions, we could endanger our role as teachers.

A moment later, Miss Inukai and Captain Mason’s phones started buzzing.

After receiving their orders, they turned to us and explained.

“I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Sasaki,” said Miss Inukai.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because our people aren’t strong enough to avoid troubling the two of you.”

“Have they already responded?”

“We received a message from those watching the route to school. They engaged in combat with a group of unknown psychics.” Miss Inukai looked at her screen as she spoke. “Then a magical girl appeared, and now she’s attacking every psychic she sees. It seems our people are prioritizing the fight and haven’t been able to evacuate the scene or set up barricades yet.”

“It looks like your friends and mine are already responding!” said Captain Mason.

Evidently, they’d gotten the details via text message. By our “friends,” the captain probably meant other bureau employees.

“Assistant, quick question,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Can you send the blue girlie into the fray with us?”

“Oh! Do you plan on having them fight?”

Lately, Ms. Futarishizuka had been calling Captain Mason “Assistant” at school. It didn’t sound too odd, considering he *was* her assistant language teacher.

“But won’t that make Magical Pink hate you, Ms. Futarishizuka?” I asked.

“I was hoping the blue girlie might persuade her,” my colleague replied. “But I suppose that’s asking for the moon.”

“If I remember correctly, we heard during the Kraken incident that she and the other magical girls have known each other for a while. And yet she’s still going around hunting psychics. Don’t you think they’ve already tried and failed?”

The yellow magical girl had once fought alongside Magical Pink. I wasn’t clear on the girls’ relationships, but it seemed like they were friends. And Magical

Pink had been desperate to save Magical Blue while we were trying to take down the Kraken.

“What are you talking about, Mr. Sasaki?” asked Ms. Mochizuki. “Is this about some video game you’re all playing?”

“Yes, something like that.”

Class 1-A’s assistant teacher came over to us as we were talking. But after glancing at our desks, she raised her voice in shock.

“What’s this?! Why do your lunches look like they cost a small fortune?!”

“Um, I think the principal was looking for you, Ms. Mochizuki,” said Miss Inukai. “It sounded urgent. Could you go check? He asked me to pass along the message if I saw you.”

“Oh yes! Thank you! I’ll go see him right away.”

Miss Inukai had cleverly gotten Ms. Mochizuki to leave the room. Since the principal knew what was going on, I figured he’d come up with something convincing. As one might expect from a National Defense Academy graduate, Miss Inukai dealt with such situations quickly and with great skill.

With the assistant teacher out of the picture, my colleague muttered, “Fine, then. Time for my trump card.”

“Do you have a plan?” I asked.

“Come with me for a minute.”

*Oh, there is no way we’re getting back before dinner,* I thought. I hastily shoved the last of the roasted spiny lobster into my mouth and got up. I wished I’d eaten it first instead of saving it for last—then I could have savored it.

I followed Ms. Futarishizuka out to the employee parking lot. In the trunk of her car, she’d stowed away a sailor uniform and a helmet, a bizarre set of horns, and a huge makeup kit that looked like something a pro would use on a film set. I’d seen all of these items before. Together, they made up the costumes for the Masked Sailor and the Demonic Middle Manager.

“Let’s get changed and head over there pronto,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“...You really like this Masked Sailor thing, don’t you?”

“Do you know how many chances I get to wear a sailor uniform in front of other people? Not many.”

“I see.”

“I’m actually pretty popular online.”

“You’ve been searching for yourself?”

“Yeah, and? What are you gonna do? Sue me?”

“No...”

“Anyway, it’s time for our transformation!”

“Won’t it take time to do the makeup?”

“Not to worry. I’ve called in some help.”

She stepped away from the trunk and moved to the back seat. As she opened the door, I spotted a familiar silver Java sparrow.

*“Girl, what is the meaning of this abrupt summons?”*

“Peeps?” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“I contacted him while we were walking down the hallway.”

*“She told me you were in trouble.”*

The distinguished sparrow was sitting right in the middle of the back seat. He must have teleported here after Ms. Futarishizuka’s message. For the Lord Starsage, getting into a locked car was easy as pie.

“Thanks, Peeps,” I said.

*“Of course. What is the situation?”*

“Come on! Get into the car already,” urged Ms. Futarishizuka.

“All right.”

Following her instructions, I climbed inside. There, I donned my disguise. Ms. Futarishizuka’s car was extremely luxurious; it even had a curtain affixed to the rear windows, keeping us hidden from view. Of course, Futarishizuka was still in

her underwear next to me, but I averted my eyes until she was dressed again.

Once we were done, a motorcycle appeared in the school parking lot, its big engine rumbling. Astride it was a familiar old gentleman—the same one who ferried my neighbor to and from school. He was tall and dressed in a suit and tie, and he looked right at home atop the rugged bike with its long, low body. I sincerely wished I would look half as cool when I was his age.

As we exited the car, he parked the motorcycle in front of us. Then he got down and handed Ms. Futarishizuka the key. Evidently, even bikes used smart keys these days.

After taking it, the Masked Sailor announced in a booming voice, “Time to set off!”

“But there’s no back seat on this thing,” I said.

“What do you mean? It extends all the way to the rear fender. See?”

“Are two people really supposed to fit on this? I don’t see any seatbelts.”

“Ugh! Just get on! Why would a motorcycle have seatbelts?”

At her urging, I eased myself onto the bike. She opened the throttle, and the vehicle lurched forward. I felt like my whole body was being pulled back. Panicking, I put my arms around Ms. Futarishizuka to stop myself from falling. I also employed a little flight magic to keep myself upright—otherwise, I would have been toast.

And with that, we zoomed down the road and away from school.



After only a few minutes on the motorcycle, we were in sight of the commotion. The scene was near a parking lot about two or three hundred square meters large.

We turned off the two-lane national highway down a T-shaped intersection with no light and proceeded along a side road. At last, we reached a gravel-filled plot surrounded by a rusty fence and tall weeds. I couldn’t spot any lines demarcating parking spaces. It was the sloppy kind of lot you find in the country



where there was more land than anyone knew what to do with.

Just as the boss had said, it appeared that combat had already begun nearby. I could see telephone poles on the ground, destroyed buildings, and overturned cars. Things were on fire, and the debris made it look like a hurricane had just blown through. I could see damage in other places nearby, too, suggesting the fighting had been gradually moving.

Still, things weren't as bad as when this happened in Tokyo. After all, there were far fewer people around. The road leading up to the scene was so small that it didn't even have a center line painted on it. There were only a few pedestrians—students on their way home and an elderly person out on a walk. Nearby buildings were sparse; in fact, more of the land here was dedicated to fields and parking lots. Cleaning up afterward would take much less work.

Nearby, traffic had already been stopped, and I didn't see any more vehicles or pedestrians approaching from the highway. When we entered the area, we'd had to show our IDs to a police officer.

My only other concern was people watching from nearby homes. But Miss Inukai's subordinates were already taking care of it. Dressed in camouflage, they were evacuating nearby residents on the pretext of a terrorist threat.

"Ah, and there's the magical girl," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Yes, there she is," I said.

"She's really going at it, isn't she?"

"Positively relentless."

The first thing I saw was Magical Pink, floating several meters above the parking lot. Surrounding her on the ground were a dozen or so people—probably psychics. It appeared the two sides had already attacked. Several psychics had perished, and their remains lay strewn across the ground—victims of the girl's Magical Beam, no doubt. A lot of the bodies had parts missing.

Magical Pink, on the other hand, was unharmed. Splattered with the blood of her enemies, she calmly floated in the air. She looked like a boss character in a game.

The psychics were broadly split into two groups—the first was composed of colleagues I vaguely recalled seeing around the bureau. A little ways away was a second group I didn't recognize. These must have been the unknown psychics Miss Inukai mentioned. It looked like the two had joined forces temporarily once the magical girl appeared.

Near the former group, I saw a few people in camo gear with guns in their hands—Miss Inukai's colleagues, no doubt.

The attacks coming from the ground were all aimed at Magical Pink. They came in many forms, such as flinging cars through the air with psychokinesis, hurling fireballs, and shooting guns.

But everything was blocked by her Magical Barrier before it reached its target.

The magical girl then fired her Magical Beam in retaliation, killing even more of her enemies.

Lately, we'd run into a lot of strong characters—angels, demons, and the nerd, for example. It was easy to forget how much one magical girl was capable of. Speaking in psychic terms, you'd need multiple people of rank B or higher to combat her.

Unable to sit back and watch this continue, Futarishizuka and I frantically rushed into the fray.

"Stop right there, magical girl!"

The Masked Sailor rolled onto the scene astride her motorcycle to the thundering sounds of its engine. She brilliantly slid the back wheel out, bringing us to a stop in front of Magical Pink. From a distance, I imagined we looked pretty cool.

"The Masked Sailor has arrived!"

Naturally, the Demonic Middle Manager—currently sitting on the tandem seat—was not equipped to resist his partner slamming on the brakes. Unable to hold out against inertia, I was launched right off the bike. From there, I tumbled onto the gravel and rolled for a bit.

"Oh no!" exclaimed the Masked Sailor. "The Demonic Middle Manager is

down!”

“And whose fault is that?”

It was a good thing she hadn’t been going very fast.

As I lodged my complaint with the driver, I hastily stood up and brushed the dirt off my suit. Just then, I noticed my horned hairband at my feet. The impact must have knocked it off. Frantically, I scooped it up and put it back on, then headed over to Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Well,” I began, “what’s the backstory for our battle here?”

“That one’s easy,” she replied. “The Masked Sailor and the Demonic Middle Manager have to fight on the same side—it’s what everyone’s been waiting for. Yesterday’s enemy is today’s friend. Faced with the appearance of a powerful, mutual foe, the protagonist and enemy general join hands in thrilling cooperation!”

“But our enemy is a little girl in a frilly skirt. Most people will just assume the Masked Sailor has turned to the dark side,” I pointed out. “I can see it now. Fans will turn against the show and light the internet on fire before the next episode even airs.”

“It’s ‘The Masked Sailor and the Demonic Middle Manager Versus the Magical Girl!’”

“Nice title. I hope you have a screenplay to go with it.”

“Doesn’t it seem like a lot of media these days is just corporations wringing money out of big-name titles?”

“The social commentary can wait.”

The people gathered in the parking lot all looked at us and our strange outfits; their faces seemed to say, “Who are these clowns?” They probably didn’t know what to do with us.

Then, breaking the silence, Magical Pink said, “I’ve heard those voices before.”

“Oh? Whatever do you mean, girlie?” said the Masked Sailor.

“It’s the magical middle-aged man and Futarishizuka.”

“No! Curses! The masked heroine’s identity is supposed to stay hidden until the last episode!”

Magical Pink immediately saw through our disguises. I’d kind of figured she would.

We’d eaten at the same table several times now. She knew our voices, so of course she recognized us right away. Our costumes were for outside observers, though. It didn’t really matter if Magical Pink and the other psychics knew who we were.

“What are you doing blowing stuff up out here?” asked the Masked Sailor. “Your timing seems suspicious.”

“I heard you all discussing things over curry. You said the alien would transfer into a school around here. I thought that psychics would come if I waited nearby. And when they did, I started killing them.”

“Ah, so this is all our fault...,” muttered the Masked Sailor.

“It’s not all bad,” I reminded her. “This isn’t some third party attacking the school or the students, at least.”

“Yeah, that’s what we’ll tell the boss!”

Things had stalled once the Masked Sailor and the Demonic Middle Manager charged in.

...Or so I thought. A moment later, someone took action.

It was the team of unknown psychics. They all floated up into the air and flew away in the opposite direction of the school. Apparently, they’d changed plans after seeing the Masked Sailor. Maybe it was a tactical retreat.

“Get back here!”

Without wasting a moment, Magical Pink chased after them. She wasn’t joking around—she was out here to hunt down psychics.

“Hey! Where are you running off to?!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka, breaking into a run. She couldn’t fly, but she could use her superhuman physical abilities

to hop between trees and rooftops like a rabbit. I was amazed. She could leap several meters without so much as a running start.

The bureau psychics followed the others, lifting off and giving chase. Evidently, they had a flight-capable psychic among them as well.

In the end, I was left behind, all alone.

*Would it have killed them to take me along? I'm a bureau employee, too.*

“.....”

The Demonic Middle Manager was left in the dust. What was he to do? Things were going way too fast, and he simply couldn't keep up.

The JSDF had eyes all over, so I couldn't use my otherworld magic. Ms. Futarishizuka had left her motorcycle behind, but I couldn't even ride a scooter, much less use a manual transmission. I didn't see any cars around, either. The JSDF seemed to have all come on foot.

I searched my surroundings, looking for anything I could use.

And that was when I spotted a signboard. It indicated that there was a horseback riding club right in this area.

“...That skill you taught me might come in handy after all, Peeps.”

Betting everything on a single ray of hope, this demon followed the directions on the signboard and ran for all he was worth.



The riding club turned out to be very close indeed, and I managed to procure a horse.

It went about as well as our requisition of the swan boat at Lake Kizaki in Nagano did—I forced the matter by flashing my police badge. The clerk was reluctant, but when I repeatedly told him lives were on the line and promised to repay him in full and then some if anything were to happen, he finally acquiesced.

Though I could have used more practice, the ride went very well.

The horse was more obedient than I'd expected, and I was able to make it move as I wanted. I got the feeling that horses in this world were kinder to their riders than those in the otherworld. Horses loved a pretty face, I supposed—that was something I'd learned on the internet.

Leaving the stable, we proceeded down the road at a good clip.

Using my company phone, I checked Ms. Futarishizuka's location, then set a course toward the pin on the map. Because the police had restricted traffic, I was able to ride along the road without worrying about cars. Even turning left and right at intersections, which I'd been worried about, went very well.

Thanks to the smooth ride, I arrived at my destination fairly quickly.

I found myself in a wooded area dotted with mansions on a lovely walking trail. The path was pretty narrow, just barely wide enough for a car to pass through. The unknown psychics had probably taken this route on purpose to evade the police and the JSDF. I spotted a high mobility vehicle stuck farther down the path. Thanks to my horse, however, I was able to pass it right by.

The neighborhood was surrounded by foliage, which conveniently hid me from the magical girl's view. Unfortunately, she'd already spotted the group of unknown psychics and commenced her attack.

The fleeing psychics had been completely annihilated. Every last one of them now lay limp on the road. Next to them was Magical Pink, splattered with blood.

Ms. Futarishizuka stood nearby, staring her down. The bureau psychics were gathered a short distance away, as if hiding behind my junior colleague. While they'd done their job and chased everyone out here, witnessing such an utterly one-sided battle must have given them cold feet. Plus, I imagined it was pretty tempting to stand back and rely on a colleague who happened to be a very dependable rank-A psychic.

"I have an offer for you," Ms. Futarishizuka said, addressing Magical Pink. "Let's call it quits for today."

"You're all psychics, too," replied the magical girl.

"Perhaps, but we're the *good* ones."

“You’re all the same to me.”

From Magical Pink’s perspective, it probably didn’t matter at all what company or organization a psychic belonged to. Her next statement was the simple declaration of intent she’d given us so many times before.

“I will kill all psychics.”

As my horse galloped toward the magical girl, she readied her Magical Beam. She thrust her magic wand out in front of her, pointing it squarely at Ms. Futarishizuka.

I wasn’t about to let her fire. The Demonic Middle Manager whacked his horse in the rear.

There was a sharp, painful-sounding *slap*. Immediately, the horse neighed and accelerated straight ahead—directly toward Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Take my hand, Masked Sailor!”

“Nwoooohhh?! ”

The horse cut gallantly between Magical Pink and my colleague. I reached my hand out to the latter, and she deftly grabbed it and leaped off the ground, settling quickly into the saddle behind me. As always, her reflexes were something else.

A beat later, the Magical Beam ripped through the air. It grazed the horse’s rear end and continued on behind us.

The blast range was narrow, so it didn’t hit any of the bureau members standing farther back. Instead, it shot into the trees and struck someone’s villa. There was a massive *boom* as a huge hole appeared in the mansion. I’d put up a magic barrier around us just in case, but the sound made a shiver run up my spine.

Miss Inukai and Captain Mason’s people rushed over to the half-collapsed building.

“Thanks for the assist, Demonic Middle Manager,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Masked Sailor,” I replied.

“Heh-heh, come on. You’re into this, too. Admit it.”

“Actually, I don’t think there’s much point in using our fake names anymore.”

“Yes, it is rather depressing that no one was around to witness such an awesome scene.”

I calmed the horse down and set it walking into a gradual turn. As it moved, I checked our surroundings.

The only other people I could see were JSDF members, Captain Mason’s colleagues, and the other bureau employees. None of the nearby villas’ residents were watching us. It was the off-season for summer resorts, so it was possible many were unoccupied.

Eventually, the horse came to a stop, and Magical Pink spoke.

“Don’t get in my way, magical middle-aged man.”

“I had to,” I said. “This woman is an important colleague of mine.”

“.....”

Magical Pink looked at me with dissatisfaction. She was serious. She was ready to hunt down and kill the other bureau employees.

From her seat atop the horse, Ms. Futarishizuka made a suggestion. “Haven’t you killed enough, dear? Aren’t you satisfied?”

“No, I’m not. I need to kill more.”

“I don’t know what happened to your family, but they must have been amazing people to make you want revenge so badly. Don’t you think your parents would be sad if they saw you going around killing people?”

“They’re not here. They won’t ever know.”

“They might be watching you from Heaven.”

“Heaven isn’t real.”

“Oh, isn’t it? You know angels and demons are real, though, don’t you?”

“.....”

Life after death was a myth. I knew that, and yet I found Ms. Futarishizuka’s



words oddly persuasive. Magical Pink seemed to think so, too, and a troubled expression crossed her face.

In the meantime, additional personnel arrived on the scene.

“Mr. Sasaki, would you be so kind as to let us take over here?”

“Captain Mason?” I replied. “And Ensign Inukai?”

“Changed your mind, have you?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “You must have, seeing as you’ve brought along the blue girlie.”

The captain, still dressed as a teacher, had arrived on the scene with a transformed Magical Blue. I’d heard a car engine nearby but never thought it would be them. *Didn’t he refuse our suggestion to send out Magical Blue back in the faculty room?*

“When I explained things to Lieutenant Ivy,” replied the captain, “she said she wanted to come talk to the other magical girl. And if she’s on board, then I’m willing to offer my assistance. We had the others show us here.”

“You all helped me through a dangerous situation,” said Magical Blue. “I want us all to get along if we can—you, Sayoko, and me. I know there’s something I can do. Please let me help!”

“That’s all well and good, but you can’t understand each other, can you?”

Ms. Futarishizuka was right—I hadn’t understood a word of what Ivy just said.

The captain smiled. “You’d have found out eventually anyway, so I don’t see any reason to keep hiding it. One of Lieutenant Ivy’s powers as a magical girl is the ability to communicate directly with others, even if they speak a different language.”

“Ah! What a fantastic power!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. “Quite suitable for a magical girl.”

Magical girls had access to several magical abilities—Beam, Barrier, Fly, and Field. Evidently, each of them also possessed other unique magical talents.

“I suppose we could call it Magical Communication,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“That’s exactly how we refer to it,” said Captain Mason.

I wondered what Magical Pink’s unique ability was. The bureau’s database had no information on it—nothing I could access, at least. I’d never seen her use it, either, so it remained an unknown. I wondered if Ms. Futarishizuka knew. Would she tell me if I asked?

“What about Japan’s magical girl?” asked Captain Mason.

“Oh, we don’t get along very well,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “She hasn’t told us. In fact, I expect she’d tell the blue girlie before she’d tell us. We heard they all keep in touch.”

“Who can say? I certainly don’t know.”

Unfortunately, it seemed my junior colleague didn’t have a clue, either. Captain Mason, on the other hand, seemed to have some idea but wasn’t about to tell us.

A moment later, Magical Blue’s voice echoed in the back of my mind.

“Sayoko! Please listen to me!”

I was perceiving her voice directly in my brain—literally. I could hear a string of incomprehensible English, but for some reason, it also sounded like my mother tongue. It felt kind of like the auditory hallucinations I’d get when I worked several days of overtime and my body started to go haywire. The association caused me to briefly break out in a cold sweat.

That stuff was bad news.

Magical Communication was terrifying.

“I see, I see,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “That certainly is magical.”

“She controls who is targeted,” explained Captain Mason. “I think she’s including you out of courtesy.”

The two magical girls spoke as we listened in.

We heard Magical Pink’s replies with our ears, the same way we always did. But since Magical Blue didn’t know Japanese, wouldn’t that make their communication one-way?

Captain Mason immediately explained. “Lieutenant Ivy’s mind is processing the words the same way it would her mother tongue.”

“Now that’s handy,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Even the mechanical life-form’s super-science can’t do that.”

“You mean the translators you were using at the theme park, right? We’re very interested in those.”

“They’re worth a bit more than the magic girlie’s secret, you know. And I doubt the manufacturer would allow us to share.”

The manufacturer was Type Twelve, of course. As Futarishizuka said, the mechanical life-form’s devices had almost the same effect as Magical Blue’s power. But the latter could be used without any preparations, making it a formidable magical ability.

The magical girls continued their exchange in hushed tones.

“Are you getting in my way, Ivy? You promised before that you wouldn’t.”

“I won’t get in your way. I know this is your thing, Sayoko.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I want to save you.”

It seemed like Captain Mason, Ms. Futarishizuka, and I were the only ones hearing the auditory non-hallucinations. I didn’t see anyone else reacting. They probably thought she was just speaking normally in English, though the fact that one of them was replying in Japanese was probably a little confusing.

“Okay. Then help me kill the psychics,” said Magical Pink.

“Some of these people are my friends. If anything happened to them, they’d be really mad at you. They don’t do things the way Japan does. You won’t be able to kill psychics anymore.”

“.....”

“I want to be friends with you, so please stop for today.”

The way she negotiated was quite mature. It was practically gunboat diplomacy. The fact she was a lieutenant only strengthened her argument.

In the end, Magical Blue's appeal had the desired effect on Magical Pink.

"...Okay. I'll go home for today," she said at last.

She whirled around, still hovering in the air.

Ms. Futarishizuka called out to her from behind. "If you're ever hungry, you can always come to my house."

"Why?"

"Because this old lady wants to feed you more curry."

"...It's not like I need it."

With a tearing sound, a pure black space opened up in front of Magical Pink—her Magical Field. She went inside, and it engulfed her. In mere moments, she was gone.



There was nothing more we could do at that point.

For the others with us, that marked the end of the incident. I heard people start to express their relief. The bureau employees had only narrowly escaped death; some of them slumped to their knees.

As all that went on to one side, Blue turned away from where Pink had been and faced us. “Mr. Sasaki, I have a question for you. Is that okay?”

“What is it, Lieutenant Ivy?”

Her voice sounded in my brain once again. It really felt exactly like when I was starting to lose it. *How utterly terrifying.*

“Sayoko called you a magical middle-aged man before.”

“Yes, people do call me that sometimes.”

“Then did a fairy task you with collecting the Fairy Drops, too?”

*Huh? I thought. What the heck is she talking about? What are “Fairy Drops”? I guess I just have to wing it.*

“Who can say? I certainly don’t know.”

“...I see.”

In the end, I copped Captain Mason’s line wholesale. And Lieutenant Ivy caught my drift and let the subject drop.

Being jostled around in the harsh company of adults really aged a person mentally, even a child like her. I wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing or a good thing, though.

Now that Magical Pink was gone, Miss Inukai ran up to join us with several men and women in camouflage. According to her, no students from the school had been hurt.

I was incredibly glad none of the kids on their way home had been roped into this madness. I didn’t know how much Captain Mason and Ms. Futarishizuka actually cared about the students, but I intended to do my best to protect them. That was my way of atoning for involving innocent people in all this.

“Actually, I had something to ask you, too,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“What is it?” I replied.

“What’s someone who can barely even drive a car doing riding a horse?”

“An acquaintance once showed me the ropes.”

“But they didn’t show you how to drive a car, eh?”

“I’m sorry. That’s still a work in progress...”

It didn’t take long for Ms. Futarishizuka to point out the irony in my mode of transport. But I had an excuse: It was actually really hard to find a driving school that accepted people like me—who had a license but never drove—year-round. And even the ones offering an applicable course had few spots available, and reservations filled up quickly.

I kept this to myself, however, and simply pasted on a smile and let the matter go.

After that, we pitched in and helped Miss Inukai and Captain Mason cover everything up, and by the time we were finished, the sun had set. When we got back to Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa, it was already dinnertime.



Our fake family’s rules were absolute. No sooner had we gotten back from cleaning up after the psychics and the magical girl than Type Twelve brought us—along with Lady Elsa, Peeps, my neighbor, and Abaddon—up to her UFO, which was still hovering in space.

It was time for us to sit around the low table in the Japanese-style house’s living room.

After we’d all had a moment to eat, Lady Elsa asked us what we thought of her cooking.

“Um, how is it? I hope it’s to everyone’s liking...”

Today’s dinner was composed of dishes from the otherworld made for us personally by Lady Elsa. The main course was meat, accompanied by bread, a salad full of colorful vegetables, and a soup that looked something like a potage. All of these were prepared from ingredients she’d brought here from

the otherworld, and they were all foods even I had never seen.

According to Ms. Futarishizuka, who helped, she'd managed almost all of it by herself.

"It has such a profound taste," she remarked.

"Elsa, what kind of meat did you use for the main dish?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"It's wy—kangaroo meat!"

That was a close one. She'd almost brought wyverns into the conversation. I'd eaten the creatures several times in the otherworld; from what I'd heard, they were quite pricy. Mr. French had cooked me up a wyvern steak at his restaurant once. He'd mentioned that they were expensive because they were so hard to catch.

"Huh? Wait, are you allowed to eat kangaroo?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Well, sure. They eat it all the time down in Australia," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Is that where you're from, Elsa?"

"Not exactly," said Lady Elsa, "but our food cultures are related."

This was an excuse she'd cooked up with Ms. Futarishizuka. We obviously couldn't tell the others the truth. *I mean, come on. Wyverns?*

Wild game made up most of the meat consumed in the otherworld; I was terrified of the infectious diseases and parasites we might get if Lady Elsa undercooked it. But if anything like that happened, I figured I'd just ask the Lord Starsage to heal us in our sleep. I'd already gotten his approval, so I was able to rest easy and enjoy the meal.

That was my contingency plan from the very start and the reason I'd allowed myself to chow down on all the best gourmet food in the otherworld.

"This soup is delicious," I said. "It makes my mouth all tingly. I can't get enough of it."

"Really? The flavor is a bit divisive, so I was worried you wouldn't like it."

"Well, I love it, Lady Elsa. And I think it goes perfectly with the meat."

"I am quite enjoying the soup myself," agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. "It has a



unique flavor I find rather addicting.”

“I’m really happy the two of you like it,” said Lady Elsa. “There’s enough soup for seconds. Please tell me if you don’t have enough. I can reheat it right away.”

Everyone else liked the food, too. One by one, they expressed their appreciation.

“I think I like the salad best,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “The dressing compliments it so well.”

“I agree,” said my neighbor. “The meat is great, but this salad is delicious.”

*“With so many colors, it must be full of nutrition. I feel healthy just looking at it,”* said Abaddon.

Compared to the meat, the side salad looked particularly otherworldly. Perhaps that was why each of the vegetables had been finely sliced so as to disguise their original forms. It kind of reminded me of coleslaw. The flavor seemed familiar to me, however—I was sure I’d eaten these ingredients before in the otherworld.

*“You said there is enough soup for seconds,”* said Peeps, *“but is there any more meat?”*

“Um, I’m sorry, little bird,” replied Lady Elsa. “There’s no more meat left.”

*“Ah, I apologize for asking the impossible.”*

“Oh, but you could have the rest of mine, if you want.”

*“No, I could never.”*

“You’re as much of a glutton as ever, you little sparrow,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Next time, I’ll get the same amount for you as I do for everyone else,” promised Lady Elsa.

“Come now. Isn’t that a little much?”

I was exhausted from the work I’d done for the bureau, and being able to eat as soon as I got home was quite soothing. Having people waiting for me with dinner ready warmed my heart more than I ever thought it could. I had to

admit, Type Twelve's passion for family made a little more sense to me now.

"Father," said the alien, "I observed psychic and magical girl activity outside of school again today."

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "We already resolved the issue."

"Huh? But wasn't there a shooting just yesterday?" asked Miss Hoshizaki in surprise.

Ms. Futarishizuka assumed an air of nonchalance. "And I would expect no less. With this robot girl's help, you could rewrite the political map. Plenty of people would make any number of sacrifices to get their hands on her. Whole nations could be destroyed in the process."

"Mother, please do not worry," added Type Twelve. "The youngest daughter will remain with you now and in the future."

"Oh, um... When you put it like that, I feel a great weight on my shoulders..." Miss Hoshizaki smiled, but I sensed a stiffness in her cheeks. Type Twelve seemed to be growing more attached to her every day.

Incidentally, the section chief had contacted me earlier regarding the identity of the unknown psychics. According to him, they were part of an international terrorist group headquartered in central Asia, unrelated to the nerd's group.

Their objective had been to kidnap my neighbor or one of her friends. They'd planned to forcibly bring her over to their side, then use her in negotiations with Type Twelve. The section chief told me this was a common pattern and promised he'd work even more closely with Miss Inukai and Captain Mason to guard the area around the school going forward.

*What a horrifying affair,* I thought.

As I cursed this new source of anxiety, family time came to an end. Afterward, I headed straight back to my cheap Tokyo hotel and quickly went to bed.



## <The Neighbor's POV>

On Sunday, Robot Girl and I go to our classmate's house. The blue magical girl is with us, too.

This all started when our classmates invited us to hang out, just as they had for the earlier welcome parties. Several boys personally reached out to us, so Robot Girl agreed at once. She's a total pushover when it comes to things like this. The blue magical girl and I got roped into it as well, of course.

We're supposed to meet at the house of a wealthy classmate—the same one who hosted the last welcome party.

After setting up in the living room, we start playing party games. Aside from the three of us, there are four boys and three girls—the same students who always hang around my desk.

"Whoo-hoo! I win again!"

"Why are the boys doing so well? Don't you think it's kinda suspicious?"

"Probably because the winner gets to tell the person in last place what to do."

"Who came in last?"

"Me. Heh. Sorry."

"Ugh, are you serious? What was all my hard work for, then?!"

"Oh. So that's why."

"I don't like how the boys have been looking at us."

"Yeah. Hey, if you say anything weird, we'll kick you out of the room!"

"I'll protect you from the boys, Kurosu!"

"Ivy, if you ever need any help, just tell us, okay?"

Come to think of it, I've never played video games with friends before. Honestly, it's not much fun.

Robot Girl, however, is having the time of her life. One of the girls has taken over managing the party and tells Robot Girl that she gets to replace the boy who just lost. As soon as she hears this, she happily reaches for the controller.

"My turn has come at last," she says. "It is torturous waiting when matches go

long.”

“Wouldn’t it be easy for you to win every time?” I ask.

“Now that I have learned the happiness of being sought after by others, the treatment reserved for the loser entices me more than the special privilege of the winner. I sense love behind the curious gazes directed at me. Ah, what a wondrous thing love is. It is truly a salve for the heart.”

“.....”

I think Robot Girl is getting love mixed up with lust. Then again, I hear plenty of women do that.

*“Personally, I’m a little concerned about the youngest daughter’s future.”*

Abaddon is with us, too. He floats right next to me, bobbing up and down like always.

He has hidden himself, so I can’t respond to his comment. It stresses me out having to listen to the demon’s sardonic banter in silence. But this time, I agree with him.

My main concern is how this will affect my relationship with my neighbor. I don’t really care what lewd things Robot Girl gets up to. But I know he wouldn’t approve.

“Okay, so Miyano, you got first place. Murata came in last, so you can give him one order.”

“Could you hop over to the convenience store and get some snacks?”

“Yikes. Plain, boring, and a pain in the butt.”

“Oh! In that case, I can come with you.”

“The convenience store... Wasn’t there a terrorist incident around there yesterday?”

“Wait, what?”

“I didn’t see anything on the news.”

“My grandpa lives nearby. He said he saw lots of police and JSDF soldiers.”

“For real? No way.”

“Don’t some of the kids at our school use that road to commute?”

They must be talking about what happened at my neighbor’s job. Yesterday at dinner, he and his coworker told us all about it.

Apparently, the blue magical girl was there, too. I steal a glance at her, but she doesn’t seem troubled in the least—her expression seems to say she knows nothing about it, and she smiles as she watches her classmates discuss the matter.

Her appearance and behavior make her seem innocent and pure, but there’s another side to her personality. From what I was told, she has the power to understand any foreign language. My neighbor warned me not to carelessly discuss secret information in front of her. She’s practically a spy. On second thought, there’s no *practically* about it.

“Hey, we have our off-campus class next week. Is everyone ready?”

“I’m so excited I bought a whole new outfit!”

“My mom bought me a bag for it.”

“Must be nice. My parents didn’t do anything like that.”

“Time to find a sugar daddy, right?”

“Oh, maybe I should.”

“One of the third-years apparently does stuff like that all the time.”

“As long as you’re a minor, you’re invincible!”

There are a lot of people here, and the topic changes come hard and fast. The video game is paused on the stage selection screen. Robot Girl still holds her controller, watching the TV and fidgeting.

Something they said has caught my attention, though: the words ‘off-campus class.’ Apparently, some sort of event is going to happen in the next few days.

Robot Girl visibly reacts to this news as well. Her gaze shifts from the TV to the other students.

“Excuse me,” she says. “I would like to know the details of this ‘off-campus class.’”

Immediately, the boys start explaining.

“Oh, that’s right! You just got here, Twelve. I guess you don’t know.”

“We go somewhere different every year, but we might just do skiing classes again like last time.”

“Isn’t skiing kind of passé?”

“Do you know how to ski, Twelve?”

A ring of boys naturally forms around Robot Girl.

She’s only been here a few days, and she already has practically everyone simping for her. The reason is probably her otherworldly beauty. Her features are particularly attractive, even compared to the blue magical girl. Obviously, she’s much prettier than me, too. She’s actually a robot inside, but only the transfer students and a handful of faculty members know that.

Meanwhile, the girls all start chattering about this off-campus class.

“Hey, you know that rumor? They say that on the last day of off-campus class, if you confess to the one you love, your love will bear fruit.”

“Didn’t Nishino in Class 2-A do that last year? That’s how she started dating Takeuchi, right?”

“Andou from Class 2-C started dating after off-campus class, too.”

“They’re both so quiet. It must have taken a lot of courage.”

“Hey, it’ll be our turn next! We’ve gotta do our best!”

The sharp-eared alien turns to look at the other girls. The night before last, she spoke about something similar at dinner. I hope she doesn’t come up with any more annoying ideas.

“Love will bear fruit?” she repeats. “I cannot ignore those words.”

“Are you interested, Twelve?”

“Hey, what about me? I’m available and quite a catch.”

“Doesn’t saying that now count as sexual harassment?”

“I want to know her type, though.”

“I bet she likes older guys.”

“Yeah, what if she isn’t interested in boys our age?”

“I am very interested in the concept of love. At present, love is my most crucial mission. I will spare no effort to obtain the most appealing romance. I would like to approach the matter with a wide view and not limit myself in regard to any specific attribute.”

This excites the girls.

“Wow, that’s pretty frank. You know the boys can hear you, right?”

“Wait, does that mean you’re already into someone?”

“Hey, for real?!”

“It couldn’t be someone in our class, could it?”

“Did they come here with you?”

“I’m so curious! Are they hot? Are they older? Are they an *adult*?”

“I have no specific partner. I would like to make the most worthwhile decision after a close examination of all potential options.”

Just as we discussed the night before last, Robot Girl shows great and awful potential for this sort of thing. I fear the day is near when she is surrounded by fuckboys and spending her days steeped in hedonism.



It was Sunday at last. Type Twelve said she was going to hang out with friends from school that day, and so Futarishizuka and I were released from our pretend family duties and free to enjoy our first real day off in some time. We

spent it lazing around at Ms. Futarishizuka's villa. It was the greatest day off ever. I didn't even have to worry about going to the otherworld.

Type Twelve and the others stayed out until evening, so we got together for our family dinner after sunset. In response to the favorable reception the day before, Lady Elsa took up her position in the kitchen once again. Today's meal was even more delicious.

Finally, the week came to an end, and it was Monday again. After arriving at work first thing in the morning, Futarishizuka and I headed for our desks in the faculty room.

"For some bizarre reason, I feel refreshed and ready to work," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"That's funny," I replied. "I've been in a lively mood myself ever since waking up."

It was probably all the good rest we'd gotten on Sunday. I was so animated I felt like I was a teen again and full of energy. In fact, I even felt up to a little dodgeball out in the schoolyard during our twenty-minute break. I wanted to run around the neighborhood for no reason at all.

Just then, Ms. Mochizuki approached us. "You two really have what it takes to be teachers!"

"Oh. Good morning, Ms. Mochizuki."

"I don't know about that," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "The little urchins have been treating me like a child for days."

"Teachers have to get used to starting pretty early in the day, or else they'll never be able to keep at it!"

"I did get the vague feeling that was the case, yes," I replied.

"Just two months ago, I regularly slept through the morning and woke up past noon," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Mr. Sasaki, if you want, we can plan to do something together before work each day."

"Oh, I don't think I can make it here any earlier..."



Ever since the welcome party, Ms. Mochizuki had been really aggressive about talking to me. Almost every time I saw her in the faculty room, she'd come over. In fact, she sent messages every day to my work number, as well. Most of it was about our jobs, of course, but there were a few more personal tidbits here and there. She was 100 percent in honey trap mode.

Just now, I'd only barely stopped myself from thoughtlessly agreeing to her suggestion. I very quickly shut my mouth. *What "something" could she possibly be suggesting?*

As I'd said to Futarishizuka, I felt awfully energetic for so early in the morning. In fact, I had the urge to go up to everyone in the faculty room and greet each of them individually. I had to consciously suppress the impulse. *What was this feeling?*

I was reminded of the time I'd felt an incredible lust toward my neighbor. This was weaker, but the sensation of it swirling restlessly in my chest was somehow similar.

"What's with you?" Ms. Futarishizuka asked Ms. Mochizuki. "Are you into men like him?"

"Calm, mature men are very enticing for somebody my age, you know," she explained.

"Isn't he just old? Who knows if he can even get it up?"

"It's a little early for sexual harassment, don't you think?" I shot back.

In the meantime, the principal arrived through the door at the front of the room, where the whiteboard was located. He walked a few steps toward the supervisor's desk, where the vice principal was sitting.

*The person behind him sure looks familiar,* I thought. It was a young woman wearing awfully thick makeup.

"I have an announcement," said the principal, looking across the room.

The entire faculty stopped their conversations.

He continued, gesturing to the one beside him. "This is Miss Hoshizaki, a new custodian who will be working at our school starting today. I doubt you will see

much of each other, but I hope you will greet her every day and work together to achieve a more harmonious school environment.”

“Hello, my name is Hoshizaki. It’s a pleasure to be working here.”

At the principal’s prompting, she bowed once.

There was no doubt about it. That was our coworker.

She’d shed her suit and tie for a workman’s clothes; she now wore a light green jacket and pants, each covered in pockets. It was the kind of functional outfit you saw on factory workers and the like.

“It looks like our dear senior has finally given up and swallowed her pride,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’m curious how she persuaded the chief.”

“I bet you’d like to push a naive high school girl like her into bed, yes? Or perhaps you’d prefer a boy. You’d greet her the next day like nothing happened, only to call out to her after school again...”



“Ms. Futarishizuka, could you please refrain from making any more comments like that?”

My junior colleague was really pushing it with the sexual harassment today. She was talking like it was the 1970s. Come to think of it, if people were that raunchy back then, what were they like in the 1920s, the 1880s, or the 1700s? Heck, what about the Warring States period or the Azuchi-Momoyama period? Was *everyone* thinking about sex back then?

I found myself surprised by my own thoughts. Where was I going with this? Why was I thinking about Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s sex lives?

At this rate, I couldn’t criticize Ms. Futarishizuka. Why was my mind spinning like this?

“Vice Principal, would you mind showing Miss Hoshizaki around the school? I have a meeting to get to, and I don’t think I’ll be back until this afternoon. Everything is as I mentioned in my phone call.”

“Yes, sir. No problem.”

After a simple self-introduction to the faculty, Miss Hoshizaki was pulled away by the vice principal. She glanced in our direction as she left. Our eyes totally met. Her stubborn desire to chase after any bonus pay she could get her hands on was honestly inspiring.

The principal followed the vice principal out of the faculty room, after which the teachers began gossiping.

“I’ve never seen such a young custodian before.”

“Neither have I. She must be about twenty.”

“She’s covering a lot up with makeup, but she’s definitely young.”

“Why the sudden influx of people anyway?”

“I’ve been curious about that, too.”

*Most custodians tend to be on the older side. Miss Hoshizaki sticks out like a sore thumb.*

We didn’t have another chance to see her after that, and then morning

homeroom began. I headed to Class 1-A at the warning bell. After that, I'd have to go around to various classes teaching math. A teacher's life was full of toil.



Once morning classes and lunch were over, it was time for afternoon break. The students all left their classrooms and scattered throughout the school.

We teachers, in contrast, gathered in the faculty room to relax. Today, though, Futarishizuka and I went to the administrative office instead. Apparently, forty or fifty years ago, a lot of janitors lived in the schools they worked for. Nowadays, places like night duty rooms and janitorial offices were things of the past, so janitors could typically be found in the administrative office.

However, our senior coworker was nowhere to be seen.

When we asked a clerk who happened to be there, she said the new janitor had gone to a nearby convenience store to buy lunch. I could imagine my senior colleague dashing out the door, eager to get to work, and totally forgetting to bring her lunch.

In that case, we could simply check her location data on our bureau-provided phones. We caught sight of her moving leisurely toward the school and decided to wait for her near the gate.

"Last week was busy, wasn't it? I hope today ends without issue," I said.

"Ah! You just raised a death flag! Now we're doomed. I bet you did that on purpose, didn't you? Didn't you?!"

"Could you say something normal for once? It's so hard to talk to you."

"Ah, stop! That's too brutal. It's even worse because I know you're right."

"I apologize. But I wish you'd stop making entertainment media references from generations ago."

"Urk... Flags...? They're still a standard meme, aren't they?"

*What's going on?* I wondered. Normally, I'd have hesitated to say something like that, but today, my mouth was moving on its own. I felt bad, but at the

same time, I was kind of loving it. Seeing Ms. Futarishizuka struggling to react delighted me. I started wanting to bully her even more. Her reactions seemed a little off, too.

Both of us had already finished eating our packed lunches—wyvern bentos prepared by Lady Elsa. She'd had some extra ingredients from the otherworld leftover and suggested the idea herself. She'd also put the soup Ms. Futarishizuka and I liked so much in thermoses. It remained incredibly delicious. Both of us had drunk every last drop.

"Oh, there's our esteemed senior now," said my junior colleague.

We watched as someone came walking toward us. Apparently, Miss Hoshizaki had gone out in her work clothes. Any other Tokyo high school girl would have taken one look at that outfit, called it old-guy clothes, and refused to wear it. Recently, I'd heard that more and more kids were choosing which school to attend based on how cute its uniforms were. Going against the times like this was so terribly like our senior.

"Sasaki? And Futarishizuka?" She seemed to notice us, and ran over. "Did you come all the way out here just to see me?"

"That janitor getup suits you better than I expected," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I'm sure you didn't go behind the chief's back to do this, right?" I said.

"Of course not. He was the one who sent me here."

Her outfit didn't seem to bother her in the least. She stood right in front of the gate as she answered my question.

"Last week, you guys were attacked by several other organizations, right?" she continued. "Some of the bureau employees were hurt, and I'm taking over for them. I am a rank-B psychic, you know. Got it?"

"Ah, I see."

"I'm sure you complained until he was forced to give in," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"N-no, I didn't!"

It looked like our junior colleague was right. Was this okay, though? Our senior was drifting further and further away from her life as a high school student, and that made me anxious.

“What about you two?” she asked. “Should you be loitering around out here?”

“Hey, teachers are free to use their afternoon breaks however they like,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Really? I didn’t think being a teacher was such a laid-back job.”

“It isn’t,” I said. “It most certainly isn’t.”

“Indeed,” agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. “After all, he has the pick of the litter when it comes to middle school girls. He hasn’t a moment to waste. He should really learn from his predecessor in the big house and enjoy the spring of youth to his heart’s content.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, is it just me, or is your sexual harassment much worse than usual today?”

“Do you think so? Well, I won’t deny that I’ve felt quite chipper since this morning.”

“You harass people more when you’re chipper?” asked Miss Hoshizaki. “God, you’re the *real* old man.”

Now that we’d met up with our coworker, we turned back toward the school building. But as soon as we did, we heard a tearing noise in the air. A Magical Field appeared, and Magical Pink popped out of it.

She dropped from several meters in the air like it was nothing and lightly fluttered down to the ground right next to Ms. Futarishizuka. A moment later, she readied her wand and performed some kind of magical-looking gesture.

Instantly, the scenery around her twisted. She’d probably turned on her Magical Barrier.

“Miss Hoshizaki, over here!” I called, immediately stepping forward to protect her. I deployed my barrier spell as well.

“What is the magic girlie doing here?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“They asked me to come,” replied the girl.

“Asked you? Who? What do they want you to do?” Ms. Futarishizuka remained detached and calm, but at the same time, she was maintaining a watchful eye on her surroundings and keeping up her guard.

We’d just battled with Magical Pink the day before yesterday. We’d been blessed with several opportunities to fight alongside her lately, but her main objective had never changed: She was out to eliminate psychics. There was a distinct possibility she’d go after our coworkers at the bureau. Our friendly relationship was thus extremely precarious.

“They told me to put my Barrier on you,” she said.

“Huh? What for?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

Contrary to my expectations, the magical girl had revealed something surprising.

Ms. Futarishizuka stared blankly, unable to comprehend. That Barrier was a tool for defense. And defending was a friendly act. My junior colleague, on the receiving end, wasn’t sure how to take the gesture. Miss Hoshizaki and I were just as flummoxed.

“They said if I listen to them, they’ll tell me where the psychics’ hideout is.”

“Oh, really?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “And?”

“If I know where the psychics are hiding, I can kill lots of them.”

It seemed like many different organizations were approaching Magical Pink—much like Type Twelve and ourselves. Considering how other magical girls were kept under tight guard by their respective states, I was sure plenty of groups were eager to endear themselves to this freelancer.

“But what will happen to me now that I’m in this Barrier?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I don’t know. They didn’t say anything about that.”

“That’s not very thorough of you.”

Come to think of it, the magical girl’s Magical Barrier had effects other than



defense—something it shared with my own barrier spell and a major source of headaches for us. I suddenly had a very bad feeling.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, do you think an isolated space is—”

—*about to appear?* But before I could finish my sentence, all sound disappeared from our surroundings.

“Oh, they got us good,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka, sounding fed up. “I never thought they’d ask the magic girlie for something like this.”

“Still, my neighbor and Abaddon are right nearby,” I pointed out.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they’re confident in how fast they can scurry away.”

Someone had gone to great trouble to ask the magical girl to drag Ms. Futarishizuka into an isolated space. She had to be their target. And if they’d used my neighbor and Abaddon to create the space, we were up against an angel and their Disciple.

As we stared out across the silent world, Magical Pink said, “I know this feeling. It’s the same as that island the other day.” She sounded suspicious.

“You sold us out, didn’t you?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I didn’t sell you out. I just did what they asked.”

“That’s a matter of perspective.”

“No use crying over spilled milk,” I said. “Anyway, we should hurry and find my neighbor and Abaddon. Depending on how strong the Disciple and their angel are, every second could put us in more danger.”

That bad feeling of mine hadn’t gone away—and soon, it turned out to be right on the money. An angel was approaching us from the sky.

“That angel with a bunch of wings,” said Magical Pink. “You all fought it before.”

“Oh, don’t act so innocent,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Maybe they sent someone other than the Disciple to negotiate with her,” I suggested.

“You’re right,” said Magical Pink. “Someone else told me about the psychics’

hideout.”

Little Mika, the tough-looking angel with six wings, was here. We couldn’t beat her—not in an isolated space, at least. We needed to meet up with Abaddon immediately.

“In any case, we need to retreat,” I suggested.

“Agreed,” said my junior colleague.

“Futarishizuka, you’re with me and a magical girl, and you still want to run away?” Miss Hoshizaki asked. “There’s only one of them. As long as we’re smart about it, we can take her down. I’m rank B now. If you just make me some water, we can put up quite a fight.”

“I think our esteemed senior needs a beating to knock her down a peg.”

“Miss Hoshizaki, that angel is on a totally different level,” I said. “Please come with us.”

Some enemies simply couldn’t be defeated, no matter how much one struggled. Peeps and the nerd were obvious examples, as were Abaddon and Little Mika when inside isolated spaces. They were in a different dimension in terms of strength. In a shounen manga, they would have been the main character’s master—unrivaled right from the start. Your whole family would have to die before you could have a chance at beating them. Miss Hoshizaki had no idea.

All the while, the six-winged angel was speeding toward us.

Magical Pink readied her wand. She must have been telling the truth when she said she didn’t mean to sell us out. At the very least, she hadn’t realized the one pulling the strings was an old enemy of ours. She’d simply accepted the deal because she wanted to know where the psychics were. And Miss Hoshizaki and I just so happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Little Mika descended right in front of us, stopping several meters off the ground. She looked down at our group, that familiar, overblown sword in her hand. “You’ve helped us,” she said to the magical girl. “So I have no intention of harming you. Don’t get in my way.”

“What are you going to do to the magical middle-aged man?” asked Magical Pink.

“I do not know of any magical middle-aged men. I am here only for that small human there.”

The angel’s gaze shifted to Ms. Futarishizuka. I was right—our junior colleague was the angel’s target.

“Why do *you* get special treatment from the magic girlie?” Ms. Futarishizuka asked me. “It’s not fair.”

“This is really not the time for that,” I replied.

“.....”

Magical Pink seemed troubled by what Little Mika had said. Ms. Futarishizuka was a psychic, someone she wanted to kill, not someone she’d risk herself to ally with. But perhaps all the battles we’d fought together lately had given her pause.

“But I am in a hurry,” Little Mika continued. “If you stand in my way, I will eliminate you.”

The angel swung her sword down at Magical Pink. The tip shattered her Magical Barrier in a single blow, just as it had my barrier spell. With a shrill noise, pieces shot out in all directions. It was as though a big glass window had broken, and each shard distorted the scenery behind it.

“Ngh...”

Magical Pink immediately pulled back but not quickly enough to avoid a small slice near her chest. Her brow furrowed in pain.

I’d taken a similar strike myself once before—and it had literally cut me in half. Little Mika must have been holding back because Magical Pink had helped her.

Nevertheless, she’d still injured the girl. She was a terrifying opponent.

“Stay there,” said the angel. “Or I’ll have your head next.”

She then lunged toward Ms. Futarishizuka, passing by Magical Pink in the

process. As she did, this magical middle-aged man finished preparing his laser beam spell.

I fired it without restraint at the six-winged angel, squeezing my attack down to the thickness of a telephone pole and setting it on a straight course toward her.

“Ack...”

“You two, head inside and meet up with the others!” I shouted.

My spell struck the angel’s sword. I’d put everything I had into that shot, and while it managed to knock the weapon from her hands, I’d done zero damage to the angel. When the beam hit her blade, she’d easily dodged out of the way.

“If they chose now to come after me, then they must have an informant at school!” complained Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’d say that’s pretty likely,” I replied.

It seemed I’d rushed things a little to protect my coworker, however. A moment later, the six-winged girl dashed at me, unarmed.



### <The Neighbor’s POV>

Right after lunch, during our afternoon break, an isolated space appears.

I’m babysitting Robot Girl in the classroom when all the lively commotion around me suddenly stops cold. At the same time, all my classmates disappear. The youngest daughter, who I’ve been keeping one eye on, and the blue magical girl vanish with them.

The only ones in the room now are Abaddon and me.

“Abaddon, it looks like a death game just kicked off.”

*“Look on the bright side—at least it didn’t happen during class.”*

My partner is right. We’re lucky this happened during afternoon break. No matter what action we take, if we move around in the isolated space, our position will change instantly as soon as it dissipates. To any classmates nearby,

it will look like I suddenly teleported.

But since we're currently on break, I have a few excuses I can use.

"We made that promise with my neighbor," I remind Abaddon. "We shouldn't take the offensive unless we're attacked. I don't feel their presence, either, so I suggest we hide and gather information this time. What do you think? I know you like rushing headlong into things."

*"Actually, I think that's a pretty good idea!"*

I decide to stay indoors for now. We exit the classroom into the hallway and move through the school building, keeping watch out the windows.

That's when I see several familiar figures near the front gates. It's my neighbor, Futarishizuka, and Makeup, and for some reason that pink magical girl is with them. There's a six-winged angel floating right next to their group. She has her sword at the ready; it doesn't seem like they're having a friendly chat.

"Abaddon, I take everything back. Reveal thyself, please."

*"Yup! Leave it to me!"*

The demon transforms from a young boy into a hunk of flesh in the blink of an eye. Then he expands, pulsing farther and farther outward. When he reaches a certain point, he splits into two separate chunks of approximately equal size. Each one floats into the air. The sight of these two grotesque meatballs lined up in the deserted, silent hallway is like a scene out of a horror movie.

"Please defeat that angel. Your first priority is to keep my neighbor safe."

*"Ah, what a refreshingly bold decision."*

At my instruction, one of the chunks of flesh rushes outside.

It rips through glass windows and reinforced concrete walls like they're made of paper. The impacts send pieces flying back in my direction, but the other chunk—the one that stayed with me—shields me from them.

With that one protecting me, I lift myself into the air and head outside.

Right before my eyes, my neighbor and the angel begin fighting.

A glow erupts from his hand like some kind of laser beam, and it knocks away the sword the angel was holding. The angel, now unarmed, moves to attack him anyway. She clenches her fist and sends it flying straight toward his head.

It's on a collision course, and I'm almost too afraid to look. But then the angel's fist stops an instant before hitting him, as if she just punched an invisible wall. My neighbor takes advantage of the pause, lifting his body into the air and pulling back. Thanks to the maneuver, the angel's attack only grazes the tip of his nose.

*"He's doing better than I expected."*

"Stop yammering and help him!"

*"Right!"*

I quickly reach the angel. Meat Chunk Number One, which arrived ahead of me, suddenly expands in midair and tries to engulf the angel's body. Keeping one eye on it, I rush over to my neighbor and slide myself in front of him. Floating next to me, Meat Chunk Number Two becomes a shield to protect us both. A moment later, I hear Meat Chunk Number One and the six-winged angel start to fight.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to get here, mister," I say.

"Not at all," he replies. "Thanks a lot."

When I look more closely, I see that the tip of his nose is a little red. It seems the angel's strike almost got him. My chest constricts just thinking about it.

I look at the others around us; the magical girl has a chest wound. It looks like a sword sliced her. It cut through her clothing, too, and I can see blood seeping from the wound.

The six-winged angel's fight with Abaddon is brief.

"Ugh. Even with everything set up for us, we still can't...," the angel trails off, muttering bitterly before quickly flying away.

Abaddon briefly moves to pursue her, but given how desperately she's fleeing, he decides to stop. He must have remembered the promise my neighbor made to his boss at work. I didn't sense any hostility from the angel

directed at us, either.

It must be true that there are people trying to control the angel-demon proxy war from the shadows.

Instead of me, they went after my neighbor, Futarishizuka, and Makeup. The thought of those people trying to kill *him* makes my chest feel like it will explode. In that case, I'd much rather they were just after me.



Right as we were attacked by the six-winged angel, my neighbor and Abaddon rushed to our rescue. Thanks to them, we made it out of the predicament safely.

Incidentally, the speed at which Little Mika withdrew after their arrival made me certain that the agreement I'd asked Mr. Akutsu to make with the death game Office was in effect. If I thought of it that way, I could say we'd gotten something out of all this, at least.

"I thought I was really done for this time," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Thank you. I mean it."

*"I'm just glad we could help out,"* said Abaddon.

"We might be to blame for this," my neighbor cut in. "So you shouldn't be smug about it, Abaddon."

"Still, you saved our lives," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Just let me say thank you."

We grouped up at the front gates of the school and discussed the situation.

Once he was sure the angel had retreated, Abaddon returned to his human-boy form. The two fleshy chunks smushed together, and the resulting mass writhed and pulsed until it formed the shape of a person. It was quite a thrilling sight.

"If you'd just produced some water for me," said Miss Hoshizaki, "we probably could've handled it alone."

"Someone *really* needs to give you a good beating, dear," commented Ms. Futarishizuka. "Perhaps our resident demon can oblige."

“May I ask who the angel was after?” said my neighbor. She looked at Miss Hoshizaki. “Was it you?”

“It wasn’t me. They were after Futarishizuka.” My senior coworker quickly turned to glare at our junior.

“I suppose even they wouldn’t be *that* stupid,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Wait, are you making fun of me?”

“Please. There’s no need to put yourself down like that. It’s not a good look.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“If they went after you, we might wind up with another crater situation. That robot girl can read the information on any network, remember? Their hideout could get blown up in two seconds.”

“Well, that’s... Uh, I guess that’s true. But still.” Miss Hoshizaki seemed frustrated by how easily our junior colleague had overturned her arguments.

Ignoring her, my neighbor began trading words with Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Is it because you refused their invitation to join them in the proxy war?” she asked.

“I suppose that’s possible,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“In that case, we’ve caused you a lot of trouble. I’m very sorry.”

“No, I made my own decision and chose you. You don’t need to apologize for that.”

“Oh, then you were actually telling the truth about it,” I remarked.

“Come now. Why the mistrust? Who do you take me for?”

My stinging comment came out almost automatically, earning a glare from her. I was about to suggest she could have staged the whole thing to get us to trust her and only barely managed to hold in the remark. *What’s going on? I’ve been in awfully high spirits all day. My mouth is flapping like it has a mind of its own.*

As if urged on by my remark, Miss Hoshizaki raised a question. “Then why would they attack you? What would be the point?”



“That’s unexpected, coming from you,” mumbled Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I mean, you wouldn’t die even if they killed you.”

“Hey. If you encased me in metal and dropped me to the ocean floor, I’d be completely helpless.”

“What? But who would do that? It’s so cruel.”

“Lots of people. In fact, someone tried something similar once before.”

“I, uh, I see...”

With this, everyone close to me, including myself, had been targeted at least once. Under normal circumstances, these overwhelming shows of violence, capital, and authority should have crushed us. But we were just barely managing to hang on, our lives suspended in a precarious balance thanks to our unique individual traits and backgrounds. I was pretty sure that if even one of us was missing, the entire thing would fall apart immediately.

I wished I could just give everything up and become a normal person. But I also felt like things had gone too far to turn back now.

“When the angel girl left,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “she said something about everything being set up, but they still couldn’t do it. What was that all about?”

“My guess is that since Ms. Futarishizuka lives so close to my neighbor and Abaddon, they haven’t been able to find a good time to attack her,” I said. “They probably chose to come after her during the day in the hopes that my neighbor would hesitate to act.”

“Oh yeah. That makes sense.”

*“She did sneak out during the lunch break,”* said Abaddon. *“I hope nobody saw that.”*

“There’s no point in worrying about minor details, Abaddon,” chided my neighbor.

*“I’m not sure it’s as minor as you make it out to be.”*

Peeps was at Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa, too. The angels and demons at Miyakejima had seen him, so if they viewed him as a threat, they’d stay well

away from the villa.

In the meantime, the isolated space disappeared. Noise and commotion returned to the world, and cars began moving down the road beside us again.

“Abaddon, could you—”

*“Already on it. Nobody can see us!”*

“Thank you.”

Remembering Magical Pink’s odd clothing, a chill ran down my spine, but hearing my neighbor and Abaddon’s exchange relaxed me. Like before, the demon’s strange powers had hidden us from the rest of the world.

Next to me, Ms. Futarishizuka’s attention turned from my neighbor to Magical Pink.

“There was something I wanted to say to you, magic girlie. Is that all right?”

“...What?”

Everyone else present naturally looked toward the two of them. Ms. Futarishizuka’s formal tone had piqued my interest.

“Even if I were to forgive you for selling me out, which I don’t, didn’t you consider what would happen next? If our senior coworker here had been caught up in this little stunt and kicked the bucket, the mechanical life-form would have gone crazy and showered the whole world in laser beams.”

“But nobody died.”

“Sure, you can say that now. But that wasn’t guaranteed to happen. You may be a child, but I know you understand that much, at least. If this hadn’t turned out so well, there would have been a whole lot more orphans like you. Would you have been okay with that?”

“.....”

Normally, Ms. Futarishizuka would have prioritized her relationship with the other person and kept all these thoughts to herself. Was this outpouring another result of our morning energy? My junior colleague sounded pretty worked up—wholly unlike her usual detached way of speaking. As a result, her

words seemed to carry a lot more weight.

“Take a look at this,” she said.

“.....”

A moment later, she had her phone in her hand and was tapping at it. She started a video and then held the screen out for Magical Pink to see. Curious, I went over and peered at the display. It showed a young child from the shoulders up.

Their cheeks were stained with tears, and their eyes were red and swollen. They were making some sort of appeal. “I’ll never forgive the one who killed my family.”

The clip only lasted ten seconds or so. But then another began playing, similar to the first—and then another, and another. All of them were children of about elementary school age. And all of them were facing the camera and grieving the deaths of their family members, each in their own words.

“...What is this?” asked Magical Pink.

“The children of psychics you’ve killed.”

“.....”

This was a very harsh thing for Ms. Futarishizuka to do to a child. Were those videos even real?

Actually, it didn’t matter. Even if they weren’t, I was certain that Magical Pink’s actions had created children just like them. It was very hard to imagine that every psychic she’d killed had been single and childless.

“Why don’t you stop hunting psychics already?” Ms. Futarishizuka asked.

“...No,” said Magical Pink.

“I think you’ve hunted enough.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You’re throwing quite the tantrum over losing your family, you know. Do you have any idea how many other kids out there are in the same situation? If all of them started killing people just because they were sad about their misfortune,

the world would come to an end.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said, “don’t you think that’s a little mu—?”

“It’s an adult’s responsibility to scold children who don’t know they’re doing something wrong. I can’t let her continue like this.”

It seemed my colleague’s remarks were having an effect on Magical Pink. She pointed the tip of her wand at Futarishizuka, not bothering to conceal her anger.

“...I will kill all psychics,” she declared.

“See, you’re doing it again. Taking your pain out on other people,” countered Ms. Futarishizuka. “It’s easy to excuse all this as revenge, of course. Too easy, though, don’t you think? All you’re doing is throwing a temper tantrum—one that’s hurting a lot of people. It’s only gone on this long because no adults wanted to scold you.”

“Shut up! You’re wrong!”

Magical Pink abruptly fired a beam from her wand. The magical middle-aged man hastily put up a barrier spell. Before, that had been enough to stop this attack.

But today, the magical girl kept firing. Her attacks hit the barrier with a series of *thumps*. After blocking several beams, my spell shattered, and the next one shot straight through my colleague’s shoulder.

“Ah! Ms. Futarishizuka!” I cried.

“Urgh...”

She emitted a low groan that sharply contrasted with her cute features.



“W-wait a second!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki. “We’re not in that special space thingie right now!”

She had a very good point. The beam that struck Ms. Futarishizuka continued past her, blowing through several tree branches before disappearing into the sky. If it had been a few degrees off, it would have hit the school building.

“Abaddon, make sure she’s protected,” said my neighbor.

*“Leave it to me! But outside an isolated space, I’m not sure how much I can do!”*

Naturally, we were all in a panic, trying to pull ourselves together to confront Magical Pink.

The magical girl, on the other hand, flew up into the air with Magical Flight and put some distance between us. Then, with a ripping sound, a pitch-black void opened up behind her. She’d used her Magical Field.

“I don’t care what you say. It has nothing to do with me,” she said.

Magical Pink glared at Ms. Futarishizuka so hard her forehead wrinkled, then she tossed herself into the void and vanished from sight. A moment later, the black tear closed up, and she was gone.

We waited a few more moments, but nothing else happened. It seemed she’d withdrawn for now.

I’d figured something like this would happen eventually. Any chance of a healthy relationship with her was now on the scrap heap.

*“Ack...” Oh, great, I thought. I forgot. If it was going to come to this anyway, I should have asked, even if I had to be forceful.*

“What is it, Sasaki?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

I’d wanted to ask Magical Pink about the mission Blue had mentioned—about gathering Fairy Drops at the behest of messengers from the fairy world. Now that I was firmly established as a magical middle-aged man, I couldn’t think of a good way to slide the topic into our conversation, and I’d hesitated all the way

until relations broke down. At this rate, I doubted I'd ever get another chance to speak to her.

"Graaaaah! I'm so frustrated!" shouted Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Um, what is it?" I asked.

A moment later, her attention was on me. "You, me, right here, right now!" she said. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"Excuse me? What are—?"

Before I could complete the sentence, she'd pinned me to the ground. She grabbed my collar and immediately pushed me down onto the sidewalk. Were those judo moves?

"Have you finally gone mad?" I asked.

"I just can't *stand* it anymore," she said. "That magic girlie is one thing, but *you* have been getting on my nerves, too. Every day, you pretend to be old and withered, always acting so detached and unbothered by everything I say. What are you playing at? I'm gonna tear that mask of yours right off. It's time you let me have some *fun*."

Her eyes were serious.

And her knee was poking persistently into my crotch.

No one had done anything, and yet it seemed her instincts had all but defeated her reason and restraint and were now running wild. At first, I thought she was just overexcited because of the wound in her shoulder, but she'd stayed calm through much worse injuries in the past.

And the same went for me, too. All it took was a little touch, and I felt my mood soaring.

*Oh, got it. Carry on.* Full disclosure, I almost said that out loud. All my senses were in overdrive.

She was acting strangely, but so was I.

Nothing made sense. Was this some kind of psychic attack? One that affected us mentally?

But how? Why?

“H-hey, Futarishizuka, what the heck are you doing?!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki. “Did you finally go senile?!”

“Just stay still. It’ll all be over soon. It won’t hurt much...”

“Abaddon, stop her!” cried my neighbor.

*“I could, but I think there’s a more fundamental problem at play here.”*

After tossing around the possibilities, I suddenly had a thought. If it worked, I could figure out the rest later. She was pinning me down, and we were so close our noses were almost touching.

So I used my healing magic on her.

“Please calm down, Ms. Futarishizuka.”

In an instant, her body glowed with a faint light.

The wound in her shoulder quickly began to repair itself. A chunk of flesh was missing, and blood was pouring out from the hole. But as I watched, the lost part began to reform and expand, then pale white skin formed over the top of it. Her torn clothes didn’t reform, but her physical injury was completely healed in only a few seconds.





A moment later, her behavior changed.

“...Huh?!”

“Are you yourself again, Ms. Futarishizuka?” I asked.

Her reaction seemed almost faked. Maybe she was just that embarrassed over what she’d done. And now that I had confirmation, I used a healing spell on myself, too. The excitement I’d been feeling since this morning immediately disappeared. My heart, which had been pounding so fiercely I’d been worried I was developing arrhythmia, calmed down in an instant, too.

“Could this have been due to the food my guest served?” she wondered aloud.

“I think so,” I said.

“I’m curious why our esteemed senior and the others weren’t affected, then.”

“Well, not only did we eat her food for dinner the last two nights, but we also had it for breakfast and lunch today.”

“Yes. I was feeling it this morning, but once this afternoon hit, I was basically going nuts.”

“And as a result, we’re no longer on good terms with Magical Pink.”

“That’s over and done with now. Little point in crying over it. And we would have clashed eventually anyway.”

We were still lying on the ground, our faces millimeters apart, as we spoke. It seemed we were in agreement on the matter, which made me increasingly confident we were right.

“Hey, Sasaki,” said our senior colleague. “Mind filling the rest of us in on what’s going on here?”

“I don’t know the details,” interjected my neighbor, “but if you’re back to normal, could you get off of him?”

The two of them were right; Ms. Futarishizuka and I got to our feet.

“It should all be clear soon enough,” I said. “I’m sure you’re all confused, but we aren’t entirely sure of the cause, either. Could you wait until dinner tonight

for an explanation? In the meantime, I'll verify my hypothesis."

"Are you sure you two aren't just going to find somewhere to hide and have, uh, s-sex?"

"If you're too embarrassed to say it, girly, then you shouldn't even ask."

Miss Hoshizaki's face was bright red. I felt embarrassed just listening to her.



That evening, Ms. Futarishizuka and I discovered the root cause of our strange impulses.

Just as we'd guessed, the ingredients Lady Elsa brought from the otherworld had been messing with our heads.

*"This is lumoné grass. It's sometimes used as a tonic or an aphrodisiac."*

We were inside the house set up in the UFO, holding a little meeting in the kitchen. All of us stared at the leaves piled on the counter. They were cute-looking plants shaped like Japanese wild parsley.

The only ones in the kitchen were Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, Lady Elsa, and Peeps. Since we were hiding the otherworld's existence from everyone else, we had to verify the ingredients in secret. None of them existed on Earth, after all.

I was sure Type Twelve, with her superior analytical technology, knew something of what we were up to already just from seeing Lady Elsa's clothing and accessories, not to mention the food she'd now eaten. However, she hadn't made any move to pursue the topic yet.

*"In small quantities, it only boosts your mood somewhat," explained Peeps. "While it is sometimes used in food, ingesting too much in a short time can dull your reason and cause you to act on instinct. It's active in much smaller quantities than alcohol, which has led to its usage as a base ingredient in truth serums."*

Peeps poked the bundle of leaves on the counter with his foot. *What an adorable sight.*

"I thought this was fingerpeal, little bird."

*"It is quite similar to fingerpeal but a different plant entirely. Your supplier likely mistook the two."*

"I...I'm so sorry! I've caused no end of trouble for you both..."

*The otherworld's ethics must be pretty lax if the ingredients to make truth serum are in regular circulation.* That said, any Japanese person could have gone to a pharmacy and bought stimulants just as powerful up until only a hundred years ago, and marijuana was steadily being legalized all over the world. For herbs like these, it was simply a matter of dosage and administration.

"Please don't let this get you down, Lady Elsa," I said.

"That's right," added Ms. Futarishizuka. "It's your supplier's fault for messing up, right?"

"Which dish did you add these herbs to?" I asked.

"Um, the soup. And you two seemed to like it so much that I put more of it in your breakfast and lunch today than yesterday. That was probably what did it, huh? I'm really sorry. I had no idea this would happen."

*"I apologize as well," said Peeps. "Had I partaken of the soup, I would have noticed before this happened."*

"No, no, I couldn't possibly expect you to do that."

My pet sparrow was a meat-lover through and through. Thinking back, he hadn't even spared a glance at the soup before digging into the wyvern meat.

We would have to tell Miss Hoshizaki and the others that it was normal to use ingredients containing the same components as narcotics in Lady Elsa's culture. In fact, we could use our location in Karuizawa to our advantage and claim Ms. Futarishizuka was picking mushrooms and made a mistake.

Even magic mushrooms, which were legally restricted, grew naturally all over the world. Something like a Psilocybin mushroom might even pop up in partial sunlight in someone's backyard—I remembered chancing upon an internet article like that during my days as a corporate drone. Just to be clear, I definitely wasn't looking for an escape from my unpaid overtime-induced exhaustion or anything. And anyway, you never knew what might come in handy later.

“Now that we know what’s going on, I don’t think it will be a problem,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“You’re right. And the effects seem to dissipate over time.”

I stowed the remaining herbs away in the back of the cabinet. Peeps and I could take them back with us the next time we went to the otherworld. They could still be used for medicinal purposes; I’d feel bad getting rid of them because of one bad experience.

Just as I was feeling relieved that we’d solved the issue, my neighbor appeared in the kitchen with Abaddon. Type Twelve was a little ways behind them.

“We wanted to talk to you about something, mister,” said my neighbor. “Do you have time?”

“Oh. Um, what is it?” I asked.

“Father,” said Type Twelve. “School will be holding an ‘off-campus class’ starting tomorrow. Because Kurosu and I are facilitating communication between Ivy and the other students, I believe we should be in the same group.”

“If you can’t do anything, I understand,” added my neighbor, “but she was very adamant about it...”

*Oh. That’s right.* An event like that *was* about to happen. A teacher’s life was full of toil, indeed.

## <Off-Campus Class, Part One>

The next day, the school's teachers and students boarded a bus together and set off from Karuizawa. Our destination was a ski resort in the Nagano area, where we'd be holding ski classes for three days and two nights. This was the so-called "off-campus class." All the first-years were required to participate, and every faculty member in charge of a first-year class had to attend as a chaperone for the students.

Ms. Futarishizuka was with us as well—in fact, so were Captain Mason and Miss Inukai. While they weren't in charge of any classes, they were asked to come along and assist. I suspected the captain had convinced the principal to let them. If anything happened at the resort, a rank-A psychic would be quite an asset.

Unfortunately, Miss Hoshizaki had to stay behind. I doubted even Captain Mason and the principal could think of a good reason to take a custodian along. Our senior had been very frustrated when the topic came up during dinner.

Our bus was now moving down the highway.

"Ski class! I can't wait! Mr. Sasaki, let's ski together!" said Captain Mason in his cartoonish foreign accent.

"Actually," I said, "I'm not that great at skiing..."

"Mr. Sasaki, if you're worried about it, I can help you," offered Miss Inukai.

"No, I couldn't ask you to do all that. I don't want to be a bother."

"So not only can you not drive a car, but you can't ski or snowboard, either?" Ms. Futarishizuka asked.

"I'm sure most busy office workers are in the same boat as me," I pointed out.

"Doesn't it make you sad to say that?"

“It’s no bother at all,” said Miss Inukai.

The teachers were all in the front row of the bus; we’d pulled out the spare seat so everyone could fit. We were lined up in the following order: Miss Inukai, Ms. Mochizuki, myself, Ms. Futarishizuka, and Captain Mason. Personally, I thought the small-statured Ms. Futarishizuka should take the spare seat, but she grabbed one of the regular spots with lightning speed, leaving me in the spare.

“Be careful,” Ms. Mochizuki warned us. “You’re getting a little too excited in front of the students.”

“My apologies,” I said.

“I am sorry!” exclaimed the captain. “I have never been to a Japanese ski slope, so I got a little carried away!”

Naturally, Class 1-A was in the bus with us, including my neighbor, Type Twelve, and Magical Blue. They sat in a cluster toward the back, also using a spare seat. My neighbor sat by the window, with Type Twelve next to her and Magical Blue in the spare. Many of the most popular kids in class were nearby.

“Twelve, you said you’ve never been skiing, right?”

“For real? Hey, I could totally teach you!”

“There’s gonna be instructors there, you know.”

“The teacher said that if you take the beginner class, you won’t get to ski at all the first day.”

“I would be glad to place myself in your care. I welcome everyone’s goodwill.”

“Huh. You sound pretty optimistic.”

“You look so cool and collected, but you get really worked up about stuff like this, huh?”

“That’s kind of cute!”

“We’ve never had a girl like you around before.”

“Speaking of, Kurosu is a pretty rare character herself, isn’t she?”

Type Twelve was being showered with attention, mainly by the boys. As she’d previously declared, she was now hard at work getting everyone in class to simp for her. My neighbor, on the other hand, seemed more friendly with the girls.

“Kurosu, do you know how to ski?”

“I bet when you’re rich, you can go skiing every day, even if you live in Tokyo.”

“Yeah. Like you can rent out the whole ski slope.”

“Or even have your own private ski resort!”

“A whole private resort? That sounds wild.”

“No, I’m not very good at physical activity...,” said my neighbor.

“That makes you seem even more like a princess.”

“Like a sheltered noble girl or something.”

“She’s into reading, remember? I knew she’d be the indoor type!”

“Hey, quit that. You’re just trying to find an in with her since *you* can’t ski, either.”

“Come on! Skiing is scary!”

With her designated interpreter—Type Twelve—busy prioritizing her own emotional cravings, Magical Blue seemed a little left out. She never tried to use Magical Communication, either. She simply smiled vaguely, looking a little frustrated.

*“The other transfer student seems lonely. Should we leave her be?”*

Abaddon was also on the bus. He was by my neighbor, floating horizontally up near the roof. He looked slightly cramped up there, which I found oddly adorable. The way he never left his partner’s side combined with his youthful appearance made him seem like quite a good-natured little boy. I was a little jealous. *If only Peeps could be with me all the time...*

*“Also, a few of the girls are looking at the youngest daughter very harshly.”*

Naturally, the other students couldn’t perceive Abaddon. My neighbor threw



him a glance every so often but never responded to any of his remarks. While I felt bad for Magical Blue, I pretended not to notice. *Some teacher I am.*

After about fifteen more minutes on the bus, my personal phone started buzzing. I checked the screen—it was a message from Type Twelve, sent to the family group chat. Unlike the rest of us, the mechanical life-form didn't need to pick up her phone to use it; she could directly access the data on the server. She must have sent the message without ever looking away from the boys lavishing attention on her.

The problem was the message's contents: She'd detected a convoy of vehicles pursuing our bus.

I flinched in shock. Without thinking, I looked behind us. However, all the other vehicles on the highway looked normal, and I couldn't discern which ones were part of the convoy in question. I'd have to watch them for some time to have any hope of picking them out.

Type Twelve had informed us earlier that she'd launched a terminal from the UFO and had it follow our bus from the air. That terminal had probably detected the convoy and notified her.

"We have a message from the youngest daughter," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"What should we do about it?" I wondered aloud.

In the meantime, we received a follow-up—Type Twelve believed it would be best if our pursuers were eliminated immediately. As I was struggling to think of a response, I remembered the person sitting on the other side of Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Mr. Robert, if I may..."

"If you're speaking of what's happening outside, please leave it to us! We already have eyes on them!" said Captain Mason, still in his cheerful assistant teacher persona.

"What? Oh, all right, then."

At some point, he'd put an earphone into his right ear. I'd assumed as much, but it seemed they had another squad accompanying us.

The bus sped up slightly as it traveled down the highway. The driver was probably one of their people, too.

A moment later, we heard a loud *boom* from behind. I turned to check and, through the window, saw a semi in the passing lane crash into the side of a vehicle trailing the bus. The target was a regular old compact car.

“Huh?! What the heck was that sound?!”

“It came from outside.”

“Hey! That big truck just got into an accident!”

“Oh my god! It crashed into a car!”

“Hey! Look behind us! There’s been an accident!”

“Are you serious?! On the highway?! Are they gonna be all right?!”

“Oh wow. They just slammed into the guardrail...”

The compact car swerved and crashed into the side of the road. The semi slowly decelerated, then turned, blocking off every lane to prevent any more cars from coming after us. Our bus, having evaded its pursuers, gallantly sped away from the scene.

Once he was sure the danger had passed, Captain Mason called out to the children. “Everything is okay! Please do not worry, students!”

The compact car was probably one of the vehicles in the convoy, which would make the semi driver someone with the captain. The latter made it through with a few scrapes and dents, but the former smashed into the wall and was totaled. I found his brutal judgment call rather terrifying.

“So that’s why Class 1-A’s bus was the last to leave, huh?”

“Yes, it was to keep injuries to a minimum in case of an emergency.”

As Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Inukai said, there were no other buses behind us. The school had made up some excuse to have them leave in reverse alphabetical order. I hadn’t thought much about it until now. Professionals were really something.

An idea occurred to me then. If we were already being targeted on the way

there, what would happen *during* the off-campus class? I was growing increasingly concerned.



The bus's occupants gawked and chattered about the highway accident for only a few minutes. After that, the bus continued along its scheduled route, and shortly before noon, we arrived at our destination—a ski resort in the Hakuba area, or, to be more precise, a nearby hotel.

I had to admit, our lodgings were absolutely gorgeous. As the students disembarked, they all looked up at the hotel and began talking.

“This place looks super expensive.”

“Are we really gonna stay here?”

“The upperclassmen said they stayed in a run-down inn.”

“I wouldn't call this an inn. It's a fancy hotel!”

“They showed me pictures from last year. It was really shabby.”

“Did they change locations?”

We'd be staying the following two nights at a resort hotel located conveniently right next to the ski slopes. We could even see them from our rooms. The building's distinctly Scandinavian design, with its red triangular roof, looked incredible against the huge piles of snow, all under a clear blue sky.

*This hotel seems pricey even for a major school field trip. I can't imagine they've set enough aside to stay here during the off-campus class.*

As we got off the bus and I took in the view, I was compelled to ask my colleague a question. “Did you arrange this, Ms. Futarishizuka?”

“No, I had nothing to do with it.”

The two of us gazed at the hotel's exterior from the parking lot.

Miss Inukai quickly explained. “My superior said this was Mr. Robert's doing.”

“Is this a foreign-owned hotel, then?” I asked.

“If you’ve got the power, you can do anything,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

The subject of our conversation soon approached. The captain guessed the topic and joined right in.

“A lot of snow fell the other day,” he said, “so we were able to use this resort!”

“Don’t tell me you rented the whole thing out,” I said.

“The facilities aren’t open for the season yet, so we’re the only patrons!”

“Ah,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “This way, we won’t trouble anyone else, and it’ll make things easier for us as well.”

“That said,” added Miss Inukai, “we have people already inside, disguised as patrons.”

She was right—I could see people all around the hotel and ski resort. There were even a few people right in front of us who looked like customers heading through the entrance. I was impressed at how quickly they’d pulled everything together. A lot of money and manpower must be going toward winning over Type Twelve.

The students had no way of knowing that, of course.

“Hey, teach! C’mon, tell us what to do next!”

“The head teacher for our grade said we were supposed to stay with our classes, right?”

“Class B is already putting their stuff in their rooms!”

“I wanna hurry up and start skiing.”

“Can I look around the hotel first?”

Urged onward by Class 1-A, we headed for the hotel reception area. From there, we did things exactly as we’d announced on the bus.

Once everyone was done putting their things in their rooms, it would be time to rent skis and gear. Then they’d change in the locker rooms, head to the ski resort, and split into groups based on difficulty. After that, the instructors would introduce themselves and start ski classes right away.

That was the plan for the students anyway. The teachers chaperoning them all had their own missions to carry out. Some would be taking pictures while the students skied, and others would be with the instructors, watching over them. Whatever we were doing, all of us teachers needed to be able to move around freely on the slopes while wearing skis.

Naturally, all this was beyond the capabilities of a certain new teacher with zero ski skills. Instead, I ended up joining a group of small children in one corner of the resort and practicing by myself. I couldn't possibly take lessons with the students. I'd heard rumors that some teachers even paid for their own ski lessons ahead of time, just for this outing.

"You can ride a horse, but you can't ski?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "It's bizarre."

"It's a dangerous sport," I insisted. "Why would I risk life and limb to do this voluntarily? You're supposed to barrel down the slope at automobile speeds without even wearing a helmet. Isn't that a little ridiculous? Far more dangerous than riding a motorcycle, in my opinion."

"I mean, I guess around ten people do die every year."

"Right? I'm not surprised."

Ms. Futarishizuka continued to make snarky comments as I tried desperately to keep my skis in a V shape. My legs were trembling something fierce. I could have used a flight spell to pretend I was skiing, but I didn't want to use otherworld magic anywhere Captain Mason and Ensign Inukai could see. Anyone who knew what they were looking at would surely notice something was up.

"Just leave your students to me and your assistant," Ms. Futarishizuka said. "You can stay here quaking in your boots."

"Sorry. Thank you."

Naturally, the task of watching my students had to fall to the others. I felt terrible for being such an unreliable teacher.

As expected, Ms. Futarishizuka started skiing downhill with the practiced motions of a veteran. Apparently, she enjoyed this just as much as anime, video games, motorcycles, cars, and amateur radio.

As soon as she left, a female student from Class 1-A approached me. It wasn't my neighbor—this was someone I only knew by name and face. If memory served, she was called Suzuki, and she was number nine on the class roster.

If you arranged the class from shortest to tallest, she'd be in the front row. She was very fashionable and never forgot her lipstick. Compared to my neighbor, whose lips cracked when it got cold out, Suzuki was much more concerned with her appearance.

The most striking thing about her was her high pigtails. This was a difficult style to pull off—I regularly saw posts on the internet about people being bullied in middle school for wearing pigtails. Suzuki must have been fearless since she wore her hair rabbit-style all the time. Just the other day, the head teacher for her grade had warned her about rolling up the waist of her skirt to shorten it, too.

"Mr. Sasaki," she called out. "What are you doing here?"

"As you can see, I have almost no skiing experience," I admitted.

"They didn't have ski classes when you were a kid?"

"Other schools had them, but mine didn't."

She deftly maneuvered her skis and came up right in front of me. She seemed fairly experienced—impressive for someone so young. Maybe people who went to schools in snowier parts of the country acquired the skill naturally.

But then she made an unexpected proposition. "All right, Mr. Sasaki. Then I'll teach you!"

As soon as I heard this, I knew. *Honey trap, part two.*

"No, I'll be fine on my own," I said. "Go have fun with your friends."

"Don't be like that. Come on. You won't be able to ski at all at the rate you're going."

"Hey, wa—"

The girl stuck her poles into the snow at her feet before taking my hands in hers. Then she started tugging, causing us both to slide across the snow together. She glanced behind her as she went, guiding me forward as she

moved backward. We were going very slowly, but the fact that she was a child filled me with dread. I wanted to bat her hands away and flee. But if I did that, I was sure to tumble over.

“P-please stop,” I said. “It’s dangerous to go backward like that.”

“Uh-uh, Mr. Sasaki. If you want to stop, you have to make a V with your skis.”

I did as she said and desperately got my skis into a V shape. But when I did, I felt the tips catch on something. A moment later, without realizing what had happened, I began to fall.

“Ah...!”

I was falling forward—straight toward the girl instructing me. As I reached out my arms on instinct, they moved toward my student’s body.

I couldn’t allow myself to touch her.

Immediately, I used flight magic to take control of my fall. After letting go of my poles, I swerved my hand to the side, plunging my arm into the snow. It looked like I was slamming her against a wall, but instead, we were on the ground. By putting my hand next to her head, I barely managed to avoid touching her.

“I...I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll move right away.”

I rolled onto my side, frantically trying to put some distance between us. While I wanted to get up as soon as I could, it was difficult with the skis attached to my feet. After some trial and error, I finally just took the skis off my boots and stood.

“Mr. Sasaki, you used the wrong edge of your skis, and they got caught. That’s really dangerous, you know.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was frightened. Are you hurt? Can you stand?”

*I’ve embarrassed myself again.* The girl didn’t seem to mind at all, however. She smiled at me as she lay on the snow.

“Hey, Mr. Sasaki, don’t mind me. Take a look over there,” she said, raising one arm and pointing to the side.

“I see your ski poles stuck in the snow,” I said.

“Yeah. You did it. You skied for real!”

“.....”

“I think you got about ten meters or so,” she added with an ear-to-ear smile.

Was all this calculated? *Women are terrifying*. I was impressed with her skills, and she was a *minor*. No wonder women of the right age wouldn’t give a loser like me the time of day. I’d been using the wrong edge of my skis my entire life. It made me appreciate how friendly Ms. Futarishizuka was with me.

“Mr. Sasaki,” said Suzuki, “do you know the rumor about off-campus class?”

“Rumor? Is there a bad rumor circulating among the students?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s like an urban legend passed down at school.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I only just started working there, so I don’t know it.”

“Supposedly, if you confess your love to someone you like on the last day of class, your love will bear fruit.”

I reached a hand down to her, and she took it and pulled herself to her feet. She made it look so easy, despite her footwear. I could tell she was an experienced skier.

“The boys in our class are all champing at the bit to ask Twelve out.”

“Ah. I see.”

That *could* be a bit of a problem. But it wasn’t something I could do anything about in my position. That was what Type Twelve herself wanted. Other people’s opinions didn’t matter. It was the whole reason she was so eager to attend my neighbor’s school. And as her teacher, I could already see her working to get her male classmates simping for her. In fact, she was starting to alienate the girls. She’d only just transferred in, too. She had some real talent for this.

“She’s your daughter, right, Mr. Sasaki?” said Suzuki.

“We’re not blood-related, but yes, that’s what our family register says.”

“Wow. I guess there really are kids like the ones you see in TV shows and



manga.”

“I think it’s pretty unusual, actually.”

We both brushed the snow off our gear. I glanced at her to see how she was doing, but I didn’t see her holding onto any body parts like she was in pain. That alone came as a great relief. If she’d somehow gotten hurt, I wouldn’t know what to say to her parents.

“Hey, Mr. Sasaki?”

“Yes?”

“I think I kind of like you, too.”

“.....”

I was pretty sure I knew what was happening. Ms. Mochizuki had struck out, so they were changing tactics, doing whatever it took.

“Do you hate kids like me?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Suzuki, but I can’t see you that way.”

“Wow. That took a lot of courage to say, and you shot me down so fast. Don’t you think that was kind of mean?”

“I want to respect your feelings, so I decided to be clear with my response.”

“That’s a matter of perspective, you know.”

“One of my coworkers says that a lot.”

“Can’t you at least get a little flustered?”

“I would only get flustered if I was actually interested.”

“...You must have a pretty lonely life, Mr. Sasaki.”

“I can’t deny that.”

Was Suzuki the spy assisting Little Mika? I’d have to report this to the boss tonight and have him look into her actions over the past few days.



## <The Neighbor's POV>

I've arrived at the location of our off-campus class—the ski resort. I have zero experience with skiing, so naturally, I get assigned to the beginner class. For today, we'll be at the bottom of the slope practicing the fundamentals of how to use our skis and poles. We form small groups, and an instructor lectures us.

To be honest, it's really hard.

Every little action requires muscles I've never used before. Just putting the skis on and standing up in the snow makes me feel incredibly restricted. My whole body is under a weird strain I don't understand. *I'm going to be aching in the morning for sure.*

*"That's my partner! Terrible at sports as always."*

My frustration is compounded by my mean-spirited demon partner making sarcastic comments at every opportunity.

Meanwhile, Robot Girl is fully engrossed in the moment, enjoying herself completely.

"Are you okay, Twelve?"

"If it's hard for you to stand, I can support you."

"If you put your thumbs on top of your poles, it'll give your feet more strength to dig in."

"If it's too hard for you, we can call the instructor and take a break in the hotel."

There's an unending stream of boys around her. It's not only kids from Class 1-A, either—even students from the other classes are joining the crowd. Some of them are actually good at skiing, and I'm pretty sure they lied their way into the beginner class.

"I am pleased by everyone's consideration. Ah, how wonderful these 'ski classes' are."

At this rate, she'll inevitably face backlash from the girls. In fact, I can hear them expressing their envy now.

“Kurosu, Twelve is a little strange, isn’t she?”

“She’s like the exact opposite of you.”

“And she left Ivy alone. I feel bad for her.”

“Was she like this at her last school?”

“It’s actually kind of impressive how brazen she is.”

A few of the girls who usually hang out at my desk are in my beginner class group. They’re conveying the majority opinion to me. I think they’re trying to get me to do something about it.

“I’m sorry she’s causing so much trouble for you all,” I say.

“No, you don’t need to apologize!”

“That’s right. We really like you, Kurosu.”

“The boys only like Twelve because she’s pretty.”

“I think it’ll all even out before long.”

“I wonder if she’d shape up a little if we told Mr. Sasaki.”

“He’s her dad, though. It’d be awkward.”

If Type Twelve were the sort to listen to criticism, we wouldn’t be struggling in the first place. In my opinion, the best we can do is get Makeup to scold her. But if that strains their relationship, it could become a major problem—in the worst-case scenario, she might blow another crater in the Earth.

Girls like her always attract dumb boys and cause everyone around them trouble.

*“Hey, I see your teacher over there.”*

At Abaddon’s remark, my body moves on its own. He’s right—I can see my neighbor out of the corner of my eye. He seems to be having trouble skiing, too, and he’s in a group of little kids, practicing by himself. Just like me, he’s struggling a lot. Seeing him boosts my mood a little.

We really are made for each other. This is how it’s meant to be. He’s so charming there, all by himself.

That thought only lasts for a moment, however, because then a girl in my class goes up to him.

*“Well, what have we here? One of your classmates approaches.”*

*“.....”*

After that, the voices around me fade into the background. My attention is locked on my neighbor and the girl.

She takes his hands and begins pulling him across the snow; she firmly grasps his wrists as if beckoning him, legs shaking, right into her. They look like a couple.

I can't think of a more irritating sight. What is she up to?

A moment later, my neighbor falls over and—of all things—lands basically right on top of her.

*“Oh my. They both fell.”*

I almost order Abaddon to eliminate the girl, but I swallow the words down just in time.

Is that what's going on? Is he into pigtails? In that case, I can't waste any time. I'll try out the style this very evening.



### **<The Neighbor's POV>**

In the end, we stay at the ski resort all day practicing. To be brief, it's *hell*.

We get a break for lunch, but aside from that, we're out on the snow nonstop. By the time we get back to the hotel, the sun is beginning to set. All the students head to a restaurant and eat dinner like they're at a school cafeteria. When we finally get back to our rooms, I'm completely exhausted.

Apparently, the organizers set aside some time for us to use the hotel's communal bath. I'd rather just collapse into bed, though.

As for our room assignments, I'm sharing with Robot Girl and the blue magical girl. Naturally, Abaddon is here, too, bobbing around in midair. Our room is part

Western-style and part Japanese; there are two twin-sized beds in the Western area and a futon in the Japanese part. I'm not sure if my neighbor arranged this for us or if it's just normal for resort hotels around here, but the room feels really big to me.

"Elder Sister, the youngest daughter would like to once again express her gratitude for suggesting such a wonderful opportunity."

"I'm happy for you."

"Yes. I am very happy, too. As I thought, it is wonderful to have family members who are so knowledgeable and quick-witted."

"....."

Robot Girl is in a really good mood. She's sitting on her knees on her assigned bed, facing me. Her expression is the same as always—like a mask, without so much as a shred of emotion. But the way her toes are fidgeting hints at how excited she is.

She and the blue magical girl are using the two twin beds while I'm in the futon laid out on the floor.

"Kurosu, is it really okay if I take this bed?" the blue magical girl asks. She's using Magical Communication, so her voice echoes through my mind. She sounds a little guilty.

"I can sleep anywhere," I say. "Don't worry about it."

Not only is the futon soft, but it's also big enough for me to stretch out on. This is pure bliss. I spent so much of my life with nothing but a blanket; it doesn't matter to me if it's a bed or a futon. Both of them are like heaven.

*"Yup! My partner's used to sleeping on the floor!"*

Abaddon is visible to everyone in the room. The blue magical girl knows who and what he is, so we decided there was no point in hiding him anymore. My neighbor said it was okay, too. He said we should prioritize communication instead, in case something happens.

“I don’t like how he put that, but he’s right,” I reply. “We should both sleep on what we’re used to.”

“Thank you so much, Kurosu.”

Unlike the permanently impassive robot girl and the pink magical girl, who’s not much better, the blue magical girl is very expressive. One moment, guilt is written all over her face, and the next, she lights up with a big grin.

I can’t tell if she’s making those expressions on purpose or if they’re what she’s honestly feeling. If her youthful appearance is to be believed, she must be younger than I am. Still, I feel like something is off about her good-girl behavior. She’s a lot better at playing it close to the vest than Robot Girl, who tends to let down her guard.

“Also, Twelve,” she says, “I want to talk to the other students more!”

“I understand your request, Ivy. Unfortunately, the male students’ attention is directed at me. Among humans, who place the most importance on love and romance, partners are to be won through one’s own power. Such information is commonplace on the internet.”

“Oh, um, I wasn’t really talking about that—”

“Therefore, you should spend your time like me, paying attention to how you interact with the male students.”

“...Right. Okay.”

I wonder if there’s anything we can do about Robot Girl’s communication issues. I thought I had trouble talking to people, but she takes it to a new level. And now she’s left the blue magical girl completely confused.

The magical girl’s mission is probably to win Robot Girl over to her side. Unfortunately, her target is too busy being fawned over by all the boys at her school. Robot Girl has been mostly neglecting her role as a translator, too, which my neighbor assigned her.

She’s quite the handful, to be sure.

“I will now head to a boy’s room,” she says. “My sister, I ask that you not stop me.”

“Could I ask why?”

“I received several invitations during today’s ski lessons. I believe this is a chance I cannot pass up.”

“If you waltz over there unprepared, you’ll probably get gangbanged.”

“If such a thing would soothe my heart, the act of ‘gangbanging’ has value to me.”

“I can’t say for sure, but I think your mother would probably be disgusted by that kind of behavior.”





“...I see. Then perhaps hesitation is called for.”

I don't care at all about Robot Girl's chastity. But if this gets my neighbor in trouble and lowers his opinion of me, I won't be able to stand it. I'm supposed to watch over her while we're at the hotel, so I have to warn her, at least.

After that, we spend the night going to the bath and doing whatever. A few girls from our class invite us to their room. According to the host, they're having a pajama party. But since I'm so worn out, I decline their invitation.

A little before the school's designated bedtime, I climb into my futon and close my eyes.

However, just as I'm starting to doze off, I hear a clattering inside the room, and my mind wakes back up.

Dazed, I open my eyes and look around. That's when I see the blue magical girl. Earlier, she was in bed in her pajamas, but now she's in her magical girl outfit and standing by the window. As I watch her, wondering what's going on, she leaps outside.

Since the Western half of the room faces the hallway, she was standing very close to me. Close enough I probably could have grabbed her foot if I had sat up and reached out. For a moment, I was worried she was trying to kill me.

But she didn't; instead, she floated into the air and left the room, quietly closed the curtains and the window, and then flew away. I wait for a few moments, but she doesn't seem to be coming back.

Eventually, Abaddon, who is lying right next to me, asks, *“Are you awake?”*

“Yes. Tell me what's going on.”

*“As you saw, your roommate transformed into a magical girl and left.”*

“Elder Sister,” says Robot Girl immediately, “the youngest daughter is curious about Ivy's behavior. I would like to pursue her.”

She slowly sits up in bed. I've known for a while that she doesn't actually need sleep. She was only lying down to mimic us humans. I can vividly imagine her fidgeting excitedly in bed all night as she thinks about tomorrow's ski lessons.

Abaddon doesn't need sleep, either. When I first met him, he would float around the room like a dust bunny even at night. Once I told him it was annoying, he started lying down near me instead. He was probably watching the blue magical girl for me just now.

"Why not leave her be?" I ask.

"It is possible she snuck out of our room at night to go see the male students. I am worried she wishes to soothe her heart by receiving a 'gangbang.' As the one who was supposed to do so originally, I am very curious."

"....."

According to Robot Girl, mechanical life-forms tell no lies. If true, those are her genuine feelings on the matter. Is communication with other cultures always so difficult?

"I think you should get a better grip on what the word 'gangbang' really means."

"For humans on Earth, a 'gangbang' provided by high-spec boys is an expression of deep adoration, and works of entertainment featuring such plotlines are mainstream. It is clear to me that such acts always grant psychogenic comfort."

"...I suppose some people out there probably think that, but..."

Whenever I talk to Robot Girl, I start to lose my grip on reality. It makes me feel like humans are all completely insane. What *is* the line between intelligent life and animals living off instinct?

"If you wish to continue your slumber, feel free to do so."

"No, I get it. I'll come with you."

What if something happens to the robot girl while she's alone? That would be a disaster. It's my responsibility to watch over her. That's the whole reason we're sharing a room. I don't want to betray my neighbor's expectations.

*"You seem very tired," Abaddon points out. "Are you sure you don't want to sleep?"*

"Someone needs to be there to contact my neighbor if anything happens," I say.

*"You're always so earnest. It's a real shame he doesn't seem to notice."*

"Shut up, Abaddon."

I slip out of my futon and change into my day clothes. The robot girl does the same. Abaddon is wearing his usual clothes and doesn't need to change. I wonder if he ever wears anything different. His clothes don't stink yet, but I think maybe he should wash them once in a while.

"Besides, the eldest daughter needs to be there to make sure her little sister doesn't do anything reckless."

"The youngest daughter is very pleased to have such a dependable elder sister."

"I'm not doing this just for you. I'm doing it for the family."

"I have learned from information stored on human networks that your behavior is described as being a tsundere."

"I am one-hundred-percent sure that's not what's going on here."

"Ah, yes. Exactly what a tsundere would say."

"....."

Who the hell is she calling a *tsundere*? I find Robot Girl so unpleasant and annoying I can barely stand her.

"I have called a terminal for transportation to the window. We should board immediately and pursue Ivy."

"All right."

Now that I'm changed, I throw open the room's curtains and window. There's a bright light floating right outside, bleeding into the dim hotel room. The

familiar terminal entrance is right up against the window. The other parts of it are hidden from sight, as usual.

I get one leg up on the window frame and hurry inside.



### <The Neighbor's POV>

Using the mechanical life-form's technology, we pursue the blue magical girl.

Robot Girl is constantly observing Earth, so she has all the information she needs on the child flying through the air—from her location to her flight speed. In fact, we can see her on the screen right in front of us.

The display hovers in midair—it's the same one I saw on our way to Miyakejima the other day. It's late at night, but we have a clear image of the magical girl as she soars through the air with Magical Flight.

"Can I ask where she's headed?"

"The target is currently flying west at an altitude of approximately three thousand meters. Along her course is the northern part of the Hida Mountains, including Mount Yukikura, Mount Shirouma, and the Ushiro Tateyama Peaks. If she passes them, she will likely exit Toyama prefecture toward the ocean."

I frantically picture a map of Japan in my head. We haven't learned about the Hida Mountains yet in class. First-year middle school students only learn world geography; Japanese geography starts in the second year.

*"The Hida Mountains, eh? They call them the 'Northern Alps.'"*

"I knew that."

*"By the way, your elementary school textbook mentioned both terms, so don't try to claim you haven't learned about them yet. Got it?"*

"....."

*Ugh. It's like he can read my mind.*

I'd always planned on dropping out after middle school, so my academics are still shaky. Lately, though, I've been approaching classes more optimistically, hoping to get into high school. But my indifference over the last several years is still dragging me down.

"You read my old textbooks?" I ask.

*"They were perfect for passing the time!"*

"Elder Sister, if you are concerned about your geographical knowledge, your younger sister can help you."

"I'll be fine on my own."

We spend a short while watching the blue magical girl fly through the air. The saucer doesn't have any chairs or tables in it, but the air conditioning is perfect, so it's just as pleasant here as it is in our hotel room.

After several minutes, something happens on the display. Right at the center of the long line of peaks, we see a pillar of light shoot up toward the sky. The blue magical girl sets a course for the base of it. Our terminal follows her.

Eventually, near a particularly high mountain peak, we see someone standing on top of a large boulder. As soon as we notice them, the display zooms in to show us a close-up. They're on a sheer precipice covered in snow, standing casually amid the sea of white and looking at the mountains around them.

It's the pink magical girl.

The pillar of light we just saw must have been her Magical Beam. The way she lowers her wand looks strangely divine.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Sayoko! I had to wait until my roommates fell asleep. Please forgive me for making you stand around in this cold when I was the one to call you."

"It's okay. I had my Field up."

We hear their conversation inside the terminal. Apparently, it isn't just picking up video—it's eavesdropping on what they're saying, too. Plus, the blue magical girl's words are being translated from English into perfect Japanese.

*“Hey, how are we getting this audio?”*

“Aside from the pod capturing video, I have several smaller ones dispersed around the area to pick up sound. The video shown on this display is being compiled from all the data received. If you desire additional information, you may state your request.”

“No, this is plenty.”

*“Mechanical life-forms have some amazing technology, huh?”*

“Elder Brother, your praise warms the youngest daughter’s heart.”

The magical girls look positively fantastical up on the craggy mountain peak. They’re on a huge rock that’s sticking up above the rest and bathed in moonlight. And, of course, they’re wearing ridiculous outfits.

“You were right, Ivy. There’s definitely a Fairy Drop here. But how did you notice it?”

“I detected it while skiing nearby, but the signal is weak. I left briefly during the lunch break to check, but I didn’t have time to really search for it. I hope we can find it tonight.”

“Okay. I’ll help you look.”

Neither of them seems to notice us as they continue their conversation. What are they hoping to find up here in the mountains? Wild herbs? Mushrooms? I don’t have a clue what this “Fairy Drop” could be. Judging by its fanciful name, though, I assume it has something to do with the magical girls.

“I’m sorry, Sayoko. I know you don’t want to do this.”

“It’s important to me to help other magical girls in my situation.”

“Well, thank you. I promise to repay you someday.”

“You don’t need to. Let’s start searching.”

Now in agreement, the magical girls gently lift into the air. They glance at

each other once, then turn in opposite directions and head off, flying very close to the ground.

In response, the display in front of us splits in two—each portion showing one of the girls.

*“I wonder what a ‘Fairy Drop’ is.”*

“There are countless objects with this name on Earth alone. Currently, it is impossible to determine which one they are searching for. However, it is highly probable that it is related to the beings known as magical girls.”

“Where do magical girls come from in the first place?”

The rather strange term “Magical Girl” has been cropping up a lot in our recent conversations. I’ve been accepting it without question, but now that I really think about it, we don’t know anything about who they are. Their background is even more opaque than that of the angels and demons. The name only clicks for me because of how truly magical they look.

“I have found several mentions of them in human administrative databases, including the one at Father and Mother’s workplace. Commonalities in the data suggest that they are humans who have been altered by messengers from a fairy world.”

Hacking is Robot Girl’s forte, and she probably has access to all sorts of databases. The information comes to her readily.

“If you know all that,” I say, “are you sure you don’t have any info on Fairy Drops?”

“In reference to magical girls, several sources note that Fairy Drops are what the messengers from the fairy world wish to recover. However, no concrete information exists on the Fairy Drops themselves, though there are traces that suggest some

data has been deleted.”

“Deleted? What do you mean?”

“It seems as though a few networks containing information databases have been isolated in order to counter hacking from mechanical life-forms. If the storage media is isolated, then even a mechanical life-form cannot access it without resorting to physical theft.”

*“You said ‘recover,’”* points out Abaddon. *“Maybe the Fairy Drops originally came from the fairy world.”*

“I believe that is very likely.”

I still have questions about these “messengers from the fairy world.” Maybe that’s just a backstory they cooked up to conceal their real identities, and they’re Disciples or psychics, like Futarishizuka. But no amount of thinking about it will get me the answer.

While I’m mulling over the origin of magical girls, the two we’re watching continue their search. For a little under an hour, they fly about under the cold sky, and we continue following them in the terminal.

Unfortunately, it seems they haven’t found what they’re looking for. On a moderately tall hill in the mountains, they meet up again to discuss the situation.

“You have school, Ivy. It’s really late. We should withdraw.”

“But Captain Mason wants those Fairy Drops recovered, too...”

“I can meet you again tomorrow.”

“...Thank you, Sayoko. Really. You’re always helping me out.”

“You and everyone else help me, too.”

“I think you do a lot more than we do. So if there’s anything you need, just talk to me about it, okay? You’re so strong you barely ever ask other magical girls for help.”



“That isn’t true.”

“If you want, why not come with us? I think we can give you a much better life than you have now!”

“It’s okay. I’m fine the way I am. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Oh, Sayoko...”

After bidding the blue magical girl farewell, the pink one disappears into her Magical Field before her friend can finish her sentence. The blue one watches her go with a look of sadness. A little while later, she uses her own Field and leaves as well.

Maybe they can only use Magical Field to get to places they’ve already been. That would explain why she didn’t use it to get here. I wonder about this as I look at the pitch-black hole in space leading to who knows where.

“Does the blue magical girl want to get the pink magical girl on her side?”

*“That would seem to be the case.”*

Captain Mason is the one who came to our school with my neighbor and now serves as the assistant language teacher. He pretends to be a civilian at school, but he’s actually the blue magical girl’s commanding officer and a high-ranking soldier in some foreign country’s military. That’s what my neighbor told me, at least. The pink magical girl has the potential to be really useful, so it makes sense they’d want her on their side.

*“By the way, won’t our roommate realize we’ve snuck out of the hotel?”*

“Sister,” I say to Robot Girl. “Please take us back to the hotel right away.”

“Understood. In accordance with the elder sister’s request, the youngest daughter will now return to our lodgings at full speed.”

“And about our cover story once we’re back...”

There’s no point worrying about these things right now. I’ll report all this to my neighbor tomorrow.



On the second day of ski classes, we were hit by a blizzard. The wind direction suddenly changed around midnight, and by sunrise, powerful gusts were already whipping and roaring. You couldn't see more than a couple of meters in front of you—it was a whiteout. Unfortunately, that meant we couldn't leave the resort.

Instead, we'd probably spend the entire day doing some kind of indoor activity. The teacher in charge conveyed all this to the students over breakfast. We were currently in the hotel restaurant on the first floor, which was essentially being rented out for our school like the rest of the hotel.

Naturally, the announcement was met with a round of booing. Even the teachers were staring at the weather forecast, wondering if there was any possible way we could still hold lessons. But according to the Meteorological Agency, the blizzard was going to last until at least that evening.

Both Ms. Futarishizuka and Captain Mason said that if we tried to go out anyway, people could wind up stranded on the slopes. All three of us were at the same table, discussing potential indoor activities. Miss Inukai and Ms. Mochizuki were seated with us, too. Similar groupings of teachers could be seen with each class doing much the same thing.

"We prepared a few games, including a quiz competition, but we probably won't be able to stretch them out to last the entire day," said Ms. Mochizuki. "Mr. Sasaki, do you have any good ideas? You've done other work out in the world before, so if you have any unique suggestions, please share them with us!"

"I'm sorry, but nothing's really coming to mind just yet."

"Thinking up some special activity sounds like a real pain," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Can't we just have them work through some math or English question sheets? We can download them from the internet and make copies. No need for textbooks. Then they can at least do some studying."

"But the children will be so disappointed, Ms. Futarishizuka!"

"What about a karaoke competition?!" Captain Mason chimed in. "We can all have fun together!"

“I’m pretty sure a hotel like this will have several karaoke setups we can use,” said Miss Inukai.

“I know you two are professionals, and I value your opinion,” said Ms. Mochizuki. “But I feel like holding a karaoke contest in place of middle-school ski lessons is probably in violation of the school’s code of ethics...”

Ms. Mochizuki, our resident veteran educator, helped sort through all our suggestions. It must have been tough to be the only real teacher in our group.

Incidentally, my neighbor was sitting at the table right beside ours. Type Twelve and Magical Blue were with her. Captain Mason had purposely arranged for them to be grouped together during the trip.

As it happened, I could hear snippets of their conversation, and I soon caught a rather interesting tidbit.

“This is a grave situation. We cannot turn a blind eye.”

“It’s not that we’re turning a blind eye. There’s just nothing we can do.”

Type Twelve and my neighbor were speaking. And what the mechanical life-form said next really grabbed my attention.

“Elder Sister, the youngest daughter will deal with the weather situation in the surrounding area. Meanwhile, I would like you to negotiate with Father to make sure that our plans for the day remain unaltered. If you ask him, I am certain he will agree.”

“Wait, are you seriously going to stop the blizzard?”

“I will dispatch a wide-area suppression vessel from my base on the moon’s surface. Utilizing a high-energy particle cannon, it will disperse the snow clouds in the airspace over Koushinetsu. This will immediately eliminate the blizzard covering the ski resort. We can then resume our ski lessons.”

The mechanical life-form, desperate to participate in more ski lessons, was about to bring out the big guns. Glancing around my table, I found that I wasn’t

the only one listening in—Ms. Futarishizuka, Captain Mason, and Miss Inukai could hear them as well. Only Ms. Mochizuki seemed not to notice; she continued brainstorming indoor recreation ideas.

When my neighbor spoke, it was as if she'd read our thoughts. "I have a serious question for you as your older sister. What is a wide-area suppression vessel?"

"To state its name in accordance with your language, it is Suppression Ship for Assaults Via Forcible Suppression Methods in Frontier Sectors, Type 5292. The optimized version for this area, in accordance with Incidental Weapon Regulation Type 156708, is Type Fourteen."

"Can you give an answer that's less detailed and more to the point?"

"I will explain the wide-area suppression vessel in a way that is less detailed and more to the point. It is a moving body meant to destroy hostile beings that exist in regions that I, the main ship, designate for development, as well as smaller obstacles. It will first electronically disable low-grade information-processing creatures and then destroy its targets with raw power."

"I still don't get it. But if you use that thing, what effect will it have on humanity?"

"Our ski classes would be able to resume."

"I mean, if you were targeting humanity, instead of the ski resort. What would happen then?"

"All humans would be vaporized and the species would cease to exist within a day."

"Then do *not* use it under any circumstances."

"But I must in order for our ski lessons to resume. If I aim

carefully, there is no need to worry.”

I had the urge to say, “That’s completely insane!” But mechanical life-forms never lied. If she said she’d do it, then the endeavor must seem worth it to her. My neighbor seemed to have come to the same conclusion because her face was stiff with caution as she questioned the youngest daughter.

“Won’t something like that damage the nearby mountains? They reach up into the snow clouds.”

“This mechanical life-form considers it a necessary sacrifice.”

“Are ski classes really worth all this?”

“I can promise minimal effects on the surface. There will be no human casualties. In addition, even if the surface suffers damage, it can be restored to its original state. I am aware that humans care deeply about environmental preservation, but there should be no problem from that perspective.”

*Oh wow.* Captain Mason was already out of his seat and on the phone with someone. So was Miss Inukai. Both of them quickly left the restaurant, their smartphones at their ears. Mystified, the teachers nearby watched them go. I wondered if I should report this to the boss, too. But then again, I could probably just wait and tell him once the dust had settled.

“If there are casualties,” said my neighbor, “your mother may decide to quit the fake family.”

“I am already scanning the surrounding environment. I have confirmed that there are no humans within the effective radius of the high-energy particle cannon. I have also confirmed via pre-simulations that it will not cause issues for any airborne vehicles currently flying in this airspace.”

“I suppose if you promise, I won’t stop you...”

“Good. Then I will leave persuading Father to you. The youngest daughter will now begin the operation.”

I was overcome by the impulse to yell, “Are you *sure* it’ll be okay?” However, there were students and teachers around. In this context, it would look preposterous for a teacher like me to respond seriously to the absurd things coming out of Type Twelve’s mouth.

In the meantime, she got out of her seat and left the restaurant. Where did she think she was going?

At that point, my neighbor addressed me. “Can I talk to you for a second, Mr. Sasaki?”

She’d walked right over to where I was sitting. I was so grateful that she always remembered to call me Mr. Sasaki during school hours instead of “mister” as she usually did.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I want to tell you something in private,” she explained.

“Oh, what’s this?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “A little rendezvous with a student, eh?”

“Actually, would you mind coming along, Ms. Futarishizuka?” I asked.

I figured the youngest daughter would be more willing to listen if we had my neighbor relay the message rather than me or my colleague berating her directly. With that thought in mind, I left the restaurant with Ms. Futarishizuka.

There were security cameras stationed in various places inside the hotel; we avoided them, choosing a spot behind a pillar in the corner of the entrance hall for our chat.

“Mister, I want to tell you about something that happened last night,” said my neighbor.

“What?” I replied. “This isn’t about the conversation you were just having?”

“I already gave up on that.”

“Oh. Um. Is that right?”

Things weren't going quite as I'd imagined. I had hoped she would be a little more persistent. Without her help, I doubted Ms. Futarishizuka and I would be able to convince Type Twelve to stop what she was doing. I really wished we had Miss Hoshizaki around for contingencies like this.

"The blue magical girl did something last night."

"She didn't get into a fight, did she?"

"No. She snuck out of the hotel by herself after bedtime and flew to an area in the Northern Alps. She met up with the pink magical girl there. Abaddon, the youngest daughter, and I trailed her. They seemed to be looking for something."

Abaddon was currently hovering at my neighbor's side; he picked up where she left off. *"They were searching for something called a Fairy Drop! And they were really putting their backs into it."*

"The mechanical life-form did some hacking and found out a little about the Fairy Drops. Apparently, the magical girls' duty is to recover them at the request of a messenger from the fairy world. I'm sorry if you already knew all this, but I decided it would be best to tell you just in case."

All I knew about Fairy Drops at the moment was that they sounded delicious. I'd heard the term before, but that was it. If possible, I wanted a more detailed explanation, but since I was pushing the narrative that I was a magical middle-aged man, I couldn't think of a good response. After all, we hadn't told my neighbor or Abaddon anything about the otherworld, including its magic.

"Ah. Was that pillar of light in the mountains last night made by one of them?" I asked.

"The pink one used her beam to call over the blue one," said my neighbor.

*"Hey, what are Fairy Drops anyway?"*

"Do we really need to get into that right now, Abaddon?" asked my neighbor.

*"Come on, we're both curious about it. Since you're a magical middle-aged man, I just wondered if you knew something."*

"I'm sorry, mister. This demon really loves to pry into other people's

business.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know much about them, either,” I said.

“Hmm, how mysterious. Count me *very* interested in these Fairy Drops,” drawled Ms. Futarishizuka. Peeps wasn’t here, so she was taking the opportunity to tease me.

I ignored her and continued. “Thank you for notifying me about the magical girls. If it’s not too much to ask, could you tell me whenever you notice they’re up to something? It’s not a requirement, of course.”

“You can leave it to me,” my neighbor replied, nodding seriously.

Abaddon grinned. “*Yeah. We can probably help a lot with that.*”

Just as we finished up our conversation, a powerful light shined through every window in the entrance hall. It was like a camera flash had just gone off. It wasn’t bright enough that I had to shut my eyes, but I could tell it wasn’t natural, even though we weren’t outside.

The light continued for a few seconds. Once it died down, I realized that the entrance hall was now much brighter. Curious, I looked out the window.

I saw clear blue skies stretching as far as the eye could see.

Where had the blizzard gone? It had been whiteout conditions just a moment ago. You couldn’t see more than a few meters in front of you. But now it was perfectly clear—there was bright blue sky for miles, and brilliant rays of sunlight were streaming down, illuminating all the snow piled up on the ski resort.

“Oh *goodness*,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “She really *did* blow away the blizzard.”

“Does anyone else think a few of those peaks look a little lower than yesterday?” I asked.

“It seems more like the snow has disappeared but only at the very top. It looks terribly odd.”

A moment later, the phone in my pocket vibrated. I didn’t even have to check the screen this time—I knew who it was.



"Hello, this is Sasaki," I said.

*"It's Akutsu. How's the weather there?"*

"The mechanical life-form was so sad about the blizzard canceling ski lessons that she called a UFO from her lunar base and drove away all the snow clouds. I don't believe there are any casualties."

*"Don't you think that's a little too much info to drop on me in a single report?"*

"Sorry, sir. We haven't had a chance to stop and take a breather."

*"Was she the source of the pillar of light in the Hida Mountains last night, too?"*

"That was apparently the pink magical girl, sir. I don't know the details, but I think you'll get a better explanation from Captain Mason. I believe it has to do with whatever the magical girls are up to."

"Oh, there you are! Mr. Sasaki! Ms. Futarishizuka!" During my phone call, Ms. Mochizuki ran up to us, practically shouting. "Ski lessons are back on for today!"

"Chief, I'm sorry. I have to get back to work."

*"All right. But next time, let me know before something happens."*

"I'll try my best, sir."

Ski lessons would be held again today, just as Type Twelve had hoped.



The mechanical life-form's super science had erased the blizzard, and ski lessons resumed under a clear blue sky.

The flash of light over the Northern Alps was already a big topic on TV and the internet. Videos showing conditions before and after were circulating, too, making it impossible for the bureau to cover up. In the end, the Meteorological Agency and the government released statements claiming it was an unknown natural phenomenon.

While the reporting all sounded incredibly shady, the public had no other way to conceptualize what had happened. And so claims of the incident being a UFO

attack on Earth—which was, in a way, much closer to the truth—were subsumed by counterarguments as one more absurd delusion.

Because the UFO in question didn't show up in the videos, someone looking up from the Earth's surface would have seen nothing but a strange torrent of light streaking through one section of the mountains. Even the handful of peaks that at first seemed to be missing were back to normal before I knew it. That probably helped smooth things over a bit.

When I asked the culprit, she explained she was hiding the change in topography with optical camouflage—the same kind her terminals used. Apparently, this was meant to buy her time to fully restore the damaged areas.

The scale of our conversation was positively galactic; all we could do was nod and say, "Okay."

Without anything else to contribute, I decided to once again put all my efforts into learning to ski at the base of the slope. My body had been racked with pain since that morning, but a quick healing spell washed it all away, allowing me to head out to practice in high spirits.

Later, during the afternoon break, my neighbor came up to me again.

"We saw Ivy do something else, mister."

I was having lunch in the hotel restaurant with Ms. Futarishizuka when she approached. The hotel had arranged it so we could have lunch whenever we chose, and she had taken the same time slot as we had.

Unlike at breakfast, Captain Mason and Miss Inukai were nowhere to be found, so my neighbor simply used Magical Blue's real name. We hadn't seen either of them since that morning.

"The pink girl was with her, too," my neighbor continued.

"Currently tracking targets. If necessary, I am able to provide a video feed."

Next to my neighbor stood Type Twelve. She was probably the one who had noticed the magical girls were up to something. I assumed she'd hacked into the hotel's security cameras or had her small terminals scouting the area. She

would be a terrifying opponent, but as an ally, she was extremely reliable. *Maybe this is why Mr. Akutsu likes security cameras so much.*

“Hmm. Should we go after them?” Ms. Futarishizuka asked, turning to me.

“I’d rather not ignore it and wind up at a disadvantage later,” I replied.

“Won’t our coworkers get mad?”

“Covering up damages caused by magical girls is part of our job.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right.”

I expected Captain Mason knew something about these Fairy Drops. That was probably why he wasn’t at lunch today—I assumed he was quite busy elsewhere.

And when it came to mysterious matters like these, knowing what was going on would be a huge advantage. Without that knowledge, we’d be forced out of any negotiations before we’d even stepped into the ring. The way my otherworld magic had kept me alive this long was only one example.

“Father, I wish to fully enjoy ski lessons,” said Type Twelve.

“Then could we borrow one of your terminals to get around?” I asked. “The point of contact may continue enjoying her ski lessons. I promise I’ll return the terminal, even if we get wrapped up in an isolated space.”

“Understood. I will supply you with a terminal. I’ve set the hotel parking lot as the rendezvous point.”

Captain Mason and Miss Inukai might be our allies for now, but I didn’t want to look the other way on this matter—not if there was any chance they could turn against us. I was sure the Starsage would have suggested the same thing. *In fact, he’d probably tell me to go one step further and dig up info on their weaknesses.*

“I know we’re in the middle of lunch, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said, “but would you mind coming with me?”

“Of course I’ll come. Do you even need to ask? It’s time to reveal all the magical girls’ secrets!”

“Abaddon and I want to go with you, mister. Is that okay?”

*“If anything happens, I’m sure we’ll be able to help!”*

If possible, I wanted my neighbor to enjoy her ski lessons. We’d come a long way for this off-campus class, after all. But I tried to consider her and her partner’s feelings, too. Ms. Futarishizuka had been doing a lot for them, and they probably wanted to return the favor. I didn’t want to discount that.

“All right,” I said. “If you’re sure, then I’d love to have the two of you with us.”

“Thank you, mister.”

I lifted my plate of half-eaten curry from the table and stood up. “Then let’s head straight to the parking lot.”

“Oh? What’s this? Not taking your skis with you?”

“I hate those things. They’re too hard to move around in.”

“But we’re heading into the snow-covered mountains. Aren’t skis the best gear for the occasion?”

“...All right. Let’s bring them along.”

After leaving the restaurant, we retrieved our skis and poles from the hotel locker room. Still in our ski gear, the four of us headed to the parking lot.

A short flight in the terminal later, we spotted the magical girls. We were in the middle of the vast Hida Mountains, looking down at their jagged peaks from the sky. On the huge screen floating inside the terminal, we could see Magical Pink and Magical Blue discussing something.

Thanks to the mechanical life-form’s crazy technology, we could clearly hear what they were saying. It was even translating Ivy’s English into Japanese in real time, which I was personally very thankful for. And thanks to Ivy’s Magical Communication, Magical Pink could understand her just fine, too.

*“Ivy, you’re right. The Fairy Drop’s signal is stronger than yesterday.”*

*“Maybe it was buried somewhere, and the crazy stuff that happened this morning uncovered it!”*

*“What crazy stuff?”*

*“Didn’t you see the news, Sayoko? The big blizzard here disappeared within seconds. The mechanical life-form was talking about it right next to me. Apparently, she used her spaceship to do something.”*

*“...I didn’t know.”*

Just as my neighbor and Abaddon had said, they seemed to be in the middle of searching for this Fairy Drop thing. Despite their breezy-looking magical girl outfits, they didn’t seem cold at all. Maybe their Magical Barriers helped keep them warm.

“Now that she mentions it,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “the youngest daughter’s beam did graze this area.”

“Yeah, I vaguely recognize the shape of the mountains around here,” I said.

After Type Twelve’s beam hit the peaks, they had appeared somewhat altered. I could see some of them a short distance away. While Type Twelve had camouflaged the changes, it seemed that if you actually set foot on the mountain, they were still visible. From what I’d seen on the internet, the authorities had banned mountain climbing in the area for the time being. No doubt that was the bureau’s doing.

“I have a question for my little sister,” said my neighbor. “Do you know what they mean by ‘the Fairy Drop’s signal’? I was wondering if you could pick it up, too, since mechanical life-forms have such incredible technology.”

“Elder Sister, I am very happy to receive such a compliment. However, this terminal’s onboard sensors have not detected any unusual signals. If necessary, I can dispatch an investigation ship.”

A familiar voice echoed through the terminal in response to my neighbor’s question. We’d parted ways with Type Twelve in the hotel parking lot, but this terminal was a part of her, too. Maybe they were being synchronized in real time despite the distance. Because of this, it felt like she was standing right next to my neighbor.

“If you can, I’d appreciate it.”

“Understood. Dispatching an investigation ship from the lunar

base.”

“The moon feels closer than ever these days,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. It was a sentiment I wholeheartedly agreed with.

We could see a camouflaged helicopter flying a short distance from the magical girls as well—probably military. Judging by the distinctive markings painted on its side, there was little doubt either Captain Mason or some of his people were onboard.

“Type Twelve, could you pick up the audio from inside that helicopter over there?” I asked.

“Acknowledged. I will bring a small pod close to the target and attempt to collect audio data from the outside.”

Type Twelve responded right away. It was always worth asking. I’d expected she wouldn’t be able to, so I was a little surprised. Almost immediately, we began to hear two adults’ voices being broadcast into the terminal.

*“Captain Mason, should we contact the government about Lieutenant Ivy’s report?”*

*“No, let’s keep this to ourselves for now. We don’t want them getting their hopes up just to be let down like last time. The higher-ups are already tearing their hair out over the mechanical life-form’s attack. The Fairy Drops may provide us a means to fight back, so I want to proceed carefully and make sure we’re certain.”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*“More importantly, it’s highly likely the mechanical life-form is intercepting everything connected to our wide-area access network. We can’t afford for this information to fall into other nations’ hands. We’ll need to show up there in person to give our report.”*

*“Now that the government is handling certain matters on a verbal-only basis, they must be hard-pressed for information.”*

*“We can travel back and forth with Lieutenant Ivy’s Magical Field in no time at all. That said, I don’t want to make her shoulder that burden alone. If possible,*

*I'd like to secure the Japanese magical girl as well, and soon..."*

Type Twelve was probably analyzing the audio feed and eliminating environmental sounds, such as the noise from the helicopter's rotors. She was doing a great job, and the conversation came through pretty clearly. Thanks to her, we were able to recognize the primary speaker's voice right away.

It seemed Captain Mason was discussing things with a subordinate. Naturally, the conversation was taking place in English and should have been incomprehensible to us. But just as with Magical Blue, their words were broadcast in Japanese simultaneously via an auxiliary audio channel. It was like a scene clipped out of a movie.

"Seems another country may well snatch up our magical girl and bring her home with them," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

*"Hmm. If possible, I'd like to be friends with her,"* said Abaddon.

"I'm against it," protested my neighbor. "I don't like how she picks fights everywhere she goes."

"The youngest daughter is particularly interested in this means of fighting back against mechanical life-forms."

As we shared our conflicting impressions, there was a change on the screen showing the magical girls.

"Sayoko, I just felt it from over there!"

"Me too."

Apparently, they'd found the Fairy Drop.

The girls used Magical Flight to move toward a valley slightly lower than the ridge. The whole area was sheer white, blanketed in snow, and it didn't seem like there was anything there. At least, nothing my eyes could discern.

But the girls' movements betrayed no hint of hesitation, so we followed them.

Eventually, we arrived at a row of several protruding cliffs. Together, they formed a complicated, maze-like configuration. Captain Mason and the others were hovering a good distance away; helicopters would probably have a hard

time traversing this kind of landscape. The terminal wasn't a good fit, either, due to its large size.

We decided to approach the area on foot and all hopped outside.

"Whoa! I'm flying!" my colleague exclaimed. "This is incredible. Ever since I saw you all, I've wanted to try this!"

"Please lower your voice, Ms. Futarishizuka," I said. "We don't want them to hear us."

*"We're perfectly hidden, but yes, if you could quiet down just in case, that would be great."*

Once we left the safety of Type Twelve's terminal, keeping us hidden fell to Abaddon and his demon powers. We had our vehicle retreat and stand by in the sky some distance away. Ms. Futarishizuka—the only one here who couldn't fly on her own—was in my arms.

As we floated through the air, we saw the magical girls reach a spot below the cliffs. Hovering just above the surface, they began looking around, searching. We stayed several meters away at a slightly higher elevation and watched them.

"Captain Mason, we found the Fairy Drop!"

"Excellent work, Lieutenant Ivy. We don't want to make the same mistake as last time, so please store it in your Magical Field until we can return home. If you need, I can ask our partner for advice. They're on standby elsewhere."

"I'll be all right! I double-checked the instructions beforehand!"

Magical Blue and Captain Mason conversed for a while over their radios. We could hear the former with our own ears, while the latter was coming in through our translator earphones. Type Twelve was routing the audio signal from the terminal directly to our devices.

"Good to hear," said Captain Mason. "Then recover it quickly."

"But, um... It seems to be possessing a bear!"

We could indeed make out a bear in front of Magical Blue—an adult Asian black bear. It was up on its hind legs, roaring at the two magical girls.



Considering the season, it should have been in hibernation. Maybe the mechanical life-form's attack this morning had woken it up. From above, we could see signs of several avalanches, and they looked very recent.

"You can eliminate the bear," said the captain. "Prioritize the Fairy Drop."

"Huh? Wait, sir... I d-don't want to *kill* it."

Magical Blue was a kindhearted girl. Magical Pink, on the other hand, was merciless. As her friend hesitated, she fired a Magical Beam at the bear. The blast was about as thick as a roadside sign's metal pole, and it penetrated straight through the target's chest, boring a big hole right in the charming patch of white fur unique to its species.

Blue's sad voice reached us shortly afterward. "Ah..."

Asian black bears were smaller than brown bears, but adults were still taller than elementary schoolers. And because of their thick, fluffy fur, they seemed much larger. Still, from the magical girl's perspective, it probably looked adorable.

The target collapsed onto the snow without so much as a chance to cry out. Blood flowed from its chest wound, dyeing the white snow a deep red.

Once the bear stopped moving, the two magical girls slowly approached it. When they reached its side, Magical Pink's expression tensed. She looked quickly to the left and right.

"Ugh... The Fairy Drop's signal disappeared."

It seemed they'd lost what they were looking for.

Not a moment later, a change came over Magical Blue.

"Mmph, ugh..."

She looked sadly at the bear. Her expression was so full of regret and grief that she seemed about to burst into tears. When she spoke, her voice sounded awkward and closer to what I'd expect from a child her age.

"Poor bear! That poor bear!" she cried out, hugging her magic wand in both arms. She looked for all the world like a child throwing a tantrum. "I don't want to do this anymore! I hate it!"

Every other time we'd seen her, she'd had an amiable, undaunted air about her. Now, though, it was like the dam had broken, and all her feelings were pouring out with her tears. To me, this seemed like a normal reaction for an elementary schooler.

"I want to talk to Mom and Dad! I want to play with my friends!"

"Ivy, the signal...", Magical Pink said, her voice rising in surprise.

I recalled a similar event from my past. At my last job, one of my coworkers, who had always been calm and polite, suddenly cried out and punched our boss before running away. He never came back to work. He must have had enough, and his stress gauge finally shattered. Things like this even happened to adults, so how could I blame a child?

However, it turned out I was way off target. What Magical Pink said next suggested a very different cause for her friend's outburst.

"Ivy, did you get possessed?! Snap out of it!" Pink pleaded desperately.

Apparently, this drastic mood swing was due to external factors. Considering the exchange I'd just heard, it had to be the Fairy Drop.

"Uh, I think Magical Blue might be in trouble," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"It's like she's a whole different person," I agreed.

*"Considering the situation, I have a feeling the Fairy Drop is to blame."*

"I agree with Abaddon," said my neighbor.

As we discussed the situation, we noticed another change in Blue's behavior. She raised her wand in the direction of the helicopter—the tip was pointed right at it. It looked like she might fire a Magical Beam at any moment.

"Uh, am I crazy, or is the blue girlie aiming at the helicopter?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Abaddon, please take Ms. Futarishizuka," I said.

*"Gladly!"*

After handing over my colleague, this magical middle-aged man frantically burst into flight.

I descended, landing in the snow. Casting my barrier spell in front of me, I slid between the magical girl and the helicopter. I'd already blocked this attack from Magical Pink in the past. I didn't know how many I could take, but I was sure I could handle at least one.

A moment later, the beam fired.

As expected, it was heading straight for the helicopter. For a moment, my vision was blanketed in light—the whole world was white.

"Ugh..."

The Magical Beam caused the air to shake and tingle. My barrier spell took the brunt of it. The collision occurred only fifteen or so centimeters from my eyes, scattering light everywhere.

"Ivy, you can't!"

I heard Pink's voice from the other side of the light.

At the same time, a shrill noise sounded from the same direction.

The Magical Beam swung upward and began to weaken. It shrunk rapidly until it vanished like the last bits of water coming out of a closed faucet. All of this had happened in only a few seconds.

With the light gone, I could see Magical Blue collapsed on the snow. Magical Pink was squatting down next to her.

She looked up at me. "Why are you here, magical middle-aged man?"

"I'm sorry. I've been watching Ivy. I knew you two were here looking for something, but I don't know any more than that. And I'm not here to fight you, of course."

"Why were you watching her?"

"I teach her class at school. We've been having ski lessons on a nearby mountain since yesterday. I saw one of my students doing something I didn't expect, so I followed her to find out what was going on."

"...Oh."

My excuse was a little rough around the edges, but Magical Pink accepted it

without objection.

As soon as I blocked the Magical Beam, I lost my invisibility. Abaddon had explained before that if someone touched me physically, they'd be able to see me, and in some cases, sounds could clue them in, too. After what had just happened, this was inevitable.

"Ah..." Magical Pink made a sound.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"The Fairy Drop signal disappeared."

"You said before it was possessing Ivy, right?"

"Yes. I sensed it from her. But now I don't sense anything."

"I see."

Apparently, they could only detect its presence when it was possessing someone. Personally, I thought the term *possession* sounded pretty dangerous. In the end, we never got to see what this Fairy Drop thing really looked like.

Not long after I started talking to Magical Pink, I heard my name called over the helicopter's speaker. "Mr. Sasaki, I'd like to speak with you," came Captain Mason's voice. "If you have others with you, I'd like to talk to them as well. I grant you all permission to board this helicopter. And when you come, I'd like you to bring that magical girl as well as Lieutenant Ivy with you."

His phrasing left no room for objection. I was certain if I tried, I'd hear from my boss right away. On top of that, talking back was physically impossible—the helicopter's rotors were way too loud, and a human's voice couldn't reach that far. So I turned back to Magical Pink and relayed the captain's request.

"I'm sorry, but could you take Ivy and me to the helicopter?"

"Okay."

She seemed to realize the people in the helicopter were Magical Blue's friends and replied straightaway.

After tossing her magic wand into her Magical Field, she lifted Magical Blue under her right arm and grabbed onto me with her free hand. A moment later, I

felt a tug, and the next thing I knew, my feet had lifted out of the snow and off the ground.

Her power was stunning. No normal child had this much arm strength. Maybe it was another one of their Magical abilities—Magical Muscle, perhaps. Otherwise, this would make no sense. If she pinned me down, I'd never escape her.

"Do you want to hide your magic abilities?" asked Magical Pink. She was sharp.

"I do," I said with a nod.

As we approached the helicopter, the hatch on the side opened up. People in camo gear appeared from inside and guided us in. *It's like a scene from a movie*, I thought distantly.

The interior of the helicopter had a flat bottom and was actually pretty roomy; there was enough space for several adults to move around inside. Along either wall was a row of benches, which you could fold up to make more room. If they were all down, I imagined you could transport a good crowd of people.

After boarding, I immediately came face to face with Captain Mason.

"Welcome, Mr. Sasaki. First, I want to thank you for saving us from mortal danger. We almost died from friendly fire. If that attack had hit us directly, the entire helicopter would have been vaporized."

"I'm just glad I made it in time, sir."

The captain smoothly held out his hand, so I grasped it in response. Apparently, people from his country really did exchange handshakes all the time. I thought that was just something they did in the movies.

"We heard what Lieutenant Ivy was saying through our intercoms," he continued.

Next to us, Magical Blue lay on one of the long benches. A soldier was providing her with first aid, fitting her with an IV and an EKG. She looked like a patient who had just arrived in the emergency room.

She was still unconscious. But I heard someone say her life wasn't in any

danger, which relieved me somewhat. It might have been nothing more than a pretext, but she was still my student. I couldn't allow her to die during ski lessons.

"If possible, I'd like an explanation for the magical girl's reaction to the lieutenant's remarks," said the captain. "We don't know what had her so out of sorts. People start panicking in the field all the time, but the lieutenant's mental state seemed perfectly stable until it suddenly wasn't."

They must have picked up Magical Pink's response from the mic on Magical Blue. The captain's attention was on Pink at the moment.

Usually, a stare like his would have anyone shaking. The man was tall and very muscular—and he even had a gun at his waist. If someone like that stared at me like he meant business, I'd be terrified. But Magical Pink didn't seem bothered at all.

"Ivy was possessed by the Fairy Drop," she explained.

"Possessed?"

"I think that's what happened."

"Sorry, I'm not understanding. Could you elaborate?"

"There are different kinds of Fairy Drops. That one probably has the power to possess people and animals. We could detect it while it was possessing the bear, but once it stops possessing something, even magical girls can't find it."

"I see."

The first time we met, Captain Mason used English as a way to assert dominance. But with Magical Pink, he started out speaking plain Japanese. It seemed he was serious about bringing her over to their side. I stayed quiet and listened to them talk.

"Did you see the Fairy Drop with your eyes?" he asked.

"It looked like a little bug."

"Can you tell what it's doing at the moment?"

"It flew away."

“Can you detect it right now?”

“No.”

“...That’s unfortunate.”

I still had questions about what the Fairy Drop did when it possessed someone. In simple terms, it seemed to stretch your mental endurance to the limit, leaving you completely helpless against your own emotions.

But Captain Mason didn’t ask about that. He probably didn’t want to give us that information. I suspected he would secretly bring in an expert from among his subordinates and attempt to ascertain the target’s effects and motives at some later time.

For now, his attention turned from Magical Pink to me.

“By the way, Mister Sasaki, you seemed to be floating in the sky by yourself before.”

*Oof, he’s sharp.* “That’s right. I had the help of a demon named Abaddon.”

“Is that also why you were able to hold off the Magical Beam temporarily?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

“I would have liked you to bring them onboard as well.”

“They’re currently with the mechanical life-form, and she refused to come with us.”

“Well, I suppose there’s nothing we can do about that. She rejected us once already. We don’t want her blowing another crater in the Earth’s surface because someone forced her to do something she didn’t want to. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if she took out one of our cities.”

“I feel the same, sir.”

As I’d expected, the angel-demon proxy war provided the perfect scapegoat to hide my otherworld magic. And I could even use Type Twelve as an excuse for refusing to bring the others with me. After all, considering past events, there was a very good chance she *would* refuse.

I looked over at Magical Blue, hoping to change the topic. “Captain, would we

be able to return to the hotel? I'm worried about Ivy's condition. They'll have a medical team on staff, and we might be able to find a psychic with healing powers."

"I appreciate your consideration. Let's do as you suggest."

"Thank you for understanding, sir."

The others were probably listening in to our conversation using the translator earpieces from Type Twelve. Ms. Futarishizuka was in the terminal with them, and I trusted her to pull out without anyone noticing.

And so the magical middle-aged man and Magical Pink ended up going back to the hotel in the captain's helicopter.



## <Off-Campus Class, Part Two>

In the end, Magical Blue was fine.

She woke up not long after we set off and hopped out on her own once we landed. She was full of energy and had no external wounds. The army surgeon in Captain Mason's retinue said all her vitals were normal. She resumed her ski lessons that afternoon.

Apparently, being possessed by a Fairy Drop didn't do all that much physical damage. Socially, however, the harm could be immeasurable. It seemed you retained all your memories from the time you were possessed, and depending on your personality, you could wind up tormented by shame.

After regaining consciousness, Magical Blue apologized profusely to the captain and his subordinates. They'd all responded with smiles, but it seemed her mental state would be a crucial matter to study for the team moving forward. Otherwise, their most powerful ally could turn into a fearsome enemy at any moment.

"So you lot can't even get along with a magical girl who's already on your side, eh?"

"That's some harsh criticism, but we aim to continue improving."

"Well, if you keep striking out, then it'll be game, set, and match for us."

Once we were safely back from the mountains, Ms. Futarishizuka and the captain started bantering. I pretended not to notice them.

Earlier, during Magical Blue's checkup, Captain Mason had gotten pretty desperate trying to recruit Magical Pink. *You saved my subordinates, please let me thank you*, he had said, pulling out all the stops. In the end, his struggle bore fruit; the girl agreed to stay the night at the hotel.

I suspected she was simply charmed by the proposition of curry for dinner.

Personally, I was concerned she might run into a psychic from the bureau assigned to the hotel. We couldn't let her see anyone using psychic powers, or she'd start raising hell. But Captain Mason seemed to want her so badly he didn't mind taking that risk.

All forces standing by inside the hotel, including my coworkers, had been ordered not to use their powers.

As we were handling all this, the sun set. Our second day of ski lessons was over, and dinner and bath time went by in a flash. The next thing I knew, I was lying in bed in my assigned room. Each faculty member got a single room to themselves—Captain Mason and Miss Inukai had probably talked the principal into it.

I'd be putting off my trip to the otherworld again today. I was so exhausted that I fell asleep the moment I lay down. I slept like a rock that night—I didn't even wake up once.

And then the final day of ski lessons was upon us. The plan was to take the buses back to school that afternoon, but they'd still packed ski classes into the morning hours. By now, even the students in the beginner class could ski down the course without much help, and they were finally granted access to the lift. For that reason, everyone was all the more excited to go out on the slopes.

I was one of the very few exceptions, of course. I was still anxious about the idea of skiing down the hill, so once again, I'd be stuck practicing how to use my gear at the bottom of the slope. Even a simple snowplow turn, easy on a flat area, was immediately more difficult when performed on a moderate incline. Parallel turns were a pipe dream.

As I was practicing, one of the boys from Class 1-A came up to me. "Mr. Sasaki, um, do you have a minute?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "What do you need?"

Was there a problem that required a teacher's help? Despite my shaking legs, I somehow managed to straighten up and turn to face him.

If I recalled correctly, this was Nakajima, number eighteen on the class roster. If you lined everyone in class up by their height from shortest to tallest, he'd be

pretty far in the back. He had a good amount of muscle on him—he probably worked out regularly—and he seemed pretty large for a middle school student. The paperwork I’d received had noted he was a regular on the soccer team despite being a first-year.

Most striking of all were his pronounced facial features. They lent him a mature air, making him quite handsome. And indeed, he seemed popular among the girls. While kids his age, in the midst of puberty, tended to hang out with others of the same gender, he regularly chatted with the girls, so I figured he was pretty used to interacting with them.

“Sorry for springing this on you so suddenly,” he said, “but I like you, Mr. Sasaki!”

“.....”

I’d assumed someone was hurt or something. This caught me completely by surprise.

“I mean, uh, I like you as a teacher and everything, but that’s not what I meant,” he stammered. “I mean, I like you as someone of the opposite sex. Wait, no, that sounds strange. What I mean is I really like you, in a *like* like way!”

*Again with this? Honey trap, part three.* Maybe whatever organization was after me had gotten desperate after Ms. Mochizuki and Suzuki both struck out and finally decided to switch genders.

“So, uh, w-would you go out with me?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Nakajima, but I can’t see you that way.”

“Is it, um, because we’re both guys? I can dress up like a girl if that’s better!”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh. Well, I guess our ages are pretty different, but maybe we could start as friends...”

He was staring at me, and he looked oddly desperate. I wondered if his family had been taken hostage or something. It seemed like a distinct possibility. Depending on the organization, it might be something much, much worse. If

that was the case, I needed to be careful with my responses.

“If you don’t mind my asking, why me?”

“You protected a girl at our school and fought off a terrorist, didn’t you? I saw the whole thing. You were... Well, I guess that’s...when I fell in love with you.”

“.....”

Apparently, he’d witnessed my fight with the child soldier.

Actually, if this *was* a honey trap, then it was possible the organization behind him had told him about it. Either way, as a bureau member, this was a grave emergency. But since I was in the middle of a ski class, I couldn’t do anything about it right now.

*Maybe I should delay my response and discuss the matter with my boss,* I thought. But just then...

“Hey! There he is! With the magical middle-aged man!”

“Oh-ho. Not too late, I hope?”

Magical Pink and Ms. Futarishizuka came shredding down the course toward us. The former was in her magical girl outfit, sliding across the snow without the need for skis. She was probably using Magical Flight imperceptibly close to the ground. Her outfit was conspicuous, however, and as a bureau employee, I couldn’t just stand by and watch.

“Excuse me, could you—?”

But before I could finish asking her to explain, she went ahead and told me.

“That person is possessed by a Fairy Drop.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice,” added Ms. Futarishizuka.

Spraying snow everywhere, the two of them came to a stop right next to me. The way they swung themselves to the side to hit the brakes looked so cool. I wanted to ski like that, too. Why was it so hard to learn?

They were both staring at Nakajima, the boy who had just confessed to me.

“...Huh?”

I turned back toward him. Was he really possessed by a Fairy Drop? In that case, had he professed his love to me because that was how he actually felt? From the way Magical Blue had gone nuts the day before, we knew this Fairy Drop made people unable to control their emotions. It probably messed with the target's sense of reason.

And if that were true, then this *wasn't* a honey trap.

In fact, it was literally the first time anyone had ever confessed their love for me without an ulterior motive.

*No, wait a minute*, I thought. What if Ms. Mochizuki and Suzuki hadn't been honey traps, either? Was it possible they'd approached me because they just... liked me, plain and simple? *No, dream on. There's no way*. But I supposed it wasn't totally impossible.

All of that information flashed through my brain in an instant. Then, a moment later, Nakajima closed his eyes and crumpled forward. I rushed to catch him so he wouldn't hit the ground.

That was when I saw something fly out of his back—it looked like a small bug. It was round with a shell, kind of like a male rhinoceros beetle, and a little bigger than the end of my thumb. And it was buzzing away *very* quickly.

"It's getting away!" exclaimed Magical Pink.

"Catch it! Catch that little monster!" shouted Ms. Futarishizuka.

Right away, Magical Pink and Ms. Futarishizuka's attention shifted from Nakajima to the insect. The beetle was fleeing straight toward Ms. Mochizuki, who was sliding our way. She shouted to us enthusiastically as she approached.

"Mr. Sasaki! I heard you were bad at skiing! I can teach you if you like!"

The bug seemed to have a pretty accurate grasp of its surroundings. Immediately, it lowered its altitude, zoomed out of her line of vision, and went around behind her. Partly due to her goggles, Ms. Mochizuki didn't notice the beetle. As she slid up to us, she shifted her skis to one side and stopped.

"Oh? Ms. Futarishizuka, who might this girl in the adorable—?"

The bug, unbeknownst to Ms. Mochizuki, locked onto the nape of her neck. It

crawled inside her ski gear, then dug into her skin.

“Ack...”

As the bug burrowed into her, she gave a full-body shudder. Not a moment later, her behavior changed completely.

“Graaaaaaah!”

She tossed aside her poles and squatted down on the snow, still in her skis. Then, without a shred of regard for her surroundings, she started screaming. She looked like a kid throwing a tantrum.

“No! I can’t do this anymore! Gross, gross, gross, gross, gross, gross! It’s so gross!”

“...Ms....Mochizuki?”

The total one-eighty had me flummoxed. Ms. Futarishizuka and Magical Pink were the same. Our jaws all dropped as we stared at her.

Then, as we watched, she slowly straightened up and leveled a terrible glare directly at me.

“Ugh! Don’t get the wrong idea, all right?! I’m only talking to you to get promoted! Why else would a young woman like me want to seduce an old man like you?! Argh! Just saying it out loud makes me want to vomit! Gross! Disgusting!”

*Ah... How sad.*

But this made more sense. Her current reaction was perfectly normal.

“It possessed someone else!” exclaimed Magical Pink.

“Catch it! Catch that stupid bug while it’s still possessing her!” shouted Ms. Futarishizuka.

The two of them immediately jumped on her. But as they did, the bug detached from Ms. Mochizuki’s neck and buzzed away into the sky, evading the two girls’ grasping hands.

*That’s one fast beetle, I thought.*

Released from the Fairy Drop, Ms. Mochizuki lost consciousness just as

Nakajima had, falling forward onto the snow. I wanted to catch her, but I was already holding the boy, so I was forced to let her fall.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, could you catch—?”

“Oh no, it’s getting away again!” shouted Magical Pink.

“Not on my watch!” exclaimed my colleague. “I’ll catch that bug if it kills me!”

Ms. Mochizuki fell to the snow with a thud. Ms. Futarishizuka and Magical Pink were completely absorbed in chasing the beetle and paid no mind to the unconscious woman. Then another person approached from the direction the beetle was fleeing.

It was the girl who had come up to me the day before last—Suzuki, number nine on the class roster.

“Mr. Sasaki! I can teach you how to ski again if you want! I bet you’d love that, right?”

As I thought, the insect was *very* aware of its surroundings. It dropped several meters toward the ground and flew around behind the girl. Then, exactly as it had with Ms. Mochizuki, it went for her neck. Suzuki didn’t notice what was happening and came to a stop right next to us.

“Huh? Wait, Ms. Mochizuki and Ms. Futarishizuka are here, too?”

The bug grabbed hold of her ski gear. Then, just like before, it dug into her skin at the nape of her neck.

“Ack...”

Her body lurched, and she reacted just like Ms. Mochizuki had.

“Graaaaaaah!”

“Um, Suzuki...?” I said, already guessing what was about to happen. I hated how my gut was only ever spot-on at times like these.

“I can’t stand this anymore! I just can’t! Why do I have to do this stuff?! I haven’t even had my first kiss! I’ve never even fallen in love! Why the hell should I have to flirt with this old man?!”

“Please, Suzuki, calm down.”

“But if I don’t try my best, they’ll kill Dad! They’ll kill him...!”

As expected, the two of them *had* been honey traps. But while Ms. Mochizuki was only after a promotion, it seemed Suzuki had a very serious reason for what she was doing. It seemed she’d fallen into the hands of some bad people. I had to do something.

“Suzuki, please settle down. They won’t kill your dad. We’ll take care of it for you. So please try and relax. There isn’t anything to worry about.”

I repeatedly tried to soothe my student, kneeling down despite my trembling legs to meet her at eye level. But, in a fit of rage, she swung her ski pole straight into my gut. Now I was emotionally *and* physically injured.

Meanwhile, Magical Pink and Ms. Futarishizuka only had eyes for the Fairy Drop.

“You won’t get away this time!” said Magical Pink as she flew through the air toward Suzuki’s neck.

This time, I thought for sure she had it.

But seconds before she could grab the beetle, it flitted away from my student and escaped Magical Pink’s grasp.

Once it had gotten a little ways away, it made a sudden turn and changed direction. Apparently, it had decided *she* would be its next target. It flew around her head, aiming for her back.

In a panic, Magical Pink tried to dodge it—but the bug stuck itself firmly to her neck.

“Agh...!”

Just like what happened to Ms. Mochizuki and Suzuki, Magical Pink’s body lurched. Seeing this, my colleague screamed.

“No! Crap! It just took over the most dangerous person here!”

“Ms. Futarishizuka,” I called out. “Get away from there!”

There wasn’t a doubt in my mind how Magical Pink would start acting if she lost control of her emotions. We all knew what was in *her* heart. Ms.



Futarishizuka quickly fled the scene.

Meanwhile, I reached for Suzuki's hand as she fell to keep her from hitting the snow. But I was already supporting Nakajima with my other arm. They may have been kids, but I couldn't carry two middle schoolers at once. Instead, I laid them down on the snow.

As I did, Magical Pink made her declaration.

"All psychics must die!"

Her eyes were fixed on Ms. Futarishizuka. She raised her wand without a hint of hesitation.

"Eeeeeek!" my colleague cried out in fear and jumped to the side.

A moment later, Magical Pink's Magical Beam sizzled through the air, punching a hole in the ski slope. Ms. Futarishizuka barely managed to dodge the strike, and her gear got a little scorched. But a moment later, Magical Pink was getting ready to fire again.

"Stop this! Ack, it's gonna hit me! It's gonna blow me to smithereens!"

Expertly manipulating her skis and poles, Futarishizuka slid across the snow. With her lightweight body and superhuman physical abilities, she was practically a star athlete. Her moves would have made any Winter Olympics contender go white in the face.

Magical Pink lifted herself into the air and gave chase.

Meanwhile, I took out my smartphone and contacted Miss Inukai. She picked up after two and a half rings—a lot faster than I'd expected.

*"Hello, this is Inukai."*

"Hello, sorry, this is Sasaki. There's a problem at the slope. Could you evacuate the students? Also, Magical Pink is in a state of confusion. Please do *not* send out any psychics."

*"I, uh, I understand. I'll deal with it immediately!"*

After a few moments, avalanche alarms started going off all over the resort, and the scattered students hurriedly withdrew from the area.

Across the slope, Magical Pink and Ms. Futarishizuka continued their game of tag in the snow. Possibly out of consideration for her environment, my colleague took the backcountry route, with Magical Pink hot on her tail. They were quickly disappearing into the distance.

I took off after them. Using just a touch of flight magic to get myself into the air, I fake-skied across the snow.

The area had a lot of trees, and I hurried through them, listening for the sounds of battle.

Soon I spotted Ms. Futarishizuka, backed into a corner. She must have hit a tree because she was sitting against its base, and one of her skis was gone. In front of her was Magical Pink, moments away from firing her beam.

“I will kill all psychics!”

This magical middle-aged man desperately flung himself into the line of fire, using a barrier spell to protect his coworker. The beam covered the entire barrier, and my vision went white once again.

I looked down, but I wasn’t particularly injured. I’d caught the beam just before it reached Futarishizuka, much like when I’d protected the helicopter from Magical Blue the day before.

I heard my colleague’s voice from behind me. “Ah, you saved me. I really thought I was done for this time.”

“I’ve always been curious,” I said. “If a Magical Beam hits you and vaporizes you until there’s nothing left, would your psychic power still work? I feel like you could easily get back to normal if you were just, say, hit by a train or something.”

“You’re asking *me* that?”

“Well, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Ms. Futarishizuka stood up on her own; I didn’t have to use any healing magic. She didn’t seem seriously hurt, either. With practiced motions, she found her missing ski and put it back on her foot, then picked up her poles.

“Could you hold her here?” she asked. “I’ll go around behind her.”

“You sure that’ll work?”

“Come on. Think about it. This is my time to shine.”

Without waiting for a response, she dove out from behind the barrier spell and made her way around the magical girl. Magical Pink realized what was happening, and a moment later, she swung her Magical Beam around after her target. The ribbon of light roared through the sky, chasing my colleague. Soon my vision cleared up, and I could see them both again.

Ms. Futarishizuka found herself right in the beam’s path and tried to twist her body to dodge it.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t completely avoid it. The telephone pole-sized ray of light gouged out part of her midsection. Blood splattered, dyeing the powder snow around us a pretty shade of red. *That had to hurt.*

But she ignored the pain and used her poles to close in.

“Huh...?!”

Magical Pink tried to leap back. But Ms. Futarishizuka’s hand reached her first. It all happened in an instant; she didn’t even have time to use Magical Flight.

Ms. Futarishizuka tossed her poles to the side and jumped at her target. After a blindingly quick grapple, Magical Pink fell to the ground. Ms. Futarishizuka straddled her, grinning. From the side, she looked like a little kid excited about all the snow.

At the same time, the Magical Beam dissipated.

“I got the stupid Fairy Drop thing!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka happily, thrusting her right arm into the air.

In her fingers, I saw the beetle we’d all been chasing. But now I was worried it would try to possess *her* next. Thankfully, my prediction didn’t come true. I waited a few moments, but no changes came over my colleague.

Nervously, I walked over to her.

“See? Check it out. Look at the stinger on its butt—it’s going in and out.”

“That’s how it gets you, huh?”

“Sure looks like it. I can’t imagine what else this thing is for.”

The pointy bit at the end of the beetle’s body was currently extending and retracting over and over. I assumed that, like a hornet’s stinger, it was normally kept inside the thing’s body. And since it looked like a beetle, it was a pretty nasty sight. It was really creeping me out.

“I have no idea who would have made such a thing or why,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “If some criminal cooked it up for fun, I imagine the fairy world must be full of people with a lot of free time on their hands. Or maybe it’s on some divine mission we can’t possibly fathom.”

“Maybe Type Twelve will figure something out if we ask her to analyze it.”

“Indeed, this is exactly the sort of thing we should be using the mechanical life-form’s handy technology on.”

“I’m more worried about *her* since she was just possessed,” I said, glancing at Magical Pink.

“Hey, the blue girlie was fit as a fiddle, wasn’t she?”

Immediately, Magical Pink started to move. Her limbs twitched, and then her eyes flew open. Judging by how quickly she’d recovered, I figured she was only suffering from temporary unconsciousness caused by the Fairy Drop detaching. If Ms. Futarishizuka had used her energy-drain ability, she probably would have been out a little longer.

“Oh, looks like she’s up,” said my colleague.

“.....”

Magical Pink glared silently up at the girl currently straddling her stomach.

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t squirm or throw a tantrum, either.

Was she not feeling well? Or did she just not like how Ms. Futarishizuka was straddling her?

Eventually, she murmured her catchphrase again.

“...I...will kill all psychics.”

“If you’re just trying to hide your embarrassment, could you be a little less

threatening?”

As we’d learned from Magical Blue’s testimony, Magical Pink could remember everything she’d done while possessed. She must have understood what Ms. Futarishizuka was getting at.

But for her, maybe this wasn’t so much covering up her embarrassment as putting up a false show of strength—a last-ditch effort at intimidation.

“I heard from another psychic,” she said.

“What’d you hear, lass?”

“That you can use your power to kill anyone you touch.”

“Yes, that is one of the things I can do with it.”

I hadn’t seen her use it lately, but as a psychic, Ms. Futarishizuka was a born assassin. If you counted up all the psychics *she’d* killed over her many years of activity, it would probably dwarf Magical Pink’s record. And if not for Peeps’s curse, I’d be way too afraid to hang around her.

“I wanted to kill more psychics,” said Magical Pink.

“Hmm?”

“I wanted to get revenge for my family and friends.”

“Are you telling us your last words or something?”

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it already.”

Magical Pink’s tone was flat, as if she’d given up on everything. Sprawled out on the snow, she looked up at Ms. Futarishizuka in a daze. Now that my colleague had her pinned, it seemed she’d made up her mind to give up.

Considering her life up to this point, I understood why she’d feel that way. The person straddling her didn’t seem to have a clue, however.

“Wait, I didn’t say a word about *killing* you,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“...Why not?”

Magical Pink’s brow furrowed. Her gaze was on the other girl’s side—on the painful-looking wound, still bleeding, that she’d gouged out with her Magical

Beam. It was beginning to heal already, thanks to Futarishizuka's psychic power, but it had to hurt like hell. I could see her brightly colored insides from all the way over here. To be honest, if an image like this had popped up in my browser, I'd have hit the back button in a heartbeat—it was that grotesque.

"I shot you," said the magical girl.

"Yes, I seem to be getting shot an awful lot lately. How many times does this make?"

"...Yeah. I shot you a lot."

"But hey, I'm still hanging on. Isn't that pretty impressive?"

"....."

Ms. Futarishizuka had suffered a similar attack just the other day. In fact, it felt like she got hit with a Magical Beam every time the two of them met. Since she could quickly heal minor wounds, maybe Magical Pink was going easy on her while still hanging on to her desire to kill all psychics. If she'd done the same to Miss Hoshizaki, our senior would be dead two or three times over by now.

"Why won't you kill me?" asked Magical Pink. "I'd kill me."

"Easy question, easy answer. Because I want to be your friend."

And yet Ms. Futarishizuka answered her with a smile—a bright, cheery smile that stretched from ear to ear. It frustrated me to admit, but it was very cute.

However, the fact that this was Ms. Futarishizuka made the otherwise beautiful scene feel incredibly fishy. There were only seven magical girls in the world. In her smile, I saw the bottomless greed of every big shot desperate to get a hold of one. And I was just as rotten an adult as she was.

But Magical Pink's heart was pure.

"....."

She seemed surprised as she looked up at the girl straddling her stomach. To her, Futarishizuka's smile must have looked positively radiant. While she wasn't as bad as Type Twelve, she wasn't a very expressive person, so it was quite striking to see her so shocked.

“Why so surprised? I said the same thing before, didn’t I?”

“But every time I see you, you nag at me. That’s all you do.”

“Well, of course I do. Someone I want to be friends with is doing something bad.”

“You attacked me, too.”

“I have the right to self-defense.”

“That excuse won’t get you very far in Japan.”

“I don’t like how kids these days are so smart about the legal system.”

Magical Pink was right. Ms. Futarishizuka had given her a good scolding just yesterday, right before she took a Magical Beam to the shoulder. If you added in the attacks that didn’t manage to hit her, she was probably Pink’s number one target by a wide margin.

And yet she’d still extended a hand to help her out. That must have resonated with the girl.

“...But I still want to kill psychics,” she said.

“Awfully stubborn, aren’t you?”

“You wouldn’t understand. Only people who had their family killed would understand.”

“You don’t say.”

Still lying on her back, Magical Pink looked up at Ms. Futarishizuka, her expression serious. She closed her fist around a clump of fresh white snow. She wasn’t hurting people because she liked it. Maybe that was why she felt both relief and irritation at everyone’s shows of goodwill.

“You can never understand how I feel,” she said.

“If you’re going to be that insistent, then why don’t I figure out which psychic killed your family and bring them to you? Then you can do whatever you want with them—boil them alive, fry them up, anything. But in exchange, you have to promise not to kill any other psychics from now on.”

“Huh...?”

“That way you’ll have your revenge, right? Keep in mind it may take some time, though.”

I remembered fishing around in the bureau’s database myself for the person responsible for killing Magical Pink’s parents. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find any useful leads—at least not at my access level. Maybe I’d get a different result if I asked Type Twelve.

*But if the boss finds out, I thought, I’ll get an official reprimand. And mechanical life-forms can’t lie.*

“Why are you being so nice to me?” asked Magical Pink.

“Remember what I said last time? There’s a lot of kids who went through the same things you did.”

The two stared at each other. Then Magical Pink seemed to realize something.

“Futarishizuka, did someone kill your family, too?”

“Who can say? It was so long ago that I can’t quite remember.”

“.....”

My colleague was still settled on the girl’s stomach, but her tone was detached.

She’d freely admitted to being alive during the Meiji Restoration. Considering her background, it was quite likely someone *had* killed her family—more likely than if she’d been born a little more recently, anyway. Then again, she could just be lying to placate Magical Pink.

Nevertheless, Futarishizuka’s statement seemed to resonate with the girl. She loosened her fist, letting the packed snow fall through her fingers.

“Is that why you saved me?” she asked.

“It’s an adult’s job to save children who have gone astray.”

“But you’re smaller than I am.”

“Not on the inside, I’m not.”

Now that she’d gotten a reaction, Ms. Futarishizuka pulled the old-lady card.



She'd had several exchanges with Magical Pink over the past few days, and it seemed like we were finally reaching a conclusion.

"...Okay. Let's do what you said."

"Oh! You mean it?"

"If you keep your promise."

"But of course! Consider it done. I may look like a child, but this old lady's got plenty of clout with people in high places. I've been doing a lot for the magical middle-aged man over there, as well. You'll just be another member of the club."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

Personally, this scene was making me anxious. After all, Ms. Futarishizuka still had the Fairy Drop in her hand, and its stinger was still going in and out. If that thing got to her neck, any amicable relationship with Magical Pink would be permanently off the table. *Can't she at least get off the girl?*

"...Thanks."

Magical Pink's face broke into a smile—the kind you'd expect from a child her age. Thinking back, I was pretty sure this was the first time I'd ever seen her make such an expression.

The fact that she'd launched an attack while possessed meant she really *had* wanted to kill Ms. Futarishizuka. Seeing her give in like this told me something inside her must have changed.

With any luck, things between us would be a little different going forward.

*And now Ms. Futarishizuka has Magical Pink in the bag—hook, line, and sinker.*





It took a lot of effort, but we finally retrieved the Fairy Drop. Ms. Futarishizuka insisted she get to keep it since she was the one who caught it. Normally, its retrieval would have been Magical Pink's job, but she'd cut all ties with the fairy world and abandoned her role long ago, and she didn't want the thing anyway.

We waited until Ms. Futarishizuka's wound had finished healing and then withdrew back to the hotel. The three of us headed for my neighbor's guest room, hoping to have Type Twelve look into the Fairy Drop, which we'd asked Magical Pink to store in her Magical Field for now. Apparently, that was the proper way to handle them.

Fortunately, Type Twelve was in the room when we arrived. She walked over as soon as she saw us.

"Father, Grandmother, the ski lessons were canceled because of an avalanche warning. However, according to my advanced weather predictions, there is zero possibility of avalanches all day."

It seemed *someone* wasn't too happy about the order to evacuate the slope. Her expression was blank, but I could tell from her words how strongly she wanted me to make the lessons resume. Since it was impossible to predict the scope of the damages caused by Magical Pink while she was possessed by the Fairy Drop, the students had all been told to wait in their rooms.

"Isn't it almost time we blew this popsicle stand anyway?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. "It's the last day. Once we eat lunch, we're going back to school."

"Grandmother, your remark is incorrect. There is still almost an hour until lunch."

"Yes, but you'd have to get your gear back on and all that. In reality, you'd have less than thirty minutes. If it were just you, it'd be one thing, but we'll have to go around telling all the other students, too. By the time the boys start fawning over you, it would be time to leave."

Futarishizuka and Type Twelve were standing by the two beds as they talked

this over. My neighbor, Abaddon, and Magical Blue were nowhere in sight. They must have left the room for some reason. I suspected Magical Blue was with Captain Mason. Perhaps my neighbor was out looking for the Fairy Drop on her own.

“If I had known this would happen,” said Type Twelve, “I would have conducted the experiment elsewhere. Emotions are dangerous indeed.”

“Experiment? What do you mean, *experiment*?”

“.....”

Ms. Futarishizuka immediately locked on to Type Twelve’s casual remark. I was quite curious myself, and I could see Magical Pink staring at her, too.

“You just said something *very* important, didn’t you, dear?”

“Grandmother, the youngest daughter would like to exercise her right to silence.”

“You know, in times like these, your inability to lie is very handy indeed.”

“Father, Grandmother is bullying me.”

Type Twelve had been at the mercy of her emotions a lot recently. She fixed me with a stare as if begging me to come to her aid. Unfortunately for her, though, I was on Ms. Futarishizuka’s side in this conversation.

“This experiment of yours. Is it related to the Fairy Drop?” I asked.

“.....”

Apparently, I was correct.

I’d been curious why the little bug had ended up at the ski resort. It seemed too unlikely to have been a coincidence. My first guess was that it was pursuing the magical girls, and yet the way it reacted to Magical Pink didn’t quite add up. But if Type Twelve was involved somehow, then everything made sense.

“Don’t tell me you captured that bug before we did?” Futarishizuka appeared to be thinking the exact same thing I was.

“Would there be a problem if I did?”

Type Twelve had stopped trying to hide the truth, and now she was getting defensive. Though her expression remained blank, of course.

Type Twelve’s terminal and quite a few of her smaller pods were present when Magical Blue was possessed by the Fairy Drop. One of these had apparently pursued the target in secret and captured it.

I recalled the time the alien had scooped our swan boat out of Lake Kizaki. I could vividly imagine one of her saucers using some kind of tech to surpass the forces of momentum and gravity and capture the flying bug.

“I suppose we mustn’t forget that you’re public enemy number one for our species, hmm?”

“Grandmother, your thinking is correct. As a mechanical life-form, I cannot permit the existence of anything that would threaten me.”

“In that sense, isn’t the *biggest* threat to your well-being that glitch of yours we’ve all been dealing with?”

“That is a separate issue. We are not talking about that right now.”

“There! See? You’re doing it again.”

Type Twelve probably couldn’t overlook Captain Mason’s remark about using the Fairy Drop to fight back against her kind. Otherwise, she probably would have used it to ingratiate herself to us the moment she had it.

At any rate, I was curious about the results of her little experiment. Ms. Futarishizuka seemed to be on the same page and quickly asked for information.

“So how’d it go? If you were analyzing that thing, I’d love to hear what you found.”

“It is impossible to gain an understanding of the Fairy Drop’s

internal structure using non-destructive methods. More detailed analysis would require disassembly. However, because reconstruction may not be possible, I opted to run an experiment to gather data first.”

“Ah, I see. So that’s why you let the bug loose on the slope.”

“However, Father and Grandmother captured the target before I was able to collect enough data.”

So our running into the Fairy Drop was no coincidence, either. We knew the things were deeply connected to magical girls. I figured Type Twelve chose the ski resort for her experiment because two of them were already there.

After hearing the mechanical life-form’s defense, Ms. Futarishizuka’s attention turned to Magical Pink.

“The term *fairy world* sounds quite fanciful. Are you sure it’s not more of a science fiction world?”

“I don’t know,” replied Pink. “I killed and tanned the fairy who talked to me before I learned about it.”

“Ah, yes. That was where that fluffy thing around your neck came from...”

She’d told us the fur muffler she wore used to be a fairy. To me, it just looked like some small animal from Earth. Because Pink was our country’s magical girl, I still hadn’t met a fairy in person. Captain Mason acted like he already knew one through Magical Blue, but I doubted he’d tell me anything about it.

“So would the fairy world get mad at us if we broke this so-called Fairy Drop?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I don’t know that, either. But the fairy really, really wanted the Fairy Drops.”

“That gross bug doesn’t seem all that great to me.”

“Fairy Drops come in other shapes and sizes. My fairy said they affect their surroundings in different ways and that we should help find them since a bunch of them got scattered all over the Earth.”

I'd been thinking that the bug was creepier than its cute name implied. However, it seemed there were quite a few other variations of these things. That made the name Fairy Drop sound a little more believable.

"Hmm," Ms. Futarishizuka groaned. "That makes it hard to decide."

I, too, was hesitant to incur the fairy world's displeasure. After all, we had no idea how powerful they were. According to Magical Pink's explanation, there were many other Fairy Drops besides this one. If that were true, we could always collect a few more in secret before we made our move.

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed to feel the same way. "I suppose we'll shelve the matter for now."

"I believe that's best as well," I said. "According to Type Twelve's explanation, we can probably dismantle it for research whenever we want. And as long as we have help from a magical girl, we can always look for more."

"If you're curious about the Fairy Drops, I can help you find them," said Magical Pink. Now that she'd made peace with Ms. Futarishizuka, her attitude toward us had softened several degrees—though I was a little wary of my colleague getting such a huge power boost.

"Grandmother," said Type Twelve, "why do you not scold the youngest daughter?"

"Eh? Why would I do that?"

"Because I exposed Father and Grandmother to danger."

"Nothing we can do about that, dear. We may be a family, but we all have our own priorities. Of course, if we were a *real* family, you would have felt compassion for us and hesitated to do what you did."

"....."

In contrast to her kindness toward Magical Pink, Ms. Futarishizuka was prickly with the mechanical life-form whenever she got the chance. *Type Twelve probably would have preferred to be scolded*, I thought, seeing her at a loss for words.

To conserve family harmony, I decided to help her out as her pretend father. “Type Twelve, if it were Miss Hoshizaki, I’m sure she would have scolded you.”

“Father, is that true?”

“Yes. There’s no doubt about it.”

Since Magical Blue had been fine physically, we knew there was a good chance no one would be hurt. Type Twelve must have understood that, too—though it reminded us once again that she saw humans only as resources.

“Oh, great,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “So the son is siding with his wife and child and betraying his mother?”

“I believe balance is important in all things,” I said.

“Father, you seem to be acting kinder toward the youngest daughter today,” noted Type Twelve.

“Argh!” my colleague exclaimed. She swayed from side to side in protest, trying to act cute. “Fine! I don’t care. I have the magical girl!”

“That’s so off-putting, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

She’d changed out of her bloodied clothes as soon as we returned to the hotel. The students and our coworkers were all around the building, after all. Instead of her preferred kimono, she was dressed in the suit she usually wore at school.

“Grandmother, in my view, you are only trying to use that girl for your own ends.”

“I know that’s what she’s doing,” said Magical Pink. “But her offer is worth it to me. So I don’t care. As long as she keeps her promise, I’ll help.”

“You’re such an awful person, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I commented.

“Can’t you put it more nicely? It’s just how the world works. Give and take.”

I’d felt a shiver run down my spine at Type Twelve’s remark. Nevertheless, Magical Pink seemed much more mentally mature than I’d expected. Or maybe she’d grown tired of going around killing psychics all the time.



“That said,” continued Ms. Futarishizuka, “I’d rather like to avoid any more big commotions like this.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said.

At that point, we heard the hotel room door click. The auto-lock had been disengaged from the outside. The door opened, and my neighbor and Abaddon appeared in the hall leading into the bedroom. Magical Blue was with them. All the room’s occupants had returned.

“There you are, mister,” said my neighbor.

*“Oh, the youngest daughter is here, too,”* added Abaddon.

“Sayoko!” exclaimed Magical Blue. “I’m so glad you’re okay!”

All three of them rushed in when they saw us. Apparently, they’d been looking for us. They’d probably been notified when we passed by the hotel’s security cameras. I could hear the beating of helicopter rotors growing louder outside the room’s window. It seemed Captain Mason and the others had been away from the hotel, too.

At the same time, an announcement came over the building’s intercom. It was the teacher in charge of the first-years explaining the plan for the rest of the day. Unfortunately for Type Twelve, ski lessons were officially over. After an hour or so of free time, we’d have lunch according to our original schedule and then return to school.

Ms. Futarishizuka and I had our own tasks to perform, so we promptly got back to work.



Despite all the crazy incidents, we’d reached the end of our ski classes safely. We’d traveled by bus, and we’d be returning to school the same way.

By far the happiest person on our ride home had to be Ms. Futarishizuka. This had been a very fruitful three-day, two-night stay for her. She’d even made a promise with Magical Pink when we parted ways to meet back up at her Karuizawa Villa later.

“It’s nice to get in a little skiing now and then, eh?” she said, turning to me. “What do you think about going again next week?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass,” I replied. “I can’t even imagine myself looking cool on skis.”

“In that case, I wouldn’t mind giving you some *very* attentive tutoring.”

“Could you please refrain from sexually harassing me in front of the students?”

My coworker was more talkative than usual on the ride back, and having to respond to her was a real pain in the butt. She was smiling—I could tell she was sincerely enjoying this.

In contrast, Ms. Mochizuki was in a terrible mood. She had revealed all sorts of things while possessed by the Fairy Drop, and she must have been feeling pretty uncomfortable. She said almost nothing on our way back. She just sat in her seat, tense and reserved.

Naturally, the two of us said nothing to each other. Would I have to continue teaching under these conditions? I could feel my enthusiasm plummeting just thinking about it.

As for our relative positions, things were somewhat different from the trip out. This time, Ms. Mochizuki sat at one end, followed by Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, Captain Mason, and Miss Inukai. Ms. Mochizuki had purposely sat far away from me, affecting everyone else’s positions.

“Oh!” said Captain Mason in his stereotypical foreign accent. “Ms. Futarishizuka, please allow me to come skiing with you!”

“I’ll think about it once we make a report to our boss about all this,” she replied.

“I think *everyone’s* boss would be happy if you gave me an answer right now!”

For Captain Mason, the off-campus class had been a total bust. Everything he’d said since getting on the bus had been sarcastic. Thanks to him, Miss Inukai was pretty on edge, too.

Two or three hours later, the buses arrived back at school. Nothing happened

on the way, and we weren't forced to take any detours. We took care of all the end-of-day announcements during the trip so the kids could go home as soon as they disembarked. The students spilled out of the bus, got their things from the luggage compartment, formed groups with their friends, and then went their separate ways.

The students in sports clubs were already out on the grounds—class had ended a while ago. The sun was low on the horizon, and the western sky was a deep madder red. There was probably about an hour left of light.

In the middle of all this, I saw a student approach Type Twelve.

“Hey, Twelve, could you come with me for a sec? Let's go behind the school building.”

It was one of the boys in her class. Hayashida, number twenty-one on the class roster, was one of the more attractive guys in the bunch. While Nakajima was fashionable with something of a wild streak, Hayashida had an androgynous charm and looked almost like an idol. I got the impression he was the girls' favorite.

“Acknowledged. I wish to hear what you have to say.”

Type Twelve happily followed him around the building. I couldn't see any change in her expression or body language, but from her immediate agreement, I could tell she was full of anticipation. She probably had some idea of what was about to happen.

“Hey, hey,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Should we just let her go?”

“Abaddon, would you mind helping us out?” I asked.

“Consider it a request from your Disciple, too,” said my neighbor. “If she makes any more waves in class, it will only add to my stress. The others worked hard to get me into this school, and I want to stay here until graduation.”

*“Right. Leave it to me!”*

We went around behind the bus and availed ourselves of the demon's mysterious powers. Now hidden, we followed Type Twelve and Hayashida.

They headed behind the school building, just as the boy had said. The area

was pretty much deserted—the perfect place for secret conversations. From Type Twelve and the boy’s perspective, they were completely alone.

However, we weren’t their only stalkers—several girls had followed the two of them as well. They hid themselves behind the building’s wall and watched the scene unfold.

“Is Hayashida seriously gonna confess?”

“I don’t know how to feel about this.”

“Yeah. You like him, don’t you?”

“There’s plenty of other girls who feel the same way.”

“Well, Twelve is very pretty.”

“But you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“If I were a boy, I would only have eyes for Kurosu.”

“Oh yeah, I get that.”

The girls seemed more interested in Hayashida than in Type Twelve. All the students, male and female, had spent the bus ride home talking about confessing to someone they liked on the last day of ski lessons—and it seemed the moment had arrived.

Type Twelve and Hayashida stood facing each other. They were close enough to touch if they reached out their hands.

Looking nervous, Hayashida said, “Twelve, will you go out with me?”

It was a development we’d all seen coming. I swallowed as I watched. The one receiving the confession was now in a state of pure bliss.

“Ah, affection soothes my heart so.”

From her point of view, this was the culmination of all her hard work at school. She’d probably been hoping for something like this to happen ever since she transferred in.

“If you don’t want to, maybe we could start as friends...”

At the same time, something misty wafted over Hayashida’s face with a *pshhh*

sound. He seemed to notice it and covered his nose and mouth with a hand. However, he quickly brought his arm back down, making it seem like he'd just wiped at his face. He *was* in the middle of confessing to a girl. The gesture was so subtle I began to wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing.

"It is not that I do not want to. However, I would like time before answering."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"In just a few minutes, the truth will become clear."

"...The truth?"

Type Twelve had begun saying things that didn't make sense. The boy was confused, too. They watched each other, not saying anything.

A few moments later, Hayashida, who had been wearing a friendly smile ever since they arrived, seemed to have trouble maintaining his expression. He still appeared to be smiling, but to me, it looked more like a tense grimace. He reminded me of someone struck with sudden stomach pain but unable to rush to the bathroom.

Two or three minutes passed after that.

"Um, Twelve, if you're not sure, you can just tell me tomorrow..." His smile was coming apart bit by bit.

Upon seeing this, Type Twelve finally spoke up.

"I would like to ask you again. Is the affection you direct at me real?"

"Yes, it's real. O-otherwise, I wouldn't have confessed to you!"

Where was that confidence from earlier? He seemed almost desperate now.

Type Twelve watched him, then responded flatly. "Confirming heart rate and body temperature increases in the target."

It was just like that competition on board the UFO where we'd all spoken to her as representatives of our species. It seemed she was monitoring

Hayashida's vitals just as she had done with us. Maybe there were small, invisible pods floating around us, too, and we just couldn't perceive them.

"I ask you once more," said Type Twelve. "Is your affection real?"

"....."

Then Hayashida, still looking at her, went quiet. His smile was completely gone. He clamped his mouth shut and glared at her.

What happened to the confession? At this, we all started talking.

"The boy seems to be acting odd, wouldn't you say?" mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

"It looked like some kind of spray appeared near his mouth," said my neighbor.

*"You saw that, too, huh?"*

My neighbor and Abaddon had also witnessed the mist. Had it affected the boy in some way? I didn't want to intervene, though, since he and the alien were having a sensitive conversation.

But while we were hesitating, Hayashida's behavior changed drastically. He drew in a deep breath, then shouted, "I-if you already realized it, then why didn't you say something?!"

"Realized what?" asked Type Twelve.

"You know! That I don't actually like you!"

His voice echoed behind the school building. People inside could probably hear through the glass.

This was a total one-eighty in only a few minutes. There was no need to go this far if he just needed to use the bathroom. Why had he lied to her about his feelings? Had he lost a bet with his classmates or something?

"My confession was fake! I was lying!"

But wasn't he being a little rude for something like that?

It had only been a few days since I'd taken over teaching Class 1-A, but from what little I'd seen of him, Hayashida was a sunny extrovert who was kind to

everyone; his conduct was beyond reproach. This behavior wasn't like him, and it raised a lot of questions in my mind.

But a moment later, we heard the answer.

"I had to! Or else they were gonna kill my family!"

Apparently, it was Type Twelve's turn to be honey trapped. It sounded like Hayashida's family was being held hostage—something similar had happened to Suzuki.

I'd already informed my boss about the latter situation; Bureau members had probably identified the criminals and were on their way to arrest them. Depending on how large the group was, we might end up asking Captain Mason for help, too.

"Besides, I'm a huge sadist!" the boy continued. "I'm not into attention whores like you!"

Wasn't that a little more information than necessary? He really could have kept that to himself.

"Like the girls I'm dating now, for example. I love toying with Asami's sensitive body, and Oozaki loves to be spanked. And Mitsuya! She developed a thing for anal sex all on her own. Isn't she the greatest?! They're all way more attractive than you!"

He *definitely* should have kept all that stuff to himself. Or maybe he got a kick out of exposing them.

Either way, Hayashida didn't seem to realize a bunch of the girls from their class were watching. As the teacher in charge, I was quite concerned about how all this would play out the following day.

*And yeah, his family might have been taken hostage, I thought, but I think he's a little too excited.*

"Ms. Futarishizuka," I said, "the Fairy Drop didn't breach containment, did it?"

"You were there when I gave the bug to Magical Pink, weren't you?"

"Well, yes. But then what's going on here?"

As we discussed it, Type Twelve and the boy's conversation continued. Hayashida's mental state was clearly not normal. He was practically raving about his sexual preferences. When there was a break in the exchange, Type Twelve spoke up.

"...I understand the situation."

"So what? You think you know anything about me?"

"Humans are lying creatures. As expected, they are not worth trusting so easily."

Type Twelve's wording had gotten awfully blunt compared to our time at the resort. There was no visible change in her expression or behavior, but it was easy to see her expectations regarding the male students were currently in freefall.

It reminded me of the exchange we'd had just before the crater appeared on Earth's surface.

"I really don't like how cold she's being," said Ms. Futarishizuka, clearly concerned.

"I think we should have her talk to Miss Hoshizaki as soon as possible," I agreed.

At that point, the eavesdropping girls burst out from their hiding place and ran up to the boy.

"H-hey, Hayashida! What was all that about?!"

"You said you liked *me*! Why are you going out with Oozaki?"

"Wait a minute! You said you broke up with Asami!"

"Asami, aren't you dating Tanaka?"

"Excuse me? Tanaka's going out with *me*!"

"Oozaki, you were with Yamagishi last night, weren't you?"

"Yamagishi came to see me on day one, too."

"Uh, *I've* been going out with Yamagishi ever since he confessed to me during



summer break.”

“Also, Mitsuya, you got into anal sex by yourself? That’s so gross.”

“Hey, uh, shouldn’t we be more worried about Hayashida’s family here?”

My class was totally falling apart. This was very, very bad.

Amid the chaos, Type Twelve turned away from the boy. Without saying a word, she started to leave. Naturally, the girls angrily called after her.

“Don’t run away, Twelve!”

“Yeah! What just happened with you and Hayashida?!”

“What does he mean, they’re gonna kill his family?!”

“I bet you did something to try and attract his attention.”

“If you’re gonna run, I’m...I’m gonna call the police!”

“You’ve always pissed us off, you know!”

“For real! You keep trying to use your looks on all the boys!”

“What, do you think you’re some kind of princess or something?”

“And the way you talk is so weird. Are you LARPing?”

“Don’t think we’ll forgive everything you do just because you happen to be a little pretty!”

“If you keep it up, we’ll strike back starting tomorrow, so get ready!”

“We’re not going to show you any mercy just because you know Kurosu.”

Even now, the girls were trying to take Hayashida’s side. People would forgive almost anything if a guy was attractive.

But Type Twelve never stopped walking. She headed straight toward the front gates.

And while the girls shouted after her, they didn’t try to follow. They seemed to think talking with Hayashida was more important. When they saw his pained expression, they started trying to console him.

“Well, she’s done a magnificent job,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “And she’s

taking the whole grade down with her.”

“I wonder what she’ll do tomorrow.”

“Probably go crying to her mother and become a delinquent truant. I can’t see this going any other way.”

“Her dependency on Miss Hoshizaki is growing by the day. It’s starting to worry me.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t tell her that, huh? Our esteemed senior can’t keep a secret to save her life.”

“You’re right about that.”

This conversation was getting me down in the dumps, too. My relationship with my assistant teacher was already in the gutter, and now this.

“I guess I have to face the fallout at school tomorrow, huh...,” said my neighbor.

*“Hey, you’ve already established yourself as a gloomy introvert. You’ll be fine no matter how the cookie crumbles!”*

“I won’t argue with that assessment, but I don’t like the way you said it.”

Still floating in the air, we set off toward home. Unfortunately, we were unable to do anything about the students’ confusion.



The total collapse of my class and my rock-bottom relationship with the assistant teacher notwithstanding, the family’s rules were absolute. With the ski lessons behind us, we came together to eat a meal for the first time in three days.

We sat down around the low table in the house aboard Type Twelve’s UFO and began dinner.

Ms. Futarishizuka was on cooking duty that day. Thanks to her, the meal was elaborate and delicious. In my opinion, these moments were the best part of pretend family life. These were also the only times Peeps finally stopped

throwing out jabs at my colleague and devoted himself body and mind to devouring his meat.

A little while after we began our meal, Type Twelve found a lull in the conversation and broached a new topic.

“The youngest daughter has something to tell Father.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I no longer wish to go to school.”

“.....”

She looked at me, sitting the same way she always did, in a perfect formal kneeling position. Her spine always remained straight, and she never once hunched over. The way she placed her chopsticks on her bowl and lowered her arms was the very image of a tea ceremony teacher.

While her attitude would have come across as formal and respectful to just about anyone, her hard tone of voice lent her an oddly serious impression. We’d all seen how her campaign to be class princess had ended, and I found myself at a loss for how to respond.

“The youngest daughter has apprehensions about potential bullying at school,” she said.

“Bullying?” I asked.

“Bullying is an act which makes the heart very lonely.”

“As your teacher, I can’t say I’ve ever seen anyone bullying you.”

If I told her we’d spied on her, it would probably only make her sadder. Instead, I kept my answers noncommittal. We hadn’t planned it, but this conversation was actually quite typical for a real family. I got the distinct impression we were closer to being a family right now than we’d been at any point since this whole thing began.

“According to information available on the internet, such acts among students commonly go unnoticed by their teachers,” she stated.

“What kind of bullying are you experiencing, exactly?”

“At the present time, all attempts have failed.”

“Then why don’t we wait a little while and see what happens?”

“Please understand that if the youngest daughter were to be hurt in the future, I would immediately file a report with the prefecture’s teaching committee and disseminate all the facts of the case to the relevant groups and administrations. I would also circulate video evidence on the internet, thus prompting a call to action that will place me on the side of public opinion, all while I thoroughly ostracize the perpetrators, and—”

“Wait a moment!” interrupted Ms. Futarishizuka. “I think that’s a little *too* proactive, dear! Try to calm down, would you?!”

No matter what we said, it seemed the mechanical life-form was done with school. I could already sense her firm resolve on the matter.

In that case, I would give her a reply based on my own feelings. That way, I would win some points as the understanding father and kill two birds with one stone.

“If you really feel that way, Type Twelve, then there’s no need for you to keep going.”

If she stopped attending school, Ms. Futarishizuka and I could finally quit teaching. I could forget about my relationship with Ms. Mochizuki, and I wouldn’t have to keep teaching a class on the brink of collapse. While I felt bad for the students, I couldn’t do anything about their sex lives.

My only real concerns were regarding Suzuki’s and Hayashida’s families. But I’d already contacted my boss about them and heard back that they were all safe. According to him, the bureau had worked with the JSDF to secure them, and they’d remain under state protection until the organization responsible could be identified. Apparently, they’d be receiving a juicy compensation package, too.

So, in a way, I’d already done everything I could. Perhaps I wasn’t leaving

things better than I'd found them, exactly. But at the very least, I'd nullified all the disadvantages that came with getting a new homeroom teacher. Ms. Mochizuki could handle things going forward.

Incidentally, it turned out that Ms. Mochizuki was the informant in the Little Mika incident. It seemed she'd simply been telling the angel's group what we were up to in exchange for a bit of extra cash. Miss Inukai had questioned her and shared all this with us.

"I had faith that you would say so, Father. You understand your child well, and this makes me very happy."

"Huh? Wait, hold on. You can't suddenly stop attending school!"

However, Miss Hoshizaki was not as approving. She didn't have a good grasp of what was going on at school and had only just forced her way in as a custodian. She sounded desperate.

"Mother? Why are you being so hard on the youngest daughter?"

"Because it's only been a week since you started going!"

"I have been placed in a situation that cannot be fully explained by the passage of time. The youngest daughter's heart is on the verge of experiencing something awful. Mother, you are mostly isolated at your school. It is for that reason that I believe you cannot understand the youngest daughter's feelings."

"L-look, this isn't about me!"

Type Twelve had just unexpectedly exposed the reality of Miss Hoshizaki's lonely school life. The latter looked awfully embarrassed as everyone turned to stare at her.

"If you ask me," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "you brought this one on yourself, dear."

"Grandmother, I cannot ignore your statement."

“But hey, if you’re serious, then I think you should go ahead and quit. You were the one who wanted to enroll in the first place. We don’t have any reason to force you to keep going.”

“But this follow-up viewpoint is very good.”

I was pretty sure Ms. Futarishizuka hated getting up early every morning just as much as I did. *You really have to be a morning person for that job.*

“As your elder sister, I want to support your decision, too,” said my neighbor.

*“Yeah! I think it’s fine!”*

Since my neighbor planned to keep attending her school, it was probably in her best interests to purge Type Twelve from the class as quickly as possible. And I could sense Abaddon’s anxiety from how quickly he jumped in to agree with her.

“With Father, Grandmother, Elder Sister, and Elder Brother in agreement, we have a majority vote. The youngest daughter’s schooling will end as of today. Beginning tomorrow, I will stay with my family in the household as a truant.”

“For being a truant, you could stand to have a little more shame,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Wait a second!” said Miss Hoshizaki. “I still haven’t agreed to this!”

Our family was divided, as always. But maybe this was how real families were. If they had no internal hierarchy, anyway.

“.....”

And in that case, wasn’t this kind of an ideal family, in its own way? Or maybe that was just my opinion as a single man.

Ultimately, what won Miss Hoshizaki over was Type Twelve playing back a recording of her time at school—specifically her conversation with Hayashida behind the school building. As my senior colleague watched the female students close in on him, she heaved a sigh.

“Yeah, that *is* awful,” she said. “In a bunch of ways.”

The video was playing on one of the mechanical life-form’s midair displays, hovering over the low Japanese table. Seeing this made Miss Hoshizaki aware of what was really going on. Rather than bullying, she’d gotten an eyeful of Type Twelve’s princess attitude.

“Right? Keep going,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“But that boy was acting pretty weird, wasn’t he?”

“We’re not sure what happened there, either,” I told her.

Everyone’s attention shifted back to Type Twelve.

“Regarding the change in the target’s mental state,” she said, “I used the culinary ingredients Elsa brought here.”

“Huh?” Lady Elsa gasped, visibly surprised at this sudden inclusion of her name.

Type Twelve ignored her and continued her explanation. “Humans are lying creatures. Both written works and video documents point out from many different angles that words of love must be thoroughly verified. Mechanical life-forms place heavy emphasis on certainty, so I needed to confirm the target’s true feelings.”

“Wait,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Did you use the stuff we hid in the kitchen without asking?”

“Grandmother, your thinking is correct.”

Ms. Futarishizuka stood up and rushed over to check. A moment later...

“It’s true! All the herbs we put in here are gone!”

She and I had personally tasted the effects of those otherworld herbs. Now the change that had come over Hayashida made perfect sense. Type Twelve had probably listened in on our conversation in the kitchen. It would have been easy for her to swipe them without us knowing.

“The effects seemed a lot more intense than when we ate it, though,” I pointed out.

“After removing extraneous components, such as moisture and plant fiber, I added a compound to stimulate the target’s metabolism. When prepared this way, the agent activates in the target’s body much faster than if they simply ingest it.”

“I think I get it.”

Was this what parents felt like when they discovered their kid had smuggled a video game into school? If I’d known it would come to this, I would have explained things to her beforehand and forbidden her from using the herbs.

“Elsa, I would like to apologize for using your ingredients without telling you.”

“Well, I don’t really mind, but...”

Lady Elsa looked troubled as her gaze flitted between us and Type Twelve. It wasn’t a big loss to her. We already knew that the herbs weren’t very valuable.

“In recompense, please tell me if there is anything you desire. The ingredients you brought were extremely beneficial to me. As an apology for using them up without asking, I would like to prepare something for you as payment.”

“I’m happy you feel that way,” said Lady Elsa. “But I can’t think of anything off the top of my head.”

“You may consider my proposal at your leisure. When you are in need of something, talk to me again.”

“Um, okay. I will.”

With that, Type Twelve and Lady Elsa’s conversation came to a close. Filling the vacuum, Ms. Futarishizuka made a jab at the mechanical life-form.

“You made a big deal about your experiment with the Fairy Drop,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but this was your real aim, wasn’t it? You wanted a convenient lie detector for when the boys made advances on you.”



“I assert my right to silence.”

*Sounds like a bullseye.*

Type Twelve turned away from us to look at Miss Hoshizaki.

“And I’d just gotten used to my new custodian job, too,” she said. “I suppose I’ll have to quit today.”

“Mother, from today forth, I want to spend time with you at home.”

“As a bureau employee, I’m not too sure about that, but okay...”

She was probably concerned that this proposal would get in the way of all the extra work she wanted to do. Still, I figured this was a lot better than any of the wild suggestions Type Twelve had made in the past. *Personally, I’d be happy to spend some leisure time with Peeps*, I thought, half-watching some serial drama on the living room TV.



Once dinner was over, pretend family time came to an end for the day. We all returned to Ms. Futarishizuka’s Karuizawa villa and went our separate ways from there.

However, I still had a very important task to carry out that day, and it had to do with the otherworld. Now that Count Müller and I were on the same page, we’d be taking our first step toward reviving Prince Lewis that very night. Thanks to our deeds in the angel-demon proxy war, we now had access to a potential cure for his rotting-flesh curse.

Type Twelve had taken Miss Hoshizaki back to her home in Tokyo, leaving Peeps, myself, my neighbor, Abaddon, and Ms. Futarishizuka. I felt bad for my senior and the mechanical life-form, but we needed to keep this a secret.

“Well, time’s a wastin’,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “How about we get a look at this prince you keep talking about?”

“Agreed. First, I’d like to bring Prince Lewis here,” I explained.

*“So all we need to do is wait, right?”* asked Abaddon.

*“If you could, yes. It shouldn’t take long.”*

In order to undo the curse, we needed to move the prince over to this world for the moment. I wanted to keep the otherworld a secret from my neighbor and Abaddon. I was also concerned about whether the latter’s demonic powers would work in another world. For a variety of reasons, I decided to carry things out here in Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa.

We pushed the furniture in her spacious living room into one corner to make a large empty space, then gathered everyone into the center.

*“Peeps, I’m sorry to ask once again,”* I said. *“But can I count on you for this?”*

*“Don’t be sorry. I should be the one apologizing for having you help us with this matter.”*

With the Starsage’s magic, we traveled from modern Japan to the otherworld and arrived in the royal castle. We were in a room set up underground.

According to Peeps, this space resembling a prison cell was meant for hiding people of high social status. Because of that, it was furnished luxuriously. Its layout was more impressive than most inns.

In the middle was a large bed. And atop it sat Prince Lewis, now a hulking mass of flesh.

Count Müller was in the room with us. We’d visited him a few minutes before in Japan time and given him a heads up, after which he’d shown us in here. Because time traveled faster in his world, I assumed he’d left and come back to meet us.

*Though honestly, I could imagine him staying here and waiting the entire time.*

*“Count Müller, with your permission, we’d like to conduct the ceremony in our world.”*

*“Yes, please do. I believe I will wait here until you return, Lord Sasaki. Should you find my assistance necessary, please tell me right away. I will do whatever you ask.”*

The count's expression was especially serious today.

After finding out Prince Lewis's true objectives, Count Müller's attitude toward him had changed. It seemed he now saw the man as royalty worth serving at the cost of his life, much like King Adonis. I could see how much Lady Elsa took after him. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, huh?*

His daughter, incidentally, was waiting in the Karuizawa villa. I'd asked her to explain the situation to Prince Lewis once the curse was lifted. Since they both spoke the same language, he'd probably accept her words more easily than mine.

"Sir," I said, "I estimate this will take the entire night—or possibly even longer."

"Don't worry about me. For the prince, I would gladly go three days and nights without food or drink."

"I understand, sir."

Otherworld loyalty was, as always, completely insane. I found it a little terrifying. I could imagine the count actually refusing food and drink to keep his word.

*"Then let's be on our way at once,"* said Peeps.

"Thanks, Peeps."

We walked up to the unspeaking pile of flesh. A moment later, the distinguished sparrow's spell activated, and a magic circle appeared underneath the bed. It was larger than normal, encompassing me as well. The next moment, I felt like I was floating.

Then my vision went black, and the next thing I knew, I was back in Karuizawa. Next to us was Prince Lewis, along with his bed.

Immediately, Ms. Futarishizuka got in her two cents. "If I weren't already used to that demon, this thing would have given me a heart attack."

"It does seem somehow similar to Abaddon's true form," agreed my neighbor.

*"Really? I don't see the resemblance."*

I recalled Abaddon's grotesque, meaty guise. The people here were all used to it, and so their reactions to Prince Lewis were subdued. Unlike the prince, however, Abaddon could whiz around and talk even when he looked like a hunk of flesh, making it almost comical. I personally found that aspect a great relief.

"In that case," said my colleague, "could I receive my reward now?"

"You're really sure about this, Ms. Futarishizuka?" I asked.

"If I backed out now, that sparrow would probably kill me."

*"I would do no such thing. If you no longer wish to do this, we need only reconsider our options."*

Ms. Futarishizuka's attention shifted to my neighbor and Abaddon, and her voice took on a more formal tone. "Will you help me? According to them, you're their only hope."

"Abaddon, it's time to show your skills," said my neighbor. "Please do a good job."

*"Yup! Leave it to me!"*

Abaddon nodded enthusiastically, then floated up into the air, stopping right above Prince Lewis's bed. He lifted his arms out in front of him and fixed his target with a serious gaze.

"....."

Even Ms. Futarishizuka, who could never resist a little banter, had on a look just as serious. I knew what she was thinking. Prince Lewis's well-being was quite personal for her. As someone suffering from the same curse, what happened here would be the touchstone that would determine her future actions. Not only would this put us in her debt, but she'd also get to see just how far a reward from the proxy war could get you.

*"Here we go!"*

Abaddon's charming voice echoed through the living room.

Not a moment later, a bright light wrapped around the prince's body. Based on past experience, I was pretty sure something like this would happen, so I'd taken a pair of sunglasses out of my suit pocket and put them on. Despite this,

the scene was near blinding. But there, through the light, I saw the prince's body begin to morph.

The hunk of flesh writhed and pulsed. At first, its motions seemed random. But a few moments later, it started to coalesce into the shape of a human. It looked just like when Abaddon transformed. The prince's volume, which had expanded beyond that of a human body, began to compress.

As this happened, something like a torso emerged, followed by his head and limbs. And once his limbs were back, the rest went quickly. Almost in the blink of an eye, his facial structure was back to normal.

In just twenty or thirty seconds, Prince Lewis's body had been restored to its former state. As the final extremities formed, like his nails and hair, the glow surrounding him faded. Once it was completely gone, I removed my sunglasses and tucked them back into my pocket.

When I turned back to the bed, Prince Lewis was lying face-up on the sheets.

His clothes, however, hadn't returned. He was stark naked.

I realized his bottom half was on full display in front of a group of women. That wouldn't do. Flustered, I untucked the sheet from one side of the bed and threw it back over his body. It felt a little like wrapping up a crepe.

A moment later, the prince's eyes popped open.

"How are you feeling, Your Highness?" I asked.

"No explanations are necessary, Baron Sasaki."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Despite falling into that sorry state, I have been aware of everything going on around me."

"Ah. I see, sir."

His words were clear and sharp. It appeared his mind was fully present and turned on. His tone was firm, as if he would brook no objection. It was very like him.

So Baron Sasaki decided to simply nod and step back.

As I did so, the prince put his hand on the bed and pushed himself up into a sitting position. For a moment, I wondered if he would need a shot of healing magic, but evidently not. He didn't seem to be in any pain; he looked quite energetic, which filled me with relief.

"This prince of yours is *really* good-looking, eh?"

"Ms. Futarishizuka, as I'm sure you're already aware, Prince Lewis holds a very high position in his country. I would appreciate it if you would be a little more considerate about how you address him. I myself have great respect for the man."

"Really?" said the prince. "I am honored to hear that you feel that way about me, Baron Sasaki."

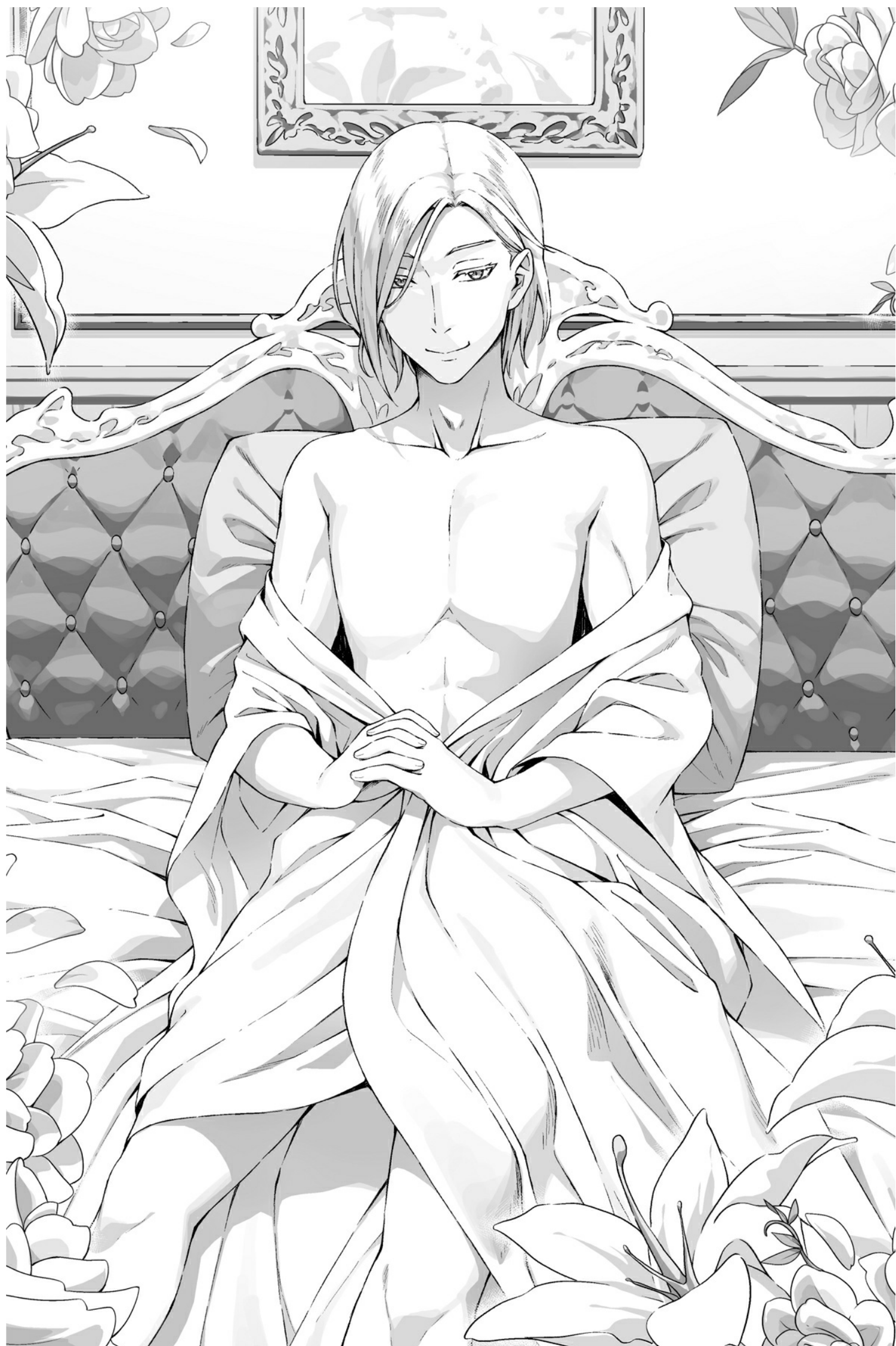
"You're always so modest, sir. I heard about everything you did behind the scenes."

"Ah, yes. You were there with my little brother, weren't you, Baron?"

It was said that the most terrifying aspect of the rotting-flesh curse was that you remained conscious even after transforming into a hunk of meat, able to perceive light and sound for all eternity. It would appear that this was no empty threat—it was a historical fact.

From our brief conversation, I got a good picture of Prince Lewis's situation. Right after the curse activated, I went before him in order to save King Adonis. He must have seen that and remembered.

I was astonished. Despite everything that had happened, he had retained all his mental faculties. He must have an extraordinarily tough spirit. I wished Type Twelve were here to learn from his example. *In fact, I could learn a thing or two from him myself.*



“Sir,” I said, “I know this is sudden, but would you place these earplug-like objects into your ears, then hold this item with the clip up to your mouth?”

I handed the mechanical life-form’s translation device to Prince Lewis.

“What are these?” he asked.

“The language spoken in this region differs from your own, sir,” I explained. “This is a necessary tool for communicating with the others here. That said, if you don’t wish to wear them, I can serve as your interpreter.”

Peeps and I could understand the otherworld’s language without using the devices, but the others here couldn’t. The prince seemed to understand us as well, but he’d looked a bit confused by Ms. Futarishizuka’s casual remark.

“Ah. Another curious item of yours.”

He took the earphones and put them into his ears without hesitation. Then he took the clip-on mic between his fingers and brought it to his mouth. His decisiveness didn’t seem very royal, but it was very Prince Lewis.

“Is this right? I can feel a slight pressure in my ears,” he said.

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“I hear an odd echo. Is that the translation?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“Excellent. That means I can thank you all personally.”

Everyone else was standing by, quietly watching our conversation. Perhaps they were reacting to my extremely formal attitude. Now that the prince was back to normal, Ms. Futarishizuka and Abaddon’s jobs were all but done.

“You were the one who restored my body, yes?” asked the prince, looking at Abaddon. “You appear to be quite noble yourself. Might I have the pleasure of an introduction? My name is Lewis. I’d very much like to know yours.”

*“Who, me? I’m Abaddon. Nice to meet you!”*

“Abaddon, you’re talking to a prince,” said my neighbor. “Can’t you be a little more polite?”



“From what I could find on the internet, Abaddon is a king among demons,” I pointed out. “And if they’re both royalty, I don’t think there’s any problem with them speaking on equal terms.”

Out of curiosity, I’d done a search on his name. Along with a rather dramatic origin story, I’d come upon several fancy titles he supposedly held, like some decked-out influencer. A few of them included the word “king,” so there wasn’t much room for doubt. Even now, he wore a crown on his head. The prince must have noticed it.

“In that case, I am of lower status, as I did not succeed the throne,” said the prince. “I apologize for my rudeness.”

*“Hey, no worries. And I saved you because she asked me to,”* said Abaddon, gesturing toward Ms. Futarishizuka with his eyes. *“If you want to thank anyone, you should be thanking her, not me!”*

Now that it was her turn at last, my colleague greeted the prince with a reverent bow. “Your Highness, my name is Futarishizuka.”

“I am incredibly grateful to you for restoring me from a pile of living flesh and giving me a second chance to live among other humans. You said your name was Futarishizuka? I cannot thank you enough.”

“Please don’t mention it, sir. I’m simply happy that you are safe and sound.”

Ms. Futarishizuka was acting very subserviently, and it was starting to frighten me. She was behaving like a waitress at a high-class hotel, but I got the feeling it was actually just a display of her sky-high pride. I could picture her getting ahead of herself and being fired by evening.

She was cleverly hiding the back of her hand under her kimono sleeve, too, as Prince Lewis was likely to recognize her bruise as the early stages of the curse.

“Baron Sasaki,” said the prince, “if possible, I would like to offer these two a gift to express my gratitude.”

“I understand, sir,” I replied. “I would be happy to help you with that.”

Despite the state of his kingdom, he was still a bona fide prince. When we returned to the otherworld, we’d probably have our pick of treasures from the

royal vault. I guessed King Adonis would readily agree to whatever he said. In fact, I could see Adonis sending us things himself. Even the Starsage atop my shoulder had no objections.

“By the way, Baron, I’d like to discuss another matter with you.”

“What is it, sir?”

But contrary to my expectations, Prince Lewis made a very unexpected offer.

“May I stay here, under your care, along with the daughter of House Müller?”

“Sir, I...”

It seemed he wished to remain on Earth instead of returning to the otherworld. He was also implying that he wouldn’t inform King Adonis of his revival.

“My brother fights valiantly for our homeland to fulfill his promise with his late older brother. I cannot very well undermine that determination, can I? If I were to reappear, it would harm our kingdom greatly.”

“That’s a very reasonable perspective, sir,” I said. “But do you think that’s what His Majesty would want?”

“This is what ruling a country means—what it means to be royalty. Though he may be king... No, *because* he is king, he cannot be caught up in private affairs. And I have a duty to support Adonis’s reign until my body withers away.”

I understood where the prince was coming from. Adonis had only just assumed the throne. If Prince Lewis went back to Herz now, it could split the kingdom in two. Their factions had been clashing only a few months ago. Even if the brothers were on good terms, the nobles would never let it go.

There was even a chance one of the purged Imperialists could use what remained of Prince Lewis’s faction to reestablish power. In that light, the prince’s determination to stay out of his brother’s way until he had a firm foundation made perfect sense.

He’d just made it clear in front of Baron Sasaki that he had no desire to succeed.

“I’ve been through so much in my short life,” he continued. “I’m quite tired. I

doubt anyone would complain if I were to take some leisure time for myself. What do you think, Baron? If you wish, you can use me as a male prostitute for the duration of my stay.”

“.....”

And there was the pièce de résistance—stabbing at our weak point with deadly precision.

When he put things like that, we had no way to object. Just like him, we spent our days longing for the slow, easy life. Even the Lord Starsage was struck dumb. The prince was now in the same position as the sparrow—a refugee from the otherworld.

Incidentally, I wished he wouldn’t throw alarming vocabulary so casually into his statements like that.

“Hey, I feel like I just heard a rather strange turn of phrase,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The prince has misunderstood something. Please don’t worry about it.”

And the way he was lying in bed wearing nothing but a sheet wasn’t helping. There was a strange eroticism to the scene. His eyes shifted away from me, then stopped on the bird perched atop my shoulder.

“I believe the one seated on your shoulder will agree with my proposal,” said the prince.

*“Yes, I’m not surprised to hear you feel that way, Lewis.”*

“After all, I do not have my brother’s strength for leading people.”

*“Different times call for different qualities in a ruler. Perhaps you are not necessary right now, but in the future, the people may need someone like you who can piece together intricate schemes to destroy their enemies. It is arrogant to believe one can rule a country alone, and you would be wise not to entertain such ideas.”*

“I am not worthy of your wise words.”

The distinguished Java sparrow, who had already insisted upon his retirement, proceeded to butter up his successor with a Starsage-like comment,

thus cementing his own position. Though he often acted like he was above the affairs of humans, these little glimpses of his humanity always charmed me.

Meanwhile, Prince Lewis lowered his head with a sincerity I didn't often see from him. He knew *exactly* who the bird was. But there was no helping that—we'd talked about all sorts of things in front of him, after all.

"Look at this stupid bird, all self-important," muttered Ms. Futarishizuka. "Just watching him ticks me off."

"I'm pretty sure you have a good guess as to why, Ms. Futarishizuka," I pointed out.

"That's no reason to get all formal now, though. In fact, it just makes me want to resist him even more."

*"Actually, I find your behavior rather refreshing. Better that than clumsy formality."*

"See? *That's* what I'm talking about."

I suspected Ms. Futarishizuka was trying to assert mild dominance over the Starsage to gain influence with the otherworld faction, Prince Lewis included. After all, if she started off by challenging the prince directly, she'd risk complicating her relationship with Lady Elsa and with me.

*She's amazingly good at knowing when and where to be discreet,* I thought.

As expected, Prince Lewis's next comment was an attempt to ascertain the nature of her relationship to the Starsage. "It seems the ties between you all are more chaotic than I first imagined."

"It may appear that way from your point of view, sir. But please allow me to explain. Regarding your proposition, I am not the one taking care of Lady Elsa here. That would be *her*, the one who saved you."

"...Ah. I see."

I didn't mind giving Ms. Futarishizuka a little boost here. I doubted Peeps would think badly of me for it, either.

She'd helped us a lot, including with this matter. That was probably why the Starsage had acted so uncharacteristically a moment ago and said something

that would raise her position in the eyes of the prince. He must have realized exactly what she was trying to do and helped her out.

While they were constantly at odds with each other, they fell into step when their interests aligned—it was all very businesslike.

“My home may not be much compared to yours, Your Highness,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but please stay and relax for as long as you like.”

“I apologize for making you go to so much trouble,” replied the prince. “I promise I will not be idle all day. You may put me to work however you wish. Also, you can simply call me Lewis, for I have all but abandoned my kingdom.”

Ms. Futarishizuka had just given the green light to Prince Lewis’s stay as well.

Right about then, Lady Elsa asked me a question. “Sasaki, um... C-could I have a word?”

“What is it, Lady Elsa?”

“I know I’m just a freeloader, so I don’t want to be presumptuous. But what do you think of, um, splitting my tasks with him evenly? Otherwise, I would be happy to take on all of his work as well.”

From her point of view, Prince Lewis was a hero who had saved her nation, someone of much higher status than her. Considering House Müller’s position, she couldn’t simply disregard him. Lady Elsa was trying very hard, hoping to have a good report for the count when she next returned to the otherworld.

To be honest, this wasn’t a job for a girl in her mid-teens. The best thing for me to do was affirm everything she’d said in front of the prince.

“I see what you’re saying. I think that’s a good idea as well,” I said.

“You’re certainly an attractive man, so I’m sure there are plenty of things you could do,” added Ms. Futarishizuka.

At this, the prince seemed to take an interest in what the girl had said. “Elsa, what sort of job do you do in this land? I’d very much like to know.”

“W-with all due respect, Your Highness, I am something called a YouTuber.”

“A YouTuber?”

*Oh my god, I thought. People from a fantasy world are talking formally about YouTubing.* From my modern perspective, it was awfully surreal. It gave me the heebie-jeebies, but I endured it and kept listening as they continued.

“It is like a bard or a troubadour in our country, sir.”

“Then do you sing in front of the people?”

“Some sing songs, sir, but I am mainly a storyteller. I provide entertainment meant for the masses, which includes informing them of worldly affairs and trends, thus guiding the people in the proper direction. It is a very similar role.”

“Ah, I see.”

“A-as for you, sir, you would have otherwise taken the reins of our government, and—”

“Your consideration is unnecessary, Elsa. I’ve come to realize that I am not in a position to choose my own line of work. You needn’t worry about it. Otherwise, I would be throwing mud in the face of the one who saved me.”

Lady Elsa was very flustered as she tried her best to answer the prince’s questions. But in the end, he interrupted her and made himself clear. He was trying to be polite, if a little awkwardly.

“That aside,” he said, “with interpersonal relationships this chaotic, I must assume the mechanisms underlying this world are complex indeed.”

“Sir,” I said, “if you wouldn’t mind, I believe we should probably keep your origin a secret...”

“Ah, yes, that’s right.”

Peeps and I had explained this world to Lewis in advance while he was still in the prison cell beneath the castle. We were simply talking at him, but we’d gotten the bare minimum of cultural information across.

At the moment, I was very grateful that Miss Hoshizaki was away. If she’d been here, she would have barraged us all with questions. I wanted to keep the otherworld as secret as possible.

But just as I thought this, the biggest source of “chaos,” as the prince put it, came knocking.

“I have heard everything,” said Type Twelve.

The sliding door facing the yard opened with a light clatter. Naturally, everyone turned their attention toward the sound.

The first one to respond was the villa’s owner. “Oh. I thought you went back up into space.”

“Mother forgot something at Grandmother’s dwelling, so we returned in order to retrieve it. At that time, I overheard a scintillating conversation from inside the villa. In consideration of our future household affairs, I decided this was a matter of great importance.”

“Such sharp ears, as usual,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

As the alien had implied, I could see Miss Hoshizaki behind Type Twelve. Prince Lewis looked at them as well, no doubt wondering who they were.

Then, ignoring the man, Type Twelve entered the villa. Miss Hoshizaki followed behind her.

“The audio collection equipment installed in my terminals allows points of contact to pick up much more than human ears can, even during normal operation. Therefore, I must stress that overhearing your conversation does not violate family rules concerning private time.”

As usual, she was full of excuses. She was quite insistent that she hadn’t broken any of the fake family rules. She already had one mark on her record; one more would incur a punishment.

“Well, not like it matters much,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I accept your affirmation, Grandmother.”

In response to my colleague’s approval, Type Twelve scampered over to us. She stopped beside Prince Lewis’s bed, looked at me, and continued speaking.

“Now then, Father, the youngest daughter implores you.”

*Please don't implore me, I thought. Nothing good ever comes from stuff like this.*

“What are you imploring me about?”

“To listen to what I have to say.”

“If it's just listening, then I don't mind...”

“I would like to spread my wings in the world as a YouTuber.”

Her expression never changed. But I could sense a hint of glee in her choice of words. If this were a manga panel, she'd have a glinting light drawn next to her face.

“Forgive me for asking, but what brought all this on?”

“I decided that, from both an efficiency standpoint and a risk management standpoint, gaining small amounts of love from a large number of unspecified humans would cause the fewest problems. It would also prevent incidents like the one today. With this plan, I stand to gain much and lose little.”

“Oh, great,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “She's figured out the true meaning of love.”

“.....”

*Oh, this girl. What are we going to do with her?*



## Afterword

It's good to see you again. This is Buncololi.

Until now, I'd been releasing one volume of this series in spring and one in autumn, but this book ended up with a slightly irregular winter printing. The reason was to line up with the TV anime broadcast.

As I'm writing this, the show hasn't yet begun, but I'm sure you will all enjoy it.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all those striving to make the anime adaptation a success—first and foremost, director Mirai Minato. I consider it a great honor to be able to work with you all on this precious, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Because of this, the next book, Volume 9, is scheduled to release next summer. From there, new volumes will be printed each winter and summer. I would be incredibly grateful if you kept that in mind.

Now then, regarding the contents of Volume 8, I decided to make it something of a romantic comedy set at the neighbor's new school, which hasn't had much exposure in the past. There have also been some new developments with the magical girls, who have been in the wings ever since Volume 1.

In the future, I would like to keep expanding on the characters like this.

Kantoku helped immensely with this book's production, working on many new designs—both for the new characters and for the school uniforms and field trip outfits. I'm full of gratitude for all of his hard work.

I'm especially delighted with Futarishizuka in her new “female teacher” outfit. She never exposes much skin in her kimono, so seeing her in a suit throughout the book, particularly in the cover illustration, has filled me with more affection than I can express in words.

And now I would like to give a few acknowledgments. First, I thank everyone

who has continued to read the series so far. Enjoying Kantoku's beautiful illustrations along with all of you is my biggest motivating factor as I continue this story.

I'd also like to express my heartfelt gratitude for the incredible support I received during the anime production period—my chief editors O and S (not to be confused with the S in my *Nishino* series), and the entire editing staff at MF Bunko J. Despite having an anime adaptation in the works, I was always shocked at how immediate and kind their replies to my messages were.

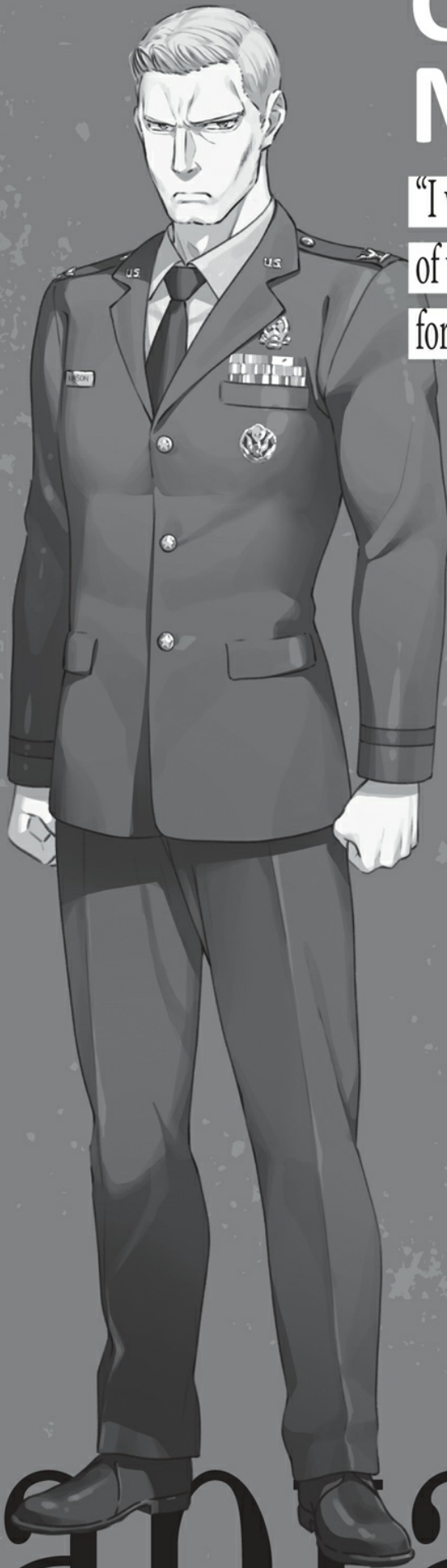
Additionally, I'd like to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart for their incredible support, including the salespeople, the proofreaders, the designers, the voice actors and actresses, bookstores and other stores both in Japan and elsewhere, everyone involved in the anime adaptation, Silver Link., and On-Lead.

This has been *Sasaki and Peeps*, published by Kadokawa and MF Bunko J, originally posted on Kakuyomu. I look forward to your continued support of this series.

(*Buncololi*)

# Captain Mason

"I would like to invite the three of you to become psychics for our country."



**Faction** Modern Psychics

A high-ranking officer in a certain allied nation's military. Normally works at Yokota Air Base.

Frequently approaches Sasaki and the others on orders from his homeland.

Seems to serve as Magical Blue's legal guardian while on official business.

# Captain M

# Ensign Inukai

“Though our time together is short,  
my superior has ordered me to serve  
as your guide.”




**Faction** Modern Psychics

An officer in the JMSDF, she's an elite who recently graduated from the National Defense Academy. Sadly, she became associated with Sasaki and the others during the Kraken incident and is now regularly assigned to work with them, repeatedly forcing her into dangerous situations.

# Miss Inukai





And there to offer her  
a helping hand  
is none other than  
the unstoppable  
mechanical life-form.

With Type Twelve's support, the neighbor  
racks up views as a VTuber despite her  
curt and unsociable nature. But what  
will happen when her less than savory  
activities come to light...?

A view count battle erupts on a video submission site.

Haven't you ever wanted to quit  
your dull nine-to-five and become  
a YouTuber adored by the masses?  
Sasaki and the others are forced into pursuing  
this unlikely dream full of Let's Plays, dance videos,  
vlogs, and musical performances.

As everyone uploads videos  
showcasing their personal  
strengths, the neighbor isn't  
sure what to do. Her life has  
been empty ever since she  
was born, and she has nothing  
to show off to others.

Sasaki and Peeps 9

scheduled for release Summer 2025!!!

# Sasaki and Peeps

Manga: **Pureji osho**  
Original Story: **Buncololi**  
Character Design: **Kantoku**

That Time I Got Dragged into a Psychic Battle in Modern Times

While Trying to Enjoy a Relaxing Life in Another World

~ Looks Like Magical Girls Are On Deck ~



Manga Volumes 1 through 3

now on sale!



# Sasaki and Peeps 8

\*This material was originally included below the dust jacket in the Japanese version

Buncololi  
Illustration by Kantoku

The Gang Heads to School and Ends Up in a Friendly Little Romcom

~ Who Will Get Their Hands on True Love? ~



Hooray! The *Sasaki and Peeps* anime is now airing!



*While watching, I suddenly realized something.*



What?



*The ones doing the character voices are all famed actors and actresses, yes?*



They are. As always, you really did your research.



*Ah, then I am correct.*



Lots of big names from the industry lent this series their support.



*It seems we are quite blessed.*



Indeed. I don't have words to express my deep gratitude.



*Do you have any special behind-the-scenes information for us?*



The scripts used when recording lines are all assigned serial numbers.



*Are they, now?*



Yes, and they sent the very first script for every episode to me, the author.



*They're so considerate, even about small things.*



On the other hand, if I lost it and it wound up on the internet, they'd know exactly whose fault it was.



*Then you must strive to keep it safe.*



Right you are, Peeps.



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