

Psychic Battles, Magical Girls, and Death Games

Can't Contend with Otherworldly Fantasy

~Or So I Thought, but Now a Storm Is Brewing~

3

Buncololi

Illustration by
Kantoku

Sasaki and Peeps



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*"What is it?
Does something concern you?"*

*"I just didn't think Ms. Futarishizuka
would be driving us personally."*



*"Wild,
isn't it?
Intense,
isn't it?"*



Nighttime on the Tokyo Expressway



“H here goes nothing!”

Maybe it would have been cooler to shout out the name of the spell as I launched it, but unfortunately, I didn't actually know what it was called.

“Hmm...”

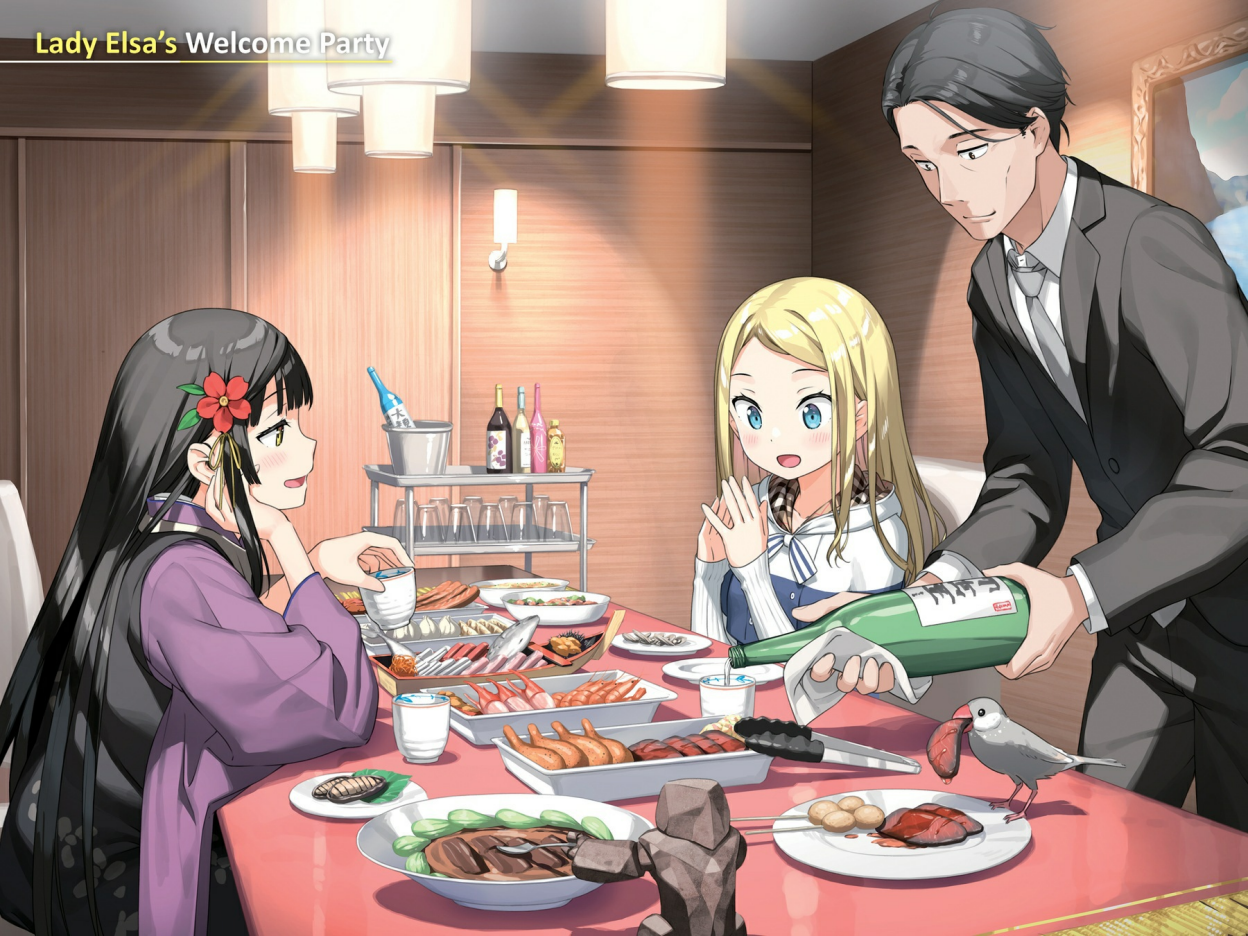
“Mister!”

“...M-Mister?!”



Wrapped in my arms, she looked up at me and cried out.

Lady Elsa's Welcome Party



Peeps's recent posts



10/15/20xx

☆ **SageSummer** @mynameispeeps

Social media, I have arrived



10/15/20xx

☆ **SageSummer** @mynameispeeps

This is truly wonderful



10/15/20xx

☆ **SageSummer** @mynameispeeps

Retweet? You mean I can get meat just by pressing this button?!



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New York

Copyright

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Translation by Alice Prowse

Cover art by Kantoku

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SASAKITOPICHAN Vol.3 ISEKAI FANTASY NARA INO BATTLE MO MAHOSHOJO MO DEATH GAME MO
TEKIDE HA ARIMASEN ~TO KANGAETEITARA, KUMOYUKI GA AYASHIKUNATTEKIMASHITA~

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: January 2023
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain
Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Buncololi, author. | Kantoku, illustrator. | Prowse, Alice, translator.

Title: Sasaki & Peeps / Buncololi ; illustration by Kantoku ; translation by Alice Prowse.

Other titles: Sasakitopichan. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023. | Contents: v. 3. Psychic battles, magical girls, and death games can't contend with otherworldly fantasy ~or so I thought, but now a storm is brewing~

Identifiers: LCCN 2022005660 | ISBN 9781975343521 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975343545 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975345389 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Humorous fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PL846.U63 S3713 2022 | DDC 895.6/36—dc23/eng/20220203

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022005660>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-4538-9 (paperback)

978-1-9753-4539-6 (ebook)

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<Summary of Events Thus Far>

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

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

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

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

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

There, in Peeps's former world, Sasaki was blessed with many fortuitous meetings.

Viscount Müller (now a count), the noble lord of the land and a former acquaintance of Peeps; Lady Elsa, the viscount's daughter; Mr. Marc, the merchant who purchased the goods Sasaki and Peeps brought; and Mr. French, the cook who made them delicious food.

Having gained their support, Sasaki and Peeps's business quickly took off.

Meanwhile, back in Japan, Sasaki ran into someone on the way home from work with mysterious powers who turned out to be a psychic.

Mistaking Sasaki's otherworld magic for psychic powers, an organization recruited him—the Cabinet Office's Paranormal Phenomena Countermeasure Bureau—and he began working there.

This new job came with a much more substantial paycheck, and Sasaki was all smiles. Now with more money, he was able to buy more stock to sell in

the otherworld.

But such smooth sailing didn't last.

While doing business in the otherworld, Sasaki became embroiled in a power struggle involving the noble and royal classes. What's more, a neighboring country rallied its formidable army and launched an invasion headed straight for the town where he and Peeps first began their business. In order to protect the town—and all the people they'd met—Sasaki and Peeps rose to the occasion.

Working together, the pair solved all sorts of problems—they took on tens of thousands of approaching enemy soldiers all on their own, managed to rescue a prince stranded in enemy territory, recovered an acquaintance held captive by a political enemy, and won over a noble from the opposing faction.

But back in modern times, Sasaki's work at the Paranormal Phenomena Countermeasure Bureau proved challenging.

His senior at the bureau, whose orders he followed on-site, was a belligerent girl still enrolled in high school, while his direct superior was a career government official with a lot of suspicious secrets. And his junior, for whom he was responsible, was an old lady in the body of a little girl.

Unable to rely on Peeps for support, Sasaki made use of the magic he acquired while training in the otherworld to survive a series of battles against psychics. With his silver tongue and sharp skills, he took out several high-ranking psychics and survived multiple life-or-death situations.

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

Running into trouble at every corner, life has been a roller coaster for Sasaki and Peeps.

But their goal remains unchanged.

The pair continue to travel back and forth between the otherworld and modern Japan, seeking a future of relaxation and luxury.

Meanwhile, as Sasaki's life only grows more and more hectic, his next-door neighbor's long-standing feelings for him continue to build and smolder within her. She has lived her life dependent on him from a young age, and

now her warped emotions seem ready to burst out into the open.

Behind *her* is a proxy war being fought between angels and demons.

And now that she has a grip on the power granted to her by one of those demons, she stands poised at long last to unleash her romantic desires on Sasaki.

<Territory and Peerage>

After rescuing Mr. Marc and bringing to a close the disputes surrounding the Hermann Trading Company, we returned from the otherworld to modern Japan. There, I spent some time in peace and quiet with Peeps in my apartment, determined to take things easy for a little while.

However, all that was over again in a flash.

A humanoid reptilian—presumably from the otherworld—had, for some reason, appeared on TV news. Section Chief Akutsu had wasted no time in calling me and requesting my presence in the office as soon as possible.

And so here I was in a conference room at the bureau. Aside from the section chief and myself, Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka were also present. Apparently, they'd been called here as well, and both had arrived before me. Right now, they were sitting next to each other across from our boss, so I took the empty seat beside them. With that, one half of the table—which had three chairs on either side—had been filled.

“Now that Sasaki's here, let's get right down to business,” said the section chief, typing something into the laptop he had on the table. A cable was hooked into its external output port, sending his screen to the big display installed in the room. It showed what I'd already seen on TV in my apartment; the announcer's voice didn't play and no text ran across the screen, but it was otherwise the same footage.

We watched the few minutes it took for the creature—a reptilian—to fall out of the sky and eventually breathe its last. The video had been taken by an outdoor surveillance camera belonging to a convenience store. While the news program appeared to have omitted some of it, the video the chief played showed everything from the subject falling from the sky to the moment its strength ran out. Once again, I heard the subject's voice as it came through the speaker in the language of the otherworld.

As soon as the video ended, Ms. Futarishizuka piped up. “Now those are some cheap-looking special effects, hmm?” she said in her usual drawling tones. “It’s all rather pathetic, really.”

“The chief wouldn’t have called us back from our break if those were special effects, you know,” said Miss Hoshizaki, sounding exasperated.

Once he’d seen their reactions, the section chief turned to me. “What do you make of this, Sasaki?”

“Me?” It seemed natural the bureau would wind up handling this situation with the unknown reptilian. It wouldn’t surprise me if there were psychic powers out there that let the user transform into monsters and the like. Miss Hoshizaki had once been attacked by a psychic who could turn his arms into blades, after all.

But why had he summoned only Miss Hoshizaki, Ms. Futarishizuka, and me? There had to be plenty of other bureau members who worked on-site and were free. Wouldn’t it be easier to coordinate if he gave everyone their instructions together?

“Knowing a video like this has been broadcast to the public makes me uneasy...,” I ventured.

“We’ve already taken appropriate measures on that end,” the chief assured me. “Anything else?”

“Could this have been a stray psychic who died from using their power incorrectly?”

“The bureau will be in charge of handling this creature’s remains for the foreseeable future, and while we’re still conducting the necessary investigations, we’ve received preliminary reports that the creature’s structure bears no resemblance to that of a human.”

“I see.”

Then they must have dissected it or something, I thought.

Yet another cause for anxiety. It seemed terrifyingly possible that some sort of illness from the otherworld might escape the reptilian’s corpse, infecting the doctors performing the autopsy and causing a pandemic—a classic disaster-movie formula.

“We’re pressed for time,” the chief said. “So I’ll be brief.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you remember the foreign psychic Ms. Futarishizuka brought to us recently? A bureau member’s analysis has shown the language she spoke is

almost certainly the same as the one this creature used upon falling from the sky.”

“...Is that true?”

Wait, are you for real? They already know? I wonder who figured that one out.

“I’ll spare you the technical details, but that was the conclusion. At the moment, we’re coordinating with outside research agencies to get a more detailed confirmation. We’ll probably receive word from them soon. If needed, I’ll share those reports with you.”

“I’m amazed you figured that out,” I remarked.

“Well, they sounded rather similar.”

“Wait—You don’t mean to say *you’re* the one who noticed, do you, Chief?”

“Who else in the bureau knew of her?”

Wow, Mr. Akutsu is incredibly talented. He’s making us underlings look bad!

“I thought for sure Ms. Futarishizuka had shared some sort of information with you.”

Naturally, she’d never voluntarily spill the beans, but I couldn’t neglect to bring her up in this conversation—not when we’d convinced him that Lady Elsa was a friend of hers. I stole a glance at the young girl in the kimono, praying she wouldn’t say anything suspicious.

“That was the reason I brought her here as well—so she could confirm,” explained the chief.

“Ahh, I see,” she said, nodding and keeping her response brief. She must have picked up my signal. She didn’t flinch once, even when the section chief called on her.

“You told me previously that your friend’s native tongue is a minority language,” said the chief.

“That is what I heard, at least,” she answered.

“Where is the language from, exactly? I’d like to know the details.”

“I don’t know that much. We aren’t *that* close.”

“As of yesterday, you’re an official member of the bureau, like Sasaki and Hoshizaki. I know things are moving rather quickly, but I’d like you to do something for us. I’ll send the video to your phone after this meeting; could you provide a translation of what’s being said in it?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t speak the language, either.”

“...Is that right?”

“Did I forget to mention that last time?”

“.....”

The section chief looked like he didn’t believe her at all. He stayed silent, fixing her with a steady gaze.

“There are plenty of people out there with language-related disabilities, are there not?” she continued smoothly. “And everyone wants to get their hands on a powerful psychic, even if they can’t understand her. Anyone with telekinetic abilities has a promising future ahead of them, after all.”

She continued feigning ignorance and giving bold answers to his questions. She had a supreme talent at communicating ideas with her attitude rather than her words, and it made her extremely dependable in situations like these. Clearly, she hadn’t wasted that long life of hers. I was no good at this stuff, so I was really glad to have her with me.

“Oh,” she said, “do you think I’m lying, perhaps?”

“Am I wrong to consider that possibility?” countered the chief.

“How cruel,” she responded theatrically. “Not even those I work with trust me.”

I doubted one could ever have an ally as untrustworthy as Futarishizuka. The chief would definitely have his eye on her after this reptilian incident, and I’d have to be even more careful than before when traveling between this world and the other.

“...Fine, then. I’ll trust you, as your superior.”

“Truly? You will?”

Apparently, he’d determined he wouldn’t be able to get any information out of her for now. Instead, his gaze left Futarishizuka and he looked over each of us in turn.

Then he addressed our next steps, which I had already more or less surmised.

“In that case, I’d like to assign the three of you to investigate the matter instead.”

“What should we do about the psychic recruitment?” I asked.

“Feel free to shelve that for now.”

“Understood,” I said, nodding.

I suppose he intends to let us go free for a while, then try to catch us in a

lie.

A moment later, Miss Hoshizaki spoke up, her eyes darting between the section chief and Futarishizuka and me. “Will I be with them, Chief?” she asked.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, the previous incident proved that Sasaki’s power has grown,” explained the chief. “For the time being, I want you to stay together, learn how to best use your powers in tandem, and reevaluate your capabilities for future tasks.”

“All right, sir. Understood.” A smile appeared on Miss Hoshizaki’s face. If she had access to more water in the field, she’d be able to do more with her own power. That was advantageous not only to her, but to me as her partner. As the water tank of the team, I’d have to do my best to keep her supplied.



According to the section chief’s instructions, the investigation of the reptilian was to be started right away—that very same day, if possible. When Miss Hoshizaki heard this, she immediately and excitedly declared we’d be heading directly to the scene.

It was a little past four in the afternoon, and the sun was gradually beginning to set. I suspected she was eager to earn both the overtime bonus and the hazard pay we always got when working outside the office. Hazard pay, too, was increased by a fixed percentage outside regular hours.

As always, this high school girl was hungry for money. She pursued her work with ferocity, ready to take the last train home at night, like a corporate drone who had just signed a mortgage. I could picture her back home, gazing at her savings account balance and grinning like an idiot.

I, on the other hand, insisted we start tomorrow, since the sun was already setting. Heading off now meant we might not get home until after midnight. That would inevitably reduce how much time I could spend in the otherworld.

When our two opinions clashed, Ms. Futarishizuka was the one to throw me a life preserver. She suggested Miss Hoshizaki get a read on the situation in the field while the two of us poked around for information about the minority language from the video.

Miss Hoshizaki, no doubt interested in her new and improved water tank, thought I should go with her. But when I reminded her that we couldn't let the new recruit work alone so soon after joining the bureau, she finally yielded and left the office on her own.

And so my work was done for the day. With our meeting at the bureau finished up, I left on time and headed back to my apartment.

The idea was to grab Peeps, who was minding the place in my absence, then meet up with Ms. Futarishizuka at her base of operations. Once there, we'd discuss our plans for the near future, and then I would receive the day's goods and head to the otherworld.

How, and why, had a creature from the otherworld appeared in this one? It made me curious, and I wasn't alone; Peeps must have been wondering about it, too. Even if the bureau hadn't directed us to investigate, I'm sure we would have done so anyway. In that sense, we were killing two birds with one stone, which meant I could make my pilgrimage to the otherworld free of guilt.

I passed through the common entrance to the apartment complex as I mulled this over. But just as I neared my front door, a voice called out from ahead of me.

"Welcome back, mister."

"Oh yeah. Hey there."

It was my next-door neighbor. Dressed in her school uniform, she sat in the same position as always: knees up, with her back to the door of the apartment adjacent to mine. She stared up at me. How many days had it been since I'd last seen her? Thanks to all my stays in the otherworld, I was starting to lose my sense of time.

"You seem really busy lately," she remarked. "Is it work?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah, I suppose it is..." I then recalled how, the last time we talked, she'd cautioned me about making too much noise. Since then, I'd been keeping my conversations with Peeps to a low volume. "Oh right—am I still being too loud? Have you heard anything recently?"

"No, it's okay. I'm really sorry for asking about something so weird."

"Don't be. It's best to solve those sorts of problems right away."

As our conversation began to wander, I held out the plastic bag in my hand. It contained several pieces of sweet bread and soda in plastic bottles, plus a few cans of the latest energy drink as a bonus. I'd bought them all at the

neighborhood convenience store on the way home—the shop I’d encountered the magical girl at before.

“Oh... Is it really okay for me to have all this?” she asked.

A day ago, buying this much might have been pretty tough for me. My savings had been tight after purchasing goods to trade in the otherworld. But now that I’d secured Ms. Futarishizuka’s cooperation, I could throw things into my cart at the store without even checking the price tags.

“It seems like I’ll be pretty busy for a while,” I explained. “My whole schedule has changed and we might not run into each other as often, so I thought I’d give you a bit more. Of course, I won’t force you to accept it.”

“...Thank you,” she said, taking the plastic bag into her hands.

Just then, my heart leaped.

And—I didn’t know why—but I started feeling *really* hot and bothered.

What on earth?

I felt a heat wash over me, like I’d drunk a whole bottle of high-proof liquor all at once. And it throbbed, ever lower, flowing down toward my nether regions.

In short, I was totally turned on. In fact, I was starting to get more excited than I’d ever been before. It was like my body had just decided to floor it.

“Mgh...,” I groaned.

Though my gaze had been on my neighbor’s eyes, it naturally drifted lower. The next thing I knew, I was staring at her chest and thighs—at everything I’d always made an effort not to pay attention to. I gazed at her chest, ample compared to others her age, and at the hem of her sailor uniform skirt, rolled up slightly so as to be even shorter.

“Is something wrong, mister?” she asked.

“N-no, it’s nothing. Nothing...”

What is going on with my body? I hadn’t realized it until she spoke—but I’d taken a half step forward.

This was bad. The word *arrest* flashed through my mind.

“Anyway, I’m, uh, gonna get going,” I said quickly. “Bye.”

Mentally slapping myself for feeling regretful, I managed to turn my back on her. From there, I fled straight into my apartment and immediately locked the door. The entrance to the bathroom was just inside, and as though I’d been holding in an urgent need to go, I dashed in. No sooner had my butt hit the toilet seat than I frantically cast healing magic on myself.

It was a miracle I didn't screw up the spell's incantation. As the magic circle appeared beneath me, it caused a change in my body. That fierce lust that had been so difficult to endure vanished in the healing light.

“.....”

After a few more seconds, I'd calmed down, and my mood had returned to normal. My quickened pulse and the heat in my lower abdomen subsided swiftly as well. The sweat that had broken out on my brow, however, was more persistent. It formed beads, sliding down my cheeks and dripping from my chin, proving that the sensations I'd just felt in front of my neighbor had been no lie, no illusion.



What on earth was that? It was like I'd developed a heart problem. Could it be cardiomyopathy? It had dramatically improved when I used healing magic, after all. But I'd never heard of something like that increasing your libido.

“.....”

Maybe I'd ask Peeps. *Wait, no, that would be way too embarrassing.* I didn't have the courage to tell him to his face that I'd felt uncontrollable lust toward a girl who had only recently graduated from elementary school. In fact, if I *did* tell him, I was sure it would fracture the relationship of trust we'd built.

No, it wouldn't just fracture it—it would probably smash it to smithereens.

I knew if the shoe was on the other foot, I'd be speechless with disgust. Inevitably, the police would get involved.

“...I'll just, er, keep an eye on it for a while,” I mumbled.

I'd have to make an appointment for a thorough medical examination in the near future. I figured dealing with it could wait until after I got myself checked out, at least. And if necessary, it did seem that my healing magic could serve as first aid.



(The Neighbor's POV)

Today I am blessed with my first opportunity in several days to see the man next door.

He must have been away at work, because when he gets home, he is wearing his usual suit. I call out to him, and like always, we exchange casual greetings. Then, just as he has done each time before, he gives me food as charity.

“Oh... Is it really okay for me to have all this?”

“It seems like I'll be pretty busy for a while. My whole schedule has changed, and we might not run into each other as often, so I thought I'd give you a bit more. Of course, I won't force you to accept it.”

“...Thank you.”

He's holding out a plastic bag, and I take it with both hands.

Then I hear a teasing voice from close by say “*Well-loved as usual, hmm?*”

“.....”

The heckling is coming from just beside the man, though its source—a boy who calls himself a demon—is invisible to him. The boy looks like an elementary schooler, but his clothes and features are striking: He has pale skin, much paler than a Japanese person’s, plus light-brown hair. From his epaulets flows a majestic cape, and on his head sits a royal crown.

His name is Abaddon.

After meeting him a few days ago, I looked up the name in an online dictionary in the computer room at school. Apparently, he’s a demon who appears in a verse of the Christian New Testament, and his name means “destroyer” in Hebrew. There was also something about the “bottom of hell.” It was all pretty dramatic.

I throw him a glance.

“Yes, yes. I’ll keep my promise... There,” he says with a nod, seeming a little fed up.

This promise is what binds the two of us together. I compete in a death game held by angels and demons, and in return, I reap rewards for defeating enemy Disciples. I’ve decided to use my first reward to change the nature of my relationship with the man next door.

Abaddon floats through the air and touches his fingertip to the man’s head.

“Mgh...”

The change is immediately apparent. Not a moment later, the man’s expression transforms as he looks at me.

His eyes widen—and his gaze slides downward. It moves past my neck and toward my chest, then down farther, to the hem of my skirt and my thighs. His clinging stare is exactly the same as the one I received from my mother’s boyfriend the other day.

Yes, this is it. This is what I want. *Look at me more.*

No, just looking isn’t enough.

I want you to violate me right here and now.

Hurry. Come on, Hurry up!

“Is something wrong, mister?”

“N-no, it’s nothing. Nothing...”

Feigning composure as he speaks, he takes a half step toward me. The hand grasping the plastic bag trembles over me. I hadn’t really believed Abaddon when he explained what he was going to do, but this *is* a pretty obvious

reaction, isn't it?

An image of myself being taken into his apartment and relentlessly defiled flashes across my mind.

I can't stop the mad beating of my heart.

But right when I'm sure it's going to happen, he swings around to face the opposite direction.

"Anyway, I'm, uh, gonna get going. Bye."

As though fleeing from me, he turns and heads for his apartment. Within seconds, he has vanished inside. As soon as his front door closes, I hear the clacking of a lock. The sound rings oddly clear in my ears, making me feel as though I'd confessed my love and been rejected. Perhaps my body is simply lacking something he desires.

"Looks like your sweetheart has some real mental fortitude," says Abaddon, praising the man. I'm keenly aware of that fact already—that's why I'm so consumed with passion for him.

But what about my reward?

"Don't tell me that's it," I say.

"Just wait a little longer. I'm sure he'll come looking for you."

"He'd better."

Still settled in front of my apartment door, I wait for him—wait for the moment he shows himself to me again. This time, I'll spread my legs just a tiny bit more in order to make a stronger impression. Though it didn't go quite as Abaddon had said, the man's reaction left me pretty hopeful. I could even feel a little bit of moisture in my *own* underwear.

"I have to say, though, you've got a pretty troublesome personality, don't you?"

"...You think so?"

"This would be much easier if you'd just ask me to make him fall for you."

"I believe I explained yesterday that there wouldn't be any meaning in that."

"Still, you're really only aiming to excite him sexually."

"He has to lose out to his own lust, because then he'll attack me of his own free will. That's what will make it amazing. And after he's finished having his way with me, he'll suddenly sober up, look at me, and regret everything—and then I'll console him. It's very important that things happen like that."

"Being on the receiving end of all those feelings is gonna be pretty rough."

“It’ll be fine. He’ll accept me, no matter what.”

“*How do you have so much confidence?*”

“Because he and I are cut from the same cloth.”

“...*I see.*”

The two of us would complement one another, filling in for what the other lacked. We’re perfect for each other. *So please, I thought, come back and violate me. I’m fully prepared. In fact, you could even kill me in the process if you want. Though, I’d be sad to miss Abaddon’s panicked expression when he realizes his Disciple is dead.*

But no matter how long I wait, the man never comes back out of his apartment. Abaddon and I remain there for close to an hour, watching his door.

“Abaddon, how long do I have to I wait for him?”

“*Hmm. Actually, I’m a little surprised at this myself...*”

“Don’t tell me you failed.”

“*Your average human really shouldn’t be able to resist such an impulse.*”

“.....”

After that, we wait for nearly another whole hour.

But even then, my neighbor never comes back through the door.



Once I’d said hello to Peeps in the apartment, we moved to Ms. Futarishizuka’s base. Now that Section Chief Akutsu knew about the warehouse we’d been using on the wharf, we decided to meet up in the high-class hotel from the other day, then travel somewhere else by car. At that moment, we were heading west on the Tokyo Expressway.

I’d decided to mentally shelve the nigh-irresistible base passions I’d felt toward my neighbor for the time being. My considerate pet sparrow had—to my dismay—seen his master rush into the bathroom after getting home and asked if my stomach was feeling all right.

“*How much longer until we arrive, child?*” asked Peeps.

“Oh, a little under an hour or so,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “As long as the roads are clear.”

“...*I see.*”

“In any case, what do you think of that...that reptilian, was it? What *was* that?”

“Reptilians are reptilians.”

“Does your world consist of creatures like that swaggering about?”

While in the car, we discussed what we’d heard at the bureau and exchanged information, helped along by Peeps, who had been minding the apartment in my absence. I’d placed him in the travel cage we used when going out together, which I now held on my lap. The car’s rear windows were tinted—a precaution that was hopefully unnecessary.

“Our world is much more diverse than this one.”

“It sounds a little *too* diverse, if you ask me.”

“Rather than all that, shouldn’t we first consider your boss? Akutsu, you called him? If he is indeed suspicious of us, then I believe we should deal with him soon.”

“Oh, I agree. I was hoping for a curse-buddy.”

If there was one noteworthy thing about this drive, it was the driver—Ms. Futarishizuka herself was at the wheel. That was why we could chat all we wanted in the car, without worrying about anyone seeing us, and even let Peeps in on the conversation. She’d probably taken the driver’s seat specifically for that reason.

But she *looked* exactly like a little girl, so it was quite unsettling. *Actually, it makes me pretty anxious—I feel like we’re gonna get into an accident at any moment.* She’d had to slide her seat up as far as it would go.

“What is it? Does something concern you?” Peeps addressed me as I stared at Futarishizuka holding the steering wheel. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him stir, so I lowered my gaze from the driver’s seat to my lap. My eyes met those of my pet bird through the clear plastic guard.

“Huh? Oh. No...”

“Something about the girl?”

“I just didn’t think Ms. Futarishizuka would be driving us personally.”

“Wild, isn’t it? Intense, isn’t it?”

When I said her name, the driver immediately responded, grinning proudly into the rearview mirror. To my frustration, it made her look kind of cool.

As for myself, I hadn’t driven a car for several years. I’d gotten my license while in school, but my life as a corporate drone had only involved commuting from my apartment to the office and back by train—I’d never had

time to spend on hobbies like driving. I'd become one of those "papers-only drivers" who carried a license but didn't own a car. If I took the wheel now, *I'd* get us into an accident. These intricate Tokyo roads, at least, were out of the question.

"I have a motorcycle license, too. Even managed to upgrade it from the provisional license without taking any classes."

"Wait. Seriously?"

The way she'd phrased it, she must have gotten her license before state-sanctioned driving schools had caught on. I remembered a superior at my old job bragging that back then, those so-called one-shot assessments had an even lower pass rate than the bar exam. Sitting atop a motorcycle had apparently been a sort of status marker. Personally, I was astonished she'd passed, looking like she did.

"Is it truly so difficult to operate these vehicles?" asked Peeps.

"No, not exactly, but..." I trailed off.

"Either way, I doubt a sparrow like yourself would ever manage it," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Keep talking like that, and the curse's crest will grow."

"Eek! Please, don't be so unreasonable..."

What's more, we were riding in a pretty large sedan. It was an imported luxury car—the type with a little goddess ornament on the front of the hood. The whole scene was surreal.

"Getting back to Section Chief Akutsu," I said, "would it be possible to wait before we use a curse?"

"Why?"

"We don't know what kind of friends the man has, remember? He's a government official. He could very well use his power and influence against us before the curse took effect."

"What was that?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. "Does that mean you thought I *couldn't*?"

"Personally, I would've preferred not to have to curse you, either."

"You got what you deserved."

"Grrrrr..."

Our situation with the chief also wasn't as pressing as what had happened with Ms. Futarishizuka. I thought acting now might be going too far. The spell was immediate, so even if we ultimately decided to use it on him, it

wouldn't hurt to wait and watch for a little while first. In the worst-case scenario, we could always have Peeps use magic to put him to sleep, then drag him to the otherworld.

I was much more afraid of what he might do if we pissed him off.

"Then, I will respect your viewpoint on the matter."

"Thanks, Peeps."

"I really would like a curse-buddy, though," commented Ms. Futarishizuka. "Not just one, but two, maybe even three..."

"That said," I continued, "I don't feel right doing *nothing*, so Ms. Futarishizuka, I'd like you to try to get some dirt on him. Can you do that? Apparently, he has quite the connection to your old haunt."

"Oh, I don't suppose I'd mind. I'm just as interested as you."

"I appreciate it."

For a while afterward, we talked in the car about our current plans, trading banter about this and that. Unfortunately, we couldn't think of anything to do about the reptilian, and when the car arrived at our destination, we decided that problem could wait until the next day.

The new base Ms. Futarishizuka had secured was in a harbor on the shore of the Sagami Bay, in one of the many warehouses that lined it. Visually, it was no different from before; the warehouse was about as big as a school gymnasium, with several shipping containers inside it.

I stood in the center and took it all in.

Ms. Futarishizuka informed me that the products I'd previously requested—large amounts of sugar and chocolate—had all been delivered in sufficient amounts. She explained I could take as much as I wanted. A closer look revealed labels on the containers stating their contents.

"Another warehouse on a wharf, huh?" I commented. "Are you involved in the shipping industry, too?"

"What do you mean? It's much more convenient to use sea routes. I'd appreciate it if you put yourself in my shoes, being asked to procure sugar and whatever other odd things you're after. I was shaking in my *geta* wondering what impossible request you'd be asking of me next."

"I see. Thanks for being so considerate."

That got me wondering—what about maritime products? Thinking back, I hadn't seen the ocean from Count Müller's town. If it was a long way away, then I might be able to get a pretty good price for fresh seafood. Maybe I'd

propose sashimi or something equally fancy for the more epicurean nobles.

Actually, wait. Didn't they have freezing magic? In that case, I wouldn't be surprised if seafood was pretty widely distributed. Either way, I figured I'd consult with the others about likely food products, then decide from there.

"Let's head over right away, shall we?"

"I'll leave it to you, Peeps."

Ms. Futarishizuka saw us off as we departed modern Japan.



After crossing over to the otherworld, we first visited Count Müller. Transporting the goods Ms. Futarishizuka had supplied could wait until after we'd confirmed the current situation. The products would be heading to a Kepler Trading Company storehouse, which meant we'd need to have a conversation with Mr. Joseph. I figured the best plan would be to first get a handle on recent events.

And so, we found ourselves sitting on a sofa across from Count Müller in the reception room of his estate.

"I'm glad you're here, Sir Sasaki, Lord Starsage," began the count.

"I apologize for never letting you know in advance of our visits, my lord."

"Julius, I am sorry for our sudden visitation."

"No apologies necessary. I'm well aware of your circumstances."

We traded greetings over a low table. A splendid little tree had been set up on its surface, just like our last visit. As soon as we'd exchanged formalities, Peeps leaped off his perch on my shoulder and landed on a branch. When he saw this, the count's face lit up.

Well-loved as always, "Lord Starsage," I thought to myself.

"Forgive me for getting straight to the point," continued the count, "but there's something I need to tell you right away, Sir Sasaki."

"Please, don't hesitate. We were hoping for news about this world's situation as well."

"I'm happy to hear that. This involves the war of succession over His Majesty's throne..."

With our greetings over, the count quickly gave me the rundown on the otherworld's political situation. The explanation that followed came as quite

a shock.

According to him, Count Dietrich had switched over to the second prince's faction. When we'd visited last, the count had been in cahoots with the Hermann Trading Company's president and a thorn in Count Müller's side. As Müller described it, their families had been at odds with each other since their parents' generation. The defection came as a total surprise.

In terms of the Kingdom of Herz as a whole, their infighting was no more than a minor kerfuffle between local lords. But now that the succession dispute had begun, and thanks to this first breakaway, their quarreling had become a major topic of conversation in Herzian high society.

"There are plenty of rumors regarding the Kepler Trading Company matter as well," he told me.

"I see." I wondered if that, in fact, was the more curious development in the eyes of the Herzian nobles. I recalled how the count had humbled himself before Mr. Joseph—and how even Prince Adonis had followed suit.

But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, in and of itself. Prince Adonis and Count Müller improving their positions at court and further enabling Peeps and me to pursue our dream of a laid-back life was cause for celebration. The two of us would prefer to keep ourselves sheltered under the protective wings of their authority and influence.

"Because of that, there are rumors about you as well, Sir Sasaki," added the count.

"There are, my lord?"

"Your knighthood came about through strong encouragement from Prince Adonis's mother. Then the incident with Count Dietrich and the trading company occurred immediately after that. Count Dietrich himself even mentioned you personally. It's safe to say that, when it comes to the second prince's faction, you're at the center of conversation these days."

"...Is that so?"

Count Müller seemed genuinely apologetic. Could this be another one of *those* situations? I could feel the atmosphere in the room bearing down on me now in much the same way as when I'd been knighted. "I'm almost too afraid to ask, my lord, but will we be going to the royal castle like last time?"

"I'm terribly, terribly sorry, but yes. Would you be able to accompany me there?"

My intuition had been spot-on. The count rose from the sofa and

immediately bowed to us. I had a direct view of the whorl of his hair—that was how deeply he'd bent at the waist. Even compared to his attitude in the past, he seemed especially humble.

“All I have done is cause trouble for you, Sir Sasaki,” he said. “I am truly sorry for everything.”

“Please, you don't need to bow to me, Count Müller.”

His apology sounded very pained. Maybe he was conscious of the Lord Starsage perched beside him. In his view, he had embarrassed himself in front of someone he dearly respected; his pride was probably wounded. As the kind of man who bowed his head with zero hesitation, I was a little envious of his attitude—and of the fact he had someone he respected so highly so close at hand.

“One such as myself, who does naught but cling to the goodwill of others, is more than deserving of your scorn,” he continued. “If you wish to cut ties with me after this, so be it. But please, won't you accompany me to the castle? Please—I'm begging you.”

He showed no inclination to raise his head at my urging, and I was afraid he might stay stuck like that if we left him hanging.

“This is unlike you, Julius.”

“...!”

At my sparrow's casual utterance, the count's shoulders jolted in surprise. I could tell his bowed body had stiffened, but he gave no reply.

“Peeps?” I asked. How much meaning had been packed into those few words? I couldn't tell. Still, it seemed to have communicated *something* between them.

Unable to sit by and watch, Peeps continued, this time spurring the man to act. “*Could you at least give us a few more details?*”

“Well, that's...”

“Do this man and I strike you as so unreliable?”

It was really cool, how they understood each other with so few words. You could tell they had spent a lot of time together. I recalled the portrait of Peeps I'd seen at the royal castle. It had hung in the hallway we'd passed through on our way to see the king. It was an image of my pet sparrow in his previous life, with blond hair and blue eyes—young and yet brimming with majesty and dignity...

“...My daughter—Elsa, she's been taken hostage,” said the count at last.

Whoa! I thought. What a disaster. Herzian noble society is a complete mess, isn't it?

"So you were trying that hard to protect us," mused Peeps.

"...I am deeply sorry for my utter lack of strength."

The situation was unexpectedly dire. This was far more than a matter of pride for Count Müller—no, this was something much worse. The count had kept his head bowed as he answered, which meant I couldn't make out his expression. But from the trembling in his voice, I could hazard a guess about his emotional state. This must have been a very difficult choice for him to make.

I felt so bad I didn't know what to say.

"I am sorry. All of this is my fault."

"No, it isn't," the nobleman insisted. "My powerlessness is the only cause for blame."

I couldn't believe Peeps had intuited the facts like that. While I was incredibly impressed, I was also a little envious. This all served to show how deeply the count felt about the Starsage. I didn't know a thing when it came to magic or politics, but situations like these were different.

"Was it the queen? I am sure it wasn't Adonis."

"No. The order was given by Duke Einhart."

"Ah. Yes, he would do something like that..."

Count Müller had mentioned a name I was unfamiliar with. Apparently, even the second prince's faction was far from monolithic. Considering the count's and the prince's positions, this Duke Einhart must have a lot of influence. I didn't know what had ultimately caused him to take Lady Elsa hostage, but he'd done so in complete disregard for how the royals might react—and that made me anxious.

"Where is the girl right now, then? In the duke's territory, perhaps?"

"No. I believe she is in his estate in the capital, Allestos."

"Did something happen at court?"

"It did, indeed. When we traveled there to give Prince Adonis our respects, my daughter was caught up in one of the court's disputes. As you can see, I am but a country noble, and so the duke offered to raise and educate her to be his wife."

Count Müller had grown very close with Prince Adonis over the past few months and was now the most successful noble in the second prince's faction.

It made sense that his daughter would end up marrying into a family of higher rank. Apparently, the duke had taken advantage of that and cooked up a pretext for himself. *Lady Elsa is a trusting girl, after all. She would have been pretty easy to deceive.*

“Hmm. Duke Einhart has played us, then.”

“...And I was too cowardly to do anything about it.”

The Herzian royal castle sure was a dangerous place. Even though all the nobles were from the same nation, we’d have to be on constant guard. It was like the final dungeon in a game, and the other nobles were like evil spirits, possessed by their desire for influence and running rampant—frightening in a whole other way than a mob of monsters would be.

But this was one time we couldn’t afford to hesitate. “Count Müller, can’t we head for the capital right now?” I suggested.

After all, I was pretty involved in this myself. I’d been having the time of my life in this world, completely dependent on Peeps, and that had placed Count Müller in a difficult situation. Not to mention I’d involved the Kepler Trading Company entirely by my own decision.

“Will you assist us?” asked Peeps.

“Of course,” I replied. “To tell the truth, I feel I should be the one apologizing.”

“I am sorry for involving you in our problems.”

“No, no. I’ve been burdening you at least as much.”

Lately, circumstances dictated that I leave Peeps behind at home while I went out—not to mention how I made him act like a sparrow in front of everyone else. And even when we *did* go somewhere together, I always put him in a cramped little carrier.

“The time I spend in your room perusing the internet is actually quite fulfilling,” Peeps replied. *“And now that I’ve lost my human form, I’ve come to many a realization I would never have before. At the moment, I feel I am spending my time meaningfully.”*

“Really? I’m happy to have such a considerate sparrow as my partner, you know.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

As he turned around to speak to me, I felt extremely close to my pet bird. I wondered if the day would come when he’d recover his human form. Looking back on the amazing feats I’d witnessed, I felt like it might well

happen in the near future. Still, I hesitated to ask him about it and hadn't yet broached the subject.

But all that aside...

Is it just me, or is it starting to feel like there's a new emergency every time we come here?



Count Müller, Peeps, and I headed for the capital of Herz right away. To get there, we used Peeps's teleportation magic as usual.

One part of the capital featured roads lined with noble estates—even some owned by those with territory elsewhere. It was like Edo in that respect. Along with their estates back home, nobles kept a separate residence near the court. It seemed the higher one's noble rank, the closer one's mansion would be to the castle.

The Müller family was no exception—they, too, kept an estate in the neighborhood. It didn't boast the same scale as their main home in Baytrium, but it was still a grand sight, built all from stone. They had quite a few maids and butlers in their employ as well.

Count Müller had led us here so we could use it as a base for the time being. He also invited us to make use of it whenever we liked in the future.

I was curious about where Peeps had lived in his past life, but when I asked the count, he told me a hostile noble had hit the former sage with levies and now treated Peeps's old home as his own.

Count Müller wore a pained expression as he explained this. Peeps didn't seem to mind it one bit, but in my opinion, if Peeps *could* one day reclaim his house, I wanted to help him do it. Everyone needed a place to call home.

“Oh! Count Müller, you've returned!”

“Your Royal Highness? I didn't realize you were here.”

Coincidentally, Count Müller had another guest—the second prince of the Kingdom of Herz, His Royal Highness Adonis. We'd run into him in a hallway as the count was showing us around the estate. Next to him were knights who must have been serving as his personal guard.

“Those here informed me that you'd returned to your lands,” explained the prince. “I was just thinking of heading for Baytrium myself, in fact. But from

the looks of things, I assume the previous matter has been resolved?”

“I prevailed upon the goodwill of these two and brought them here with me.”

The “previous matter” the prince was referring to must have been Lady Elsa’s hostage situation. He threw a glance my way—apparently, he had been apprised of the matter.

“In that case,” he said to me, “I have something to tell you, as well. It’s rather sudden, I know, but I’d like a bit of your time. And I want to tell you two, as well, while I have the chance.”

“Is that all right with you, Sir Sasaki?” asked the count.

“Yes, by all means.”

Once I had agreed, Count Müller led us into another area—the estate’s reception room. The prince’s guard waited in a separate chamber at their lord’s orders. The knights seemed reluctant to leave, but they weren’t about to disobey a direct command from the prince. Now Peeps could join in on the conversation without the fear of being overheard.

The count and I sat on a sofa, next to one another, and the prince sat alone across from us. Since he hadn’t had the time to procure a little tree for Peeps, the sparrow remained in his usual spot on my shoulder.

“Sasaki, the plan is to grant you the rank of baron.”

No sooner had we entered the room than Prince Adonis got straight to the point. Apparently, I was to receive a promotion not just in Japan but here as well.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t simply celebrate *this* change in status. I got the feeling promotions in this world were more like when you were made a manager in name only, had your salary actually decrease, and were forced to work more overtime.

Besides, why am I being promoted? I thought. *I don’t remember doing anything in particular.* “I’m sorry, sir, but may I ask the reason why?”

“You’ve worked with the Kepler Trading Company to establish a business of your own in the Republic of Lunge, correct?”

“Well, yes...”

“My mother was made aware of it by Count Dietrich. She must want to make sure she has you under her wing as one of the nobles of *this* country. My father, too, is keen on the idea. He may have been reluctant in the past, but his concern regarding the Ohgen Empire’s invasion must be more

pressing now.”

“Even so, sir, is it all right for them to grant me a rank so easily?”

“The problem is the land you will be granted.”

“You mean I won’t be given a role in the court, sir?”

“The current consensus is to give you land in the Rectan Plains.”

“Wha...?”

The count’s expression changed at the prince’s words—his eyes opened wide in shock.

I remembered hearing the name Rectan Plains. It was where the Ohgen Empire’s forces had been stationed—and where they had attacked the Kingdom of Herz. The image of Peeps blowing the whole place to kingdom come was still burned vividly into my memory. Apparently, Count Müller’s lands shared a partial border with the plains, as well.

“At a time like this, what is he supposed to do with such a territory, sir?” asked the count. “It doesn’t have any small settlements, much less any towns or villages. How is he supposed to collect taxes?”

“All reasonable questions, Count Müller.”

“And that land is meant to be a buffer zone. Does it even count as part of our nation?”

“It appears my father intends to take control of it as a prize for our victory over the Ohgen Empire. I can easily imagine him bequeathing it to you, then telling you to create a moat or two in the region to stave off any more emergencies for the time being.”

“B-but, Prince Adonis, isn’t that going too far?” asked the count.

“I am opposed to it, of course.”

“Forgive my rudeness, sir, but was this your mother’s idea?”

“No. Apparently, it came from my father and Duke Einhart.”

I’d heard that name from Count Müller before we came to the capital. If he was able to hold in-person planning meetings with the king of Herz, he must have been in a *very* high position. And then there was the whole hostage situation.

Given my position, knowing someone like that was discussing my status was terrifying. The only thing supporting me was the sensation of Peeps’s talons gripping my shoulder through the thin fabric of my suit.

“Duke Einhart is close with my father. And frustratingly, he has the most authority out of anyone among my supporters. No amount of discussion will

convince my father to consider our opinions. I tried asking my mother, but she hasn't gotten anywhere with him, either."

"Did it occur to them that Sir Sasaki might leave Herz over this?"

"Duke Einhart probably wouldn't mind that, personally. I hate to constantly speak ill of my own family, but my father has been coaxed into the duke's camp. Perhaps he believes the situation urgent enough to warrant acquiring the Rectan Plains as soon as possible—in spite of all the dangers."

"...I see, sir."

"And that," continued the prince, "is why I decided to pay a personal visit to explain the situation..."

For Duke Einhart, this was probably a means of keeping Count Müller, who had begun to distinguish himself in the second prince's faction, in check. By stationing us along the border with the Ohgen Empire, he would make it easier for himself to act in court. I felt like a self-made executive manager who had defied the board of directors and was being relegated to some remote corner of the country.

This must all be part of the infighting within the second prince's faction. That was probably why Count Müller had asked me to come to the capital with him—although it seemed like he hadn't been informed of everything.

On the other hand—though the prince hadn't said this exactly—the king of Herz seemed pretty spooked by the Ohgen Empire. In that light, if we used this future work in the Rectan Plains as leverage, even *we* might be able to gain some sort of concession from the king.

"Is this truly such a problem?"

As I mulled this over, Peeps spoke up. Until now, he'd been watching over the proceedings in silence. In contrast to the anguished tones of Prince Adonis and Count Müller, the bird spoke quite indifferently. As his words implied, he didn't seem to mind this at all. Maybe that was why everyone turned to stare at him.

The distinguished sparrow returned their gaze and continued. *"No citizens in the territory? Why, that's a good thing. It saves us the trouble of managing them. In fact, we've gained a plausible excuse to distance ourselves from the court. We should take this opportunity to withdraw."*

"But what about your duties as a noble...?" asked the count.

"We can simply build a moat or two. And take a long time with it—several years, perhaps. If we're working hard out on the frontier, they won't be able

to criticize us, will they?"

It seemed Peeps was thinking along the same lines as I was. From a Herzian noble's point of view, this treatment was positively humiliating. But for the two of us, who wished for a relaxed, leisurely life away from all the hustle and bustle, this was perfect. In fact, inadvertently getting assigned some duty in the court was a far more disagreeable prospect.

"In addition, if we throw some money around, your lands will profit as well."

"Y-you needn't worry about my situation..." stammered the count.

Partly thanks to our deal with the Kepler Trading Company, our pockets were lined with gold. If we weren't out to climb the ranks of nobility, then as Peeps said, it wouldn't be a bad choice to build some moats and secure our position in the kingdom for the time being.

Still, I'd be lying if I said I had no doubts. "Won't the Ohgen Empire meddle in our business, then?" I asked.

"Oh, they will. I'm certain of it."

"Isn't that...bad?"

"It will be fine. I have an idea."

"...Really? Just remember, if your true identity gets out, it won't matter what we do."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about that ever since the previous incident."

Well, if Peeps said so, everything was probably fine. As an outsider, I obediently closed my mouth. Prince Adonis and Count Müller appeared to come to the same decision, and no more objections were raised.



We spent that night at Count Müller's estate, and the next day, Prince Adonis took Peeps and me to the castle. Normally, it would have taken quite a bit more time to receive an audience with the king, but with an introduction from the second prince, we got in faster than a bullet train. In fact, we were permitted to meet him that same day; no doubt the prince had negotiated it with the king some time the previous evening.

Owing to all that, we eventually arrived in the waiting area connecting to

the audience chamber—the same one we’d visited previously. It was about fifteen meters square and contained some gorgeous construction and furniture. This room was a stark contrast with the reception room in Count Müller’s estate, still emptied after his family’s financial losses.

As before, we had to submit to a pat down. After that, we passed through the hallway reserved for those entering the audience chamber.

On the way, I saw that Peeps’s portrait was still there.

“.....”

“What’s wrong, Sir Sasaki?” Count Müller asked me as I turned to look. As always, his perception was quick and sharp when it came to the Lord Starsage.

“Oh, nothing, my lord.”

I’d just been thinking that, in the portrait, the Starsage’s hair was a very vivid, neat blond... I wondered how the count would respond if I was to broach the subject. Instead, however, I simply brushed it off and continued down the hallway.

When we arrived in the audience chamber, we saw that many nobles had already gathered there, just as before. Under their imposing stares, we proceeded toward the empty throne. Then, alongside the count, I knelt on the floor and lowered my head. After waiting a short time in that position for His Majesty to enter, we heard a voice from above.

“You may lift your heads.”

When we did, we saw that someone now occupied the throne—the King of Herz.

The man appeared to be in his fifties, and he cut a fine figure, with stern, pronounced features that contributed to a sense of awe and majesty. I wished I would age as gracefully. His silver hair—a trait he shared with Prince Adonis—was particularly striking.

The queen sat next to him. She, too, looked the same as before—a woman likely in her midthirties with pretty, symmetrical features. She wore an amicable smile, but she was also the sort who would gladly impersonate a maid to uncover private information on her guests.

What piqued my curiosity even more, however, was the man standing right beside the royal couple. He hadn’t been present last time. Like Prince Adonis, his hair was silver. His melancholy features, however, were a stark contrast to the prince. His hair was long for a man’s, too, and it hid one of his eyes. In

short, a typical gloomy character. Still very good-looking, though.

Not just any noble would be standing in that position. *Could that be Prince Adonis's elder brother?* I wondered. As I mentally cycled through several possible titles the man might have held, the king addressed us.

“Count Müller, I do apologize for the frequency of these visits.”

“Please, Your Majesty, there is no need for apology.”

The king and the count began exchanging pleasantries as I watched in silence. The casual way the king spoke despite his frightening countenance seemed to demonstrate his trust in Count Müller. It appeared the man was sincere in his joy at Prince Adonis's safe return from the battlefield.

“Thanks to you,” said the king. “Adonis has been absorbed in his martial training of late. He practices with the sword at every opportunity. He appears quite taken with the skills you displayed on the battlefield, Count. Would you do him the honor of overseeing his training?”

“To instruct His Royal Highness in the ways of the blade would be a far greater task than I am worthy of.”

“Oh, I don't think there's any need for such humility between us. Please, Count Müller.”

“To receive such words directly from you, Your Majesty, will honor my family for generations to come.”

But that conversation lasted only a moment. The king bestowed his next remarks upon yours truly. “Moving on, I have something to ask of you, Knight Sasaki.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am at your command.”

I felt the eyes of all the assembled nobles focus in on me. Their expressions had been pretty caustic when it came to Count Müller, but they looked at me like I shouldn't be there at all. The shift in attitude was obvious, even from the few I could see out of the corner of my vision.

“I've heard rumors you have established a business in the Republic of Lunge through the Kepler Trading Company. I also hear that its president, Sir Joseph himself, came to visit our nation last month.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I have indeed established a trading company in another nation.”

My honest affirmation was met with murmurs of utter disbelief from the surrounding nobles, creating a stir in the audience chamber.

“Diplomatic relations such as these are extremely valuable to our

kingdom,” said the king. “Naturally, those who take up such a task must be given an appropriate position. Thus, Knight Sasaki, as of today, I bequeath to you the rank of baron. You will now aid in foreign policy and diplomatic work within the court.”

This was similar to what Prince Adonis had told us—but it was also a little different. He had said I would have my own territory, not a role in the court.

Not a moment later, one of the nobles present raised their voice. “Your Majesty, while I will respect any decision you make, is that role not beyond his position?”

“Duke Einhart, what is this all of a sudden?” asked the king.

“Our relations with the Republic of Lunge are certainly important, Sire. And this knight did, in fact, establish a trading company in the republic. However, that was *all* he did. He has made no contributions to our kingdom.”

“...I see your point.”

Even among the nobles present in the audience chamber, this man’s dress was especially grand. I pinned him as being somewhere in his fifties, and his bushy white hair in particular looked like some baroque-era composer. Judging by what His Majesty had said, this man was Duke Einhart.

“He may even damage our great kingdom’s reputation.”

“Indeed. Your concerns are reasonable, Duke Einhart.”

“In that case, I would beg our beloved and revered king to reconsider.”

“Hmm...”

The king began to ponder Duke Einhart’s words. The nobles’ attention now turned to the two of them.

In contrast, my attention was on Count Müller, who was kneeling on the floor next to me. I tried to tell him telepathically *This isn’t what Prince Adonis promised!* However, his eyes were fixed ahead of him, and he showed no signs of having noticed me. Personally, I didn’t want anything to do with a job in the court.

Eventually, the king gave his response.

“Then let us do things like this,” he began. “I shall grant Sir Sasaki the rank of baron. As for his lands, I shall bestow upon him part of what we acquired in the previous war—the Rectan Plains. It borders on Count Müller’s territory as well. I’d like you two to collaborate and help bring prosperity to our kingdom.”

And in the end, a familiar place name made its way into the conversation.

After making a show of thinking it over, the king of Herz had proposed this as a “replacement” plan, and Duke Einhart nodded at the decision. At this, the nobles present flew into a chorus of conversations.

Apparently, this had been their intention all along. I was glad I hadn’t jumped to conclusions. Perhaps their exchange had partly been to curtail dissent among the other nobles. I could easily imagine that being the reason for the two of them to stage a compromise.

The intricate power balances of Herzian nobles were far too involved. I found myself curious how someone like Section Chief Akutsu would fare if he was thrown into this mess.

“Baron Sasaki, I believe it would be wise to build, say, a defensive bulwark or two.”

Without wasting a moment, Duke Einhart put in his request—or rather his demand, which already exceeded what Prince Adonis had suggested. When he said *bulwark*, how large a defensive wall did he mean, exactly?

“It should be an easy task, if the stories about you and the Kepler Trading Company are true, don’t you think?”

In place of the king, the duke started nitpicking at me. Considering this was happening right in the audience chamber, maybe Herz’s royalty had less authority than I had thought. The nobles really threw their weight around, didn’t they?

At the same time, their conversation had made me think the king might truly have high hopes for us.

“I will go to any length to fulfill this task and meet your expectations,” I said. Either way, that wouldn’t change our plans. I’d give my full agreement, as we’d discussed.

But it would be a shame to let things end like this. We’d been lucky enough to see Duke Einhart. I wanted to try to use the public works project in the Rectan Plains as a pretext to solve Count Müller’s problem at the same time. I’d gotten Peeps’s approval on it, too.

“To that end, Your Majesty,” I said, moving my gaze from Duke Einhart to the king, “may I implore you to hear me out on a certain matter?”

“Hmm? Speak, then.”

All eyes gathered on me—the nobles’ gazes seemed to say *Oh, what is it this time?*

“I hereby pledge that until this bulwark in the Rectan Plains is complete, I

will not return to the capital of Allestos. I swear to carry out this task for the prosperity of the Kingdom of Herz. So I beg of you, Sire, please return the color to Count Müller's life."

"S-Sir Sasaki..." cried the count.

No less than the Lord Starsage himself had said this would be fine. It was time for me to strut my stuff.

"You!" roared Duke Einhart in immediate protest. "How dare a mere *knight* implore His Majesty for *anything*!"

I'd assumed that since *he* had been chatting with the king, I could do the same. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. The glare he'd just turned on me was absolutely petrifying. I may have been a noble, but the difference between a knight and a duke was considerable.

Still, if I gave up now, who knew when I'd get another chance to express my opinions to Duke Einhart? This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—I had him in front of a whole bunch of other people. Plus, I could draw the king, who presumably outranked him, into the discussion.

I continued to look at His Majesty, my stare pleading.

Finally, he responded. "Color? What might you mean by that?"

Yes! It seemed like he'd hear me out. But in this atmosphere, I couldn't talk for long. "I would beg of you, Sire, to confirm the particulars with Duke Einhart."

"...Hmm," said the king, throwing a glance at the duke.

Man, I thought. *I'm not coming anywhere near this place again, even after the bulwark is done.*

Then the king lowered his gaze to his feet, pretending to think about something or other. The difficult look on his face persisted only for a moment, however. When he looked up again, he gave his reply—approval. "Very well. As you are so favored by Adonis, I shall grant you this request."

The king nodded, and that was when the surrounding nobles *really* started to make noise. The comments that reached me were infinite in their variety. So many different reactions: Some were simply astonished, while others voiced their disapproval.

For now, I'd just be thankful. "I offer my sincerest gratitude for your generosity, Sire," I answered, bowing deeply, still kneeling on the floor.

A moment later, a youthful voice came from directly in front of me—one I hadn't heard before.

“How curious, that you would go so far.”

His voice sounded exactly like Prince Adonis’s. For a moment, I thought it was the second prince himself. In his clearly articulated words, however, I could detect a very slight difference in tone. Confused, I raised my eyes slightly. When I did, I saw who it was out of the corner of my vision.

It was the gloomy character with the silver hair who had been standing near His Majesty.

“What is it, Lewis?” asked the king.

“Nothing, Father. Please, pay me no mind.”

If the king was his father, that made him a prince. Judging by his age, the *first* prince. Though the second prince seemed rather sociable, this young man appeared, from head to toe, to be the opposite. I had heard that for a long time he had been treated as an unwanted child, so maybe his upbringing had influenced his appearance. Still very good-looking, though.

As soon as the prince finished speaking, the king gave his parting words, and the day’s audience ended without much incident.



After our audience with His Majesty, we returned to Count Müller’s estate. He insisted we stay the night, and we accepted his gesture of goodwill. We could bring our products to the Kepler Trading Company the following day. Ms. Futarishizuka had set up a base for us, which gave us some leeway in how we handled things back in Japan.

Soon, it was suppertime.



We'd only had a few moments to relax in the guest room before one of the maids employed at the estate showed us to the dining hall. The moment we exited the corridor and entered the room, we encountered Lady Elsa.

She was already seated at the table, but as soon as she spotted us, she burst out of her chair with a clatter and started shouting.

"Baron Sasaki! I... I heard from Daddy what happened!"

"Lady Elsa," I replied. "I see you've returned to the estate."

I was surprised by how quickly she'd been returned. According to Count Müller, she'd been a hostage. Had His Majesty discussed it with Duke Einhart immediately after our audience? Otherwise, I couldn't imagine why the duke would have released her. The Kingdom of Herz was rife with corruption, but maybe the current king was unexpectedly trustworthy.

"And I have you and your familiar to thank for all of it, don't I?" she said.

"Well, most of the credit should go to my familiar, my lady," I said, sparing a glance at the bird on my shoulder. I'd just followed Peeps's suggestions.

"Your familiar is so tiny and cute—and yet so amazing. I couldn't believe my ears when Daddy told me you asked His Majesty to intercede with Duke Einhart."

"I believe Prince Adonis may have explained the situation to His Majesty in advance."

"I still think what you did was splendid!" exclaimed the youthful princess happily.

It really must have been tough, being separated from her family like that.

"Normally," she continued, "a low-ranking noble making a direct request of His Majesty during an audience would be grounds for arrest! I had no idea you were so courageous. So well, I..."

"....."

Apparently, my actions had been more extreme than I'd imagined. No wonder Duke Einhart was so out of sorts. Hearing Lady Elsa's words, I broke out in a cold sweat—hours after the fact. But I supposed there was no point worrying over what was already done. In the end, everything went well, so maybe I should just be happy about that for now.

But I need to be way more careful in the future, that's for sure.

"Thank you, Baron Sasaki," she said. "For saving me!"

"Please, don't mention it. We're very happy with how things turned out as

well.”

Aside from Peeps and me, only Count Müller and Lady Elsa were in the dining hall. The count probably wanted to secure as much time as possible to talk with the Lord Starsage; his wife and son didn’t know the distinguished sparrow on my shoulder could speak, after all.

“Lord Sasaki,” said the count, “I’d like to thank you as well.”

“Please, you don’t need to be so formal. We’re more than happy we were able to help.”

“And you don’t need to be considerate toward me just because my daughter is with us...”

After exchanging greetings, Count Müller invited us to sit down at the rather large, circular dining table. The chairs were spread out around it at equal intervals, forming a square. Next to one of them was a little perch.

The food was brought out immediately. Once the party of maids confirmed everything was ready for us to eat, they gave little bows and exited the room. As long as the door—which probably led to the kitchen—was closed, nobody would overhear our conversation. Owing to that, Peeps was free to join in.

“By the way, Lord Sasaki,” said Count Müller a short while after we began to eat, “regarding the issue of shoring up the Rectan Plains’s defenses...” His eyes kept glancing over at the sparrow as he spoke. It seemed like he was going to broach the topic of our future work. I, too, wanted to get a read on the situation as soon as possible.

As for the bird in question, he was hopping around on the table’s surface, deftly using his beak to peck at the thinly sliced meats stacked on his plate. If he was going to that much effort, he must have a high opinion of the food.

“Is there something on your mind, my lord?” I asked.

“If possible, I wanted to ask about your immediate plans,” he explained.

“And what will you do with that information?”

“I would very much like to assist you, if you’ll have me.”

“We’re only creating a few walls. It won’t take that much time or effort.”

“Still, I am concerned any carelessness might invite the Ohgen Empire’s wrath...”

I was concerned about the same thing. Peeps had told me he’d handle it, but I couldn’t help being curious anyway. After all, this would greatly affect the lives of whoever we put to the task. The count, for his part, presided over a town not too far away.

“There’s nothing you need worry about. I’ll handle everything myself.”

“Still...”

“This time, however, we will need just a few extra hands. If you might aid us with the procurement of materials and such, it would be a great help. I shall contact you when the time comes. I might send a messenger, depending on how things play out.”

“Understood. I would be more than happy to offer my assistance.” A smile broke out on Count Müller’s face.

Whoa, he looks positively elated. Was it because the Starsage had asked him for a favor? Peeps did have an aloof side to him, after all.

“Daddy, what’s all this about?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“How come you’re being so polite to Sasaki’s familiar...?”

As the youthful princess looked on in confusion, Count Müller grew nervous.

Come to think of it, while Lady Elsa knew the bird could talk, she didn’t realize the Starsage was alive. She must have been wondering why her dad—the one with the most authority in town—was humbling himself so much before a bird. It was a heartwarming father-daughter scene, and as an unmarried, middle-aged man, it made my heart feel just a tiny bit empty.

Naturally, my attention focused in on the bird I’d only recently adopted.

“.....”

No, I couldn’t get greedy. It was so long ago that I’d decided to adopt a bird and visited that pet shop. Back then, I promised myself that one day I would cup my pet in my hand and pet it with my thumb. At this point, however, even just petting him on the head seemed an impossible task. I wondered if he’d get mad at me if I suggested getting him a sibling.

“...What is it? Something on your mind?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Is that so? Well, all right.”

And just like that, we leisurely passed the rest of the evening.



We spent the night at Count Müller’s estate, and in the morning, we set off

from the capital. Our destination was the Rectan Plains, which we'd be reaching with—as always—sparrow magic.

The reason for our trip was to eliminate any concerns regarding relations with the Ohgen Empire—as Count Müller had pointed out the night before. We'd been planning to visit the Kepler Trading Company for business that day, but Peeps himself suggested we carry out this task first. I assumed he had a whole host of concerns on his mind as well.

“That gigantic hole is still there, huh.”

“It was too much of a bother to fill it back in.”

We were currently flying through the sky. Below us was the big hole—the one the Starsage had previously created with his magic. Over ten thousand Ohgen Empire troops had been stationed in this area, and the memory of how they were obliterated in less than a few minutes was still fresh in my mind. And now there was a huge hole in the grassy plains where the soldiers had disappeared. It was so deep you couldn't see the bottom; looking at it terrified me.

“Should we just leave it like that?” I wondered aloud. “I feel like it would be dangerous...”

“My plan is to use the hole as part of our response to the Ohgen Empire.”

What a vague response. Were we going to construct a humongous pitfall trap? No, no. Such a scheme would be unbecoming of the Lord Starsage. Just covering the top of it would be an enormous project—probably just as difficult as building a bridge over a great river.

“...What are you thinking?” I ventured.

“The hole is perfect for large-bodied monsters to nest in, don't you think?”

“Sorry, but the only creatures of that size I've ever seen are orcs.”

“Now that you mention it, that is true...”

Well, and the reptilian we saw on the news. To prepare for my future life in this otherworld, it would probably be a good idea to learn about its representative fauna, at least. I wondered if there was a zoo here, or some similar facility. If not, then I'd love to at least peruse an illustrated field guide. *I'll ask Count Müller at some point—I bet he'd have one in his storehouses or something.*

“What I'm getting at is this—our monsters will be more similar to my current form.”

“Similar to you, Peeps?”

“Familiars. I was thinking of using a few to curb the Ohgen Empire.”

“Oh, I get it.”

The word *familiar* had been popping up ever since I’d first visited this world. *Familiars*—creatures that were absolutely obedient to their master’s instructions. According to previous explanations, any wild animal or monster you captured or called forth using summoning magic, then put under your command, was considered a familiar. Apparently, some who tried to rein in things more powerful than they were fell victim to counterattacks, however.

“I’d like to hold the Ohgen Empire’s troops far away from the border for a while by having a wild dragon take up residence in the hole. That way, the two of us can remain behind the scenes while still maintaining the area’s safety as the bulwarks are constructed.”

“What? You can just *tame* a dragon like that?”

“It depends on the type of dragon.”

Dragons, huh? That made me super curious—these were *dragons* we were talking about! I’d encountered much upon first coming to this world that seemed straight out of a fantasy novel, but the word *dragon* just hit different. When people talked about fantasy worlds, it was all about dragons, and when they talked about dragons, it was all about fantasy worlds. The two ideas were joined at the hip.

If it was possible, I wanted to have one as a pet. Even just a small one. Maybe one that could fit in the palm of my hand and made cute little squeaking noises.

“As far as I can see, the Ohgen Empire’s forces haven’t made any moves to return here. I can’t sense anyone inside the hole, either, so let’s send a few in right away. With this much space, we could place several here without causing an issue.”

“Will nearby villages be all right?”

“I’ll command them not to attack people.”

“This magic sounds surprisingly adaptable.”

“That depends on the power of the caster.”

As we made light conversation, a magic circle appeared in front of Peeps. At the same time, another of a very similar design appeared just above the great hole. I figured the creatures would appear from the second one.

My heart started to pound with anticipation. What sort of dragons would he summon?

As if in response to my excitement, things began to develop below. Once the magic circles had appeared, Peeps began to incant a spell. As he finished, the magic circles began to pulse wildly with light, like a heartbeat.

Meanwhile, an image materialized above the second circle. The silhouette looked like something you'd find in the results of an internet search for the word *dragon*.

It had a pair of large wings, a longish neck, plus a head sporting a huge jaw and magnificent horns. Its body had thick flesh, and it walked on all fours, just like a dinosaur. Golden scales covered its entire body. The dragon had a very western design—like the one on the flag of Wales.

Right after it was summoned, its jaw turned toward the sky and opened wide.

Rooooooaaaaaar!! came its loud cry, echoing all through the area.

It made my ears hurt, to put it mildly.

The dragon itself was about the size of an apartment complex. It would have been able to crush an entire shed or small dwelling with ease. Even one of its eyes, now turned to look up at us, appeared bigger than my head.

It seemed a little too big to keep as a pet.

In fact, it was downright terrifying. It seemed like it might charge us at any moment.

“Peeps, that’s a *really* strong-looking dragon...”

“Any weaker variety would simply be exterminated by the Empire.”

He was right—you’d need nerves of steel to pick a fight with something that looked like that. I’d definitely take the long way around. At any rate, I doubted my intermediate lightning magic would stand a chance against it. I’d need stronger spells, and several of them, to prepare—plus friends who would help me escape if it didn’t work out. Actually, if it was going to require that much effort, I’d rather not try it at all.

“Yeah, I can’t imagine anyone defeating that dragon.”

“Not true. Assemble enough people, and it would be surprisingly possible.”

“Wait, really?”

“But the sacrifices would be great. I doubt the Ohgen Empire would try to force an attack. Even if their troops were able to eliminate the dragon, if they tried to invade in their weakened state, they’d be in for a rough time of it.”

“I see. So it’s kind of like a bouncer, in that sense.”

“Exactly.”

Personally, I’d prefer neither side to suffer. I doubted the dragon wanted to get hurt, either. After its initial roar, it had turned rather docile as it watched us floating overhead. Judging by behavior alone, it was basically a well-trained dog. And when I thought about it like that, I started to find it sort of cute.

“Our little buddy has some gorgeous golden scales, huh?”

“People mainly call dragons of this variety golden dragons.”

The faint sunlight reflected off its scales, making them sparkle. Outside the hole, they’d probably shine even more.

“It reminds me of the portrait of you I saw in the hallway leading to the audience chamber.”

“...You saw that?”

In his lifetime, Peeps had been a very handsome blond. That was how the portrait had depicted him, at least. The sparrow’s response to my casual remark was rather disappointing. Maybe I’d stirred up some lingering regrets about his former body. Or maybe there was another reason. Whatever the case, it seemed wise to give the topic a wide berth. *That was a little insensitive of me. Sorry, Peeps.*

“Come to think of it, you’re going to summon a few more, right?”

“I would feel uneasy with just one. I’d like to summon another two or three.”

“They won’t fight with each other or anything, will they?”

“Unless something very out of the ordinary happens, I can simply instruct them not to.”

After that, he called forth two more similar dragons, successfully completing our work in the Rectan Plains for now. If they were a little smaller and cuter, I might have wanted to come back and check on them—but these dragons were a little too rough and scary, so I decided I’d keep my distance.

For now, I’d just trust Peeps and leave them be. The Ohgen Empire’s armies wouldn’t come anywhere near such terrifying creatures.



Once we'd finished our work on the Rectan Plains, we headed for the Republic of Lunge to visit the Kepler Trading Company and deliver goods we'd promised. After asking for Mr. Joseph at the main store's entrance, we were promptly shown to a reception room. Luckily for us, the man seemed to have returned from the Kingdom of Herz.

"I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Sasaki," he said.

"Thank you for making the time to visit us. I know you were busy last month."

I'd gotten pretty used to this sort of exchange. We traded words over a low table between two sofas; Peeps was on my shoulder.

I wasted no time delivering the goods I had promised them. Recently, I'd been bringing more of the items I had previously brought in using a rucksack or a shopping cart. It was extremely difficult to carry them all at once, so we'd begun to use a storehouse nearby. It had been provided by the Kepler Trading Company and allowed us to securely store our wares.

Time still flowed at significantly different rates here and in the modern world. Even just transporting wares over several trips caused multiple hours to pass here—and sometimes a whole day would go by. I was thankful to have somewhere with restricted entry for this task.

"Before you ask," I said, "I brought the more unwieldy goods, like the sugar, to the storehouse we discussed previously. Would you mind confirming delivery? I'll be staying in town until then."

"Of course. I'll have those in charge check on it."

Mr. Joseph clapped, and someone immediately came along. After a few whispers from Mr. Joseph, the man hurried back out of the room. I wondered if he was going to have the goods checked while we were talking. The only thing left was to deliver the products we had on hand, like the simple electronic devices—calculators, first and foremost—as well as other manufactured goods we thought might be in high demand in this world.

"I'm happy to see you again as well, Mr. Marc," I continued. "I see the color has returned to your cheeks."

"Yes, and thank you so much for everything you did last month, Mr. Sasaki."

Mr. Marc was sitting next to Mr. Joseph during our visit. Perhaps it was my lingering impression of him locked in a jail cell that made him seem so happy and energetic now. Even the clothes he wore appeared to be several degrees

fancier than when I'd first visited him at the Hermann Trading Company.

"How is the Marc Trading Company doing?"

"Extremely well, thanks to Mr. Joseph. We plan on opening a branch in Baytrium in the coming days, too. I'd like to use it to coordinate with the Hermann Trading Company to support you and Count Müller."

"That's very good to hear."

"Oh? Will you be needing something in the near future, then?"

"Actually, I wanted to discuss that with the two of you."

Well, wasn't this conversation moving along swimmingly? I felt a little bad since we'd just met each other again, but I needed to discuss the homework Duke Einhart had given us during our audience with His Majesty—all that stuff about building defensive structures along the border with the Ohgen Empire.

Peeps and I had already determined how we'd go about it. I, Baron Sasaki, would put in a personal order with the Marc Trading Company, asking them for help procuring the necessary material and labor. Then they'd probably subcontract the Hermann Trading Company for the actual work. With the latter's roots in Baytrium, I trusted it wouldn't be difficult.

"Such, er, drastic measures once again..." stammered Mr. Marc.

"Could I possibly ask for your help with this?" I said.

"Will you be receiving support from the Kingdom of Herz or neighboring feudal lords?" asked Mr. Joseph. "If not, I'm pretty sure the Ohgen Empire's troops would simply trample it. And our company doesn't have the military might needed to oppose the Empire's regular soldiers."

"We already have that handled, actually," I assured him.

I'd been waiting for this point to come up and explained what we'd just finished preparing—for some reason, several very large wild dragons had taken up residence near the border on the Rectan Plains, but they wouldn't attack anyone from the Kingdom of Herz, so workers could labor at a nice, leisurely pace without worrying about the Empire.

"As you all know, the Kingdom of Herz is in decline," I continued. "However, I have poured no small amount of capital into the country, and I would like to stay there for the foreseeable future. So won't you lend me your trust?"

This was for Peeps's sake, too, so I was ready to really plead with them.

At my words, Mr. Marc looked surprised. "Dragons to curb the Ohgen

Empire...?”

“I apologize. I am aware of how odd it sounds.”

“No, no. If you say so, I believe it. All right. Count Müller has done a lot for me as well, so please allow me to repay my debts to you both.”

“Thank you for understanding,” I replied.

Great! We’d gotten him to trust us. I wouldn’t have trusted me, had I been in his shoes. Dragons along the national border? It sounded totally crazy.

His staid reaction was shared, however, by the one listening in at his side—Mr. Joseph. When Mr. Marc nodded, Mr. Joseph continued, without so much as a hint of doubt about the dragon situation.

“Do you intend to take an aggressive position regarding the Ohgen Empire, Mr. Sasaki?”

It was only natural he would ask such a question, but I would prefer he not draw any hasty conclusions. I had zero intentions of getting into a fight with the Ohgen Empire.

“Oh, no, of course not,” I said. “This is merely for our own financial benefit.”

“Really?”

“It wouldn’t be good for the Kepler Trading Company if the Empire goes into decline, would it?”

“What a carefree statement. It both fascinates me and makes me hesitant.”

Maintaining relations with other countries had to be far more profitable than palling around with us. I wasn’t about to ask to be first place in his book—in fact, I’d give up second and third place, too. I had no desire to start throwing my weight around. I merely hoped we could continue our friendly relationship, even if we were more of an extra business partner for him.

“Is that point of view related to the nature of your products, Mr. Sasaki?” asked Mr. Joseph.

“I’d appreciate it if you saw it that way,” I replied.

“Then I understand. I’ll give Mr. Marc what assistance I can render.”

“Are you sure, sir?”

“We’ve gotten a *lot* of inquiries and orders for the products you’ve sold us in the past. If you would do us the honor of providing them wholesale in the future, we can expect significant profits. I look forward to the Marc Trading Company’s success as much as anyone.”

“Well, all right then.”

We even managed to get Mr. Joseph's backing—I hadn't expected that. And so once again, today's dealings ended harmoniously.

The day after we finished our business with the Kepler Trading Company, we headed for Baytrium, the town governed by Count Müller. We explained to those at the Hermann Trading Company and Mr. French what we'd talked about with Mr. Marc the day before.

None of this had much to do with Mr. French, but I wanted to apprise him of the situation just in case. And when I did, he said—very firmly and fervently—that he wanted to help us out. I supposed a lot of his enthusiasm came from the thought of performing a service for his town.

I also told him to ask Count Müller if he needed anything. They weren't completely unknown to one another, and if I could get everyone on good terms, then there wouldn't be any unexpected problems—at least, not around Baytrium.

As for our finances, we entrusted Mr. Marc with all the large gold coins we had on hand—five hundred—about half of what we'd earned so far. Peeps said we should be fine with about that much for the time being. Maybe we'd be able to start the work in earnest when we next visited. We were more than ready to hole up in Count Müller's territory for the next few years, using the bulwarks' construction as our excuse.

Thinking about it like that, things were going fairly well. But as we flitted about from place to place, before we knew it, several days had passed. I didn't even have time to practice my magic during our stay. Next time, I wanted to come for more of a vacation and enjoy this world. Peeps was in agreement.

As our conversation began to wander, we decided to return to the modern world.

<Convergence, Part One>

When we returned from the otherworld inn to our apartment in modern Japan, the clock on the wall showed it was a little past six AM. I could feel the morning sun filtering in through the curtains and hear the chirping of sparrows outside the window.

“Once again, we see a change in the relative flow of time...”

“Did it match your calculations, Peeps?”

“No, there’s a discrepancy. My assessment model must have been lacking.”

I couldn’t help feeling a little daunted by my roommate, who now had an impressive mastery over some pretty high-level terminology. *Should I study up on that kind of thing, too?* I wondered. I wanted to be a good, responsible pet owner who cared for and nurtured my bird’s values. But unfortunately, he was smarter than I was, so it would probably be a challenge to keep up.

As he turned from me to gaze at the clock, his small figure already seemed so far away.

“.....”

Putting that aside for now, I checked my phone from the bureau, which I’d left in the apartment. If Section Chief Akutsu had called while I wasn’t around, I’d need to deal with it quickly, or I’d be in trouble later. Thankfully, though, I didn’t see anything from him.

However, there *was* a missed call from Ms. Futarishizuka. *Wonder what she wants.*

“Peeps, is it all right if I use the phone for a moment?”

“I don’t mind. Is something wrong?”

“It looks like Ms. Futarishizuka wanted to get in touch.”

“Oh, the girl. Attacked by someone else, perhaps?”

“It’s possible.”

My phone's history showed that she'd made the call a little less than an hour ago. If Peeps was right, it might already be too late. Recently, she had begun to feel like one of the team, so I quickly called her back.

After a few rings, she picked up. I'd grown accustomed to the young girl's voice over the past several days, and I now heard it again through the speaker.

"It's me—yes, it's me. Were you asleep, by chance? Dozing away?"

"Well, it sounds like whatever it was, it wasn't urgent."

"Not urgent, perhaps, but something I thought you should know sooner rather than later. My apologies for contacting you so early. Could we have a little chat before heading to the bureau? I can even give you a lift."

"I suppose I'll take you up on that."

"Got it! Roger! Leave it to me!"

"I'd prefer to meet at the nearby convenience store."

"Actually, I'm pretty close already. Hard starboard toward the convenience store!"

"...You seem pretty excited, huh?"

"Well, I didn't get much sleep. I'm just so passionate about my work."

"All right, well, thank you again. See you soon."

I was always afraid I would slip up and say something I wasn't supposed to during a phone conversation, so I promptly wrapped up our call. Since the phone I was using had been provided by the bureau, I got anxious even during regular, casual conversations. If somehow Peeps was overheard speaking, we'd be in a whole lot of trouble.

"Are you going out right now?"

"Looks like she wants to talk to me about something as soon as possible."

"I see."

"Sorry, but could you mind the place while I'm gone?"

"I can. I'll see what fun I can dig up on the internet."

"You really like the internet, huh, Peeps?"

"I don't know if I will ever tire of it. It will be fun for a while longer; that much is certain."

With my roommate's approval, I quickly got ready to leave. In addition to food and sleep, I'd gotten everything done in the otherworld, including bathing and making sure I was dressed properly. I just had to check the contents of my usual bag and stick my wallet and phone into my pants

pocket, and I was ready to leave.

“All right, then. Bye for now, Peeps.”

“*Take care.*”

“Aw, thanks.”

How wonderful it is to have someone at home to see you off, I thought.



Not long after ending the call, I headed for the neighborhood convenience store.

Futarishizuka probably would have come to the apartment if I'd asked, but I didn't want to risk my neighbors catching sight of her. After all, her car was one of those super-obtrusive, conspicuous cars that cost a fortune. Plus, the driver looked like the definition of “little girl.”

That was why I'd wanted to meet her at the convenience store a few minutes away. When I stepped into the eating area, I found her already there. She was sitting in a chair by the window, tapping away at the screen on her phone.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said.

“Oh? You're finally here, hmm?”

As I walked toward her, she looked up from her phone and our eyes met. Our relative positions meant she was gazing up at me from below, and I found the way her black hair fell gently over her forehead cute. Her smartphone's screen showed a combat scene in a video game.

“I feel like I've asked this before,” I said, “but you really do like gaming, don't you?”

“I may not look like it, but I happen to be on the leaderboards in multiple titles,” she boasted.

“I bet you're just throwing money at them to beat everyone else with pay-to-win items.”

“Why, of course! Using the power of cash to tear through free-to-play losers is some of the most fun I've ever had.”

“For someone who looks so detached from modern life, you're surprisingly materialistic.”

“Hmm? What's this, now? Growing ever more curious about me, are we?”

Trying to raise my affection level and access my character route? My, that does worry me. Maybe a special scene is about to start right now—one of the erotic variety, perhaps.”

“Not to rush you, but we should get moving. We can talk—or whatever this is we’re doing—in the car.”

“You are *such* a bore. Couldn’t you stand to pay a *little* more attention to me...?”

“You stayed up all night and now you expect me to match your excitement level—wouldn’t you agree that’s pretty annoying?”

“As the person setting the pace, I think it’s rather fun, actually.”

Ms. Futarishizuka put away her phone and got up from her seat, taking the lead. I headed after her, leaving the eating area and exiting the store.

Several people nearby glanced at the young girl in a kimono. It was early in the morning, but there were people out and about in the area. Most of them appeared to be on their way to work or school.

Futarishizuka walked on, paying them no mind. The car—the same luxury vehicle as the day before—was parked in the lot right next to the store.

Since Peeps wasn’t with us today, I’d be riding shotgun. Seeing Futarishizuka plant herself in the driver’s seat was still somewhat surreal. Now that I was up front rather than in the backseat, everything felt way more dangerous. *Are we really gonna be okay? I mean... Look how far she has to stretch out her leg to reach the accelerator.*

Contrary to my apprehensions, however, the car got off to a light, easy start. We left the parking lot and smoothly traveled down the busy roads. She seemed accustomed to driving—I noticed she was hardly checking the GPS. Maybe she really *hadn’t* been lying about having her motorcycle license as well.

“So about that boss of yours,” she began once we’d passed a few intersections. “I’ve learned several very interesting things about him.”

“Oh? I’d love to hear.” This was the task we’d requested of her last night, right before we’d visited the otherworld. I hadn’t expected her to give me a report the very next day. For me, it had been almost a week since we’d last met, but for her, it had only been about twelve hours.

“Simply put,” she explained, “he set up the entire ruckus at the bowling alley. Personally.”

“Huh...?”

“I heard this directly from the gross one with the long hair, so there is little doubt.”

Now this sounds interesting, I thought.

By “the gross one with the long hair,” she must have meant the head of her old group—the one whose psychic power gave form to whatever he dreamed up. Perhaps it was rude of me to assume, but he *was* the only one among our mutual acquaintances with long hair. Still, though it wasn’t about me, hearing her call another man gross made me go numb. I’d have to make sure I was always well put together. If Ms. Futarishizuka looked at me with her little girl face and said I was gross, I don’t know if I’d ever recover.

“Are you sure this information is real?” I asked.

“I was worried about that, too. But even when I mentioned you all, he stubbornly insisted it was true. And thinking back, every one of us had the same order not to kill your boss under any circumstances.”

“That’s some pretty strong evidence by itself, isn’t it?”

“At the time, I assumed it was because he was of use to us.”

My suspicions about the boss were growing. But why would he do something like that? It had been completely against his interests, hadn’t it? No, I was thinking about it the wrong way. He must have been willing to assume such a high level of danger and risk precisely because there *was* something for him to gain.

“I’ll be honest,” I said. “I can’t see how he would have benefitted from it.”

“I haven’t been able to figure that out, either. I’m stumped.”

“Is it possible he’s in cahoots with the long-haired man?”

“As far as I know, they’re not really friends. In terms of sponsorship, that group and the bureau are like cats and dogs. If he’d gotten too close to your boss, he’d have been putting himself in danger. Perhaps it would have worked fifty years ago, but the world is very *busy* these days, if you know what I mean.”

“In that case, I’m surprised you got him to cooperate.”

“I’ll spare you the details, but I had some outside help.”

“Mutual acquaintances?”

“Something like that.”

This was also of great interest to me, and I really wanted to hear more. But judging by how Futarishizuka was skirting the subject, she probably didn’t want to share. I figured it was possible to use Peeps’s curse to force her to

tell, but that would seriously damage her trust in me, so I decided to hold back.

“It is also possible he hasn’t yet gained anything,” she continued. “You’re the one who has been working with him, right? Has anything stuck out to you? Like his necktie pattern suddenly being gaudier than the day before, or catching sight of him with a woman?”

“Not really,” I replied. “He’s an especially guarded person...”

“Then for the time being, I think we should be very cautious of his actions.”

“Yes, I’ll be taking that to heart.”

Whatever the case, I’d tuck this information away at the back of my mind. More than a few bureau members had died in that incident, and apparently, many more still suffered from the aftereffects. It would be a mess if this went public. If the section chief got wind of our suspicions, he might decide to strike first.

“I’m glad to have such a reliable colleague with me,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Does that mean you’ll take this thing off the back of my hand?” she asked.

“You’re going to have to ask Peeps about that. I don’t have the power to remove it.”

“Oh, what an unreliable colleague I have.”

“I am truly sorry about that.”

“Are you really?”

“Every minute of every day.”

That was the long and short of Ms. Futarishizuka’s findings on the section chief.

Not long after this exchange, and still not far from my apartment, something happened—we ran into a particularly bad traffic jam. I could see the next light was green, but the line of cars wasn’t budging an inch.

And for some reason, I was seeing people jump out of their vehicles and run across the pavement. What was happening? It was like we were in the midst of a large-scale natural disaster—it reminded me of the sites of earthquakes or big floods you sometimes see on the news.

“It would seem there is trouble ahead,” remarked Futarishizuka.

“Would you mind stopping the car?” I asked.

“Well, it’s not like we are going anywhere.” Ms. Futarishizuka brought the car up to the shoulder and parked it. And then, through the windowpane, we

heard what sounded like a distant scream. That was a bad sign.

“Could it be a huge monster, perhaps?” she mused aloud.

“If that was a joke, it wasn’t funny.”

Now that I’d seen psychic powers and learned about the otherworld *and* the fairy world, I was terrified that giant monster attacks might be more possible than I’d previously imagined. I could easily picture some humanoid robots showing up, or a pandemic from an unknown pathogen, or a dozen other ominous prospects.

In the meantime, though, the phone in my pants pocket started buzzing. Not my personal one, but the one from the bureau. I checked the screen; it showed Section Chief Akutsu’s name.

“It’s from the chief,” I told Ms. Futarishizuka. “Can I pick up?”

“Go right ahead.”

With the driver’s permission, I took the call from my boss. And when I picked up, he got straight to the point.

“Sasaki, please head to the site immediately,” he instructed.

“You mean whatever’s happening in front of us?” I asked.

“I’m glad you catch on so quickly.”

He’d probably contacted us after checking our devices’ location data. We’d definitely drawn the short straw on this one. Of course, if it was Miss Hoshizaki in our place, I was sure she would have been happy to rush to the scene.

“Very close to your location,” he explained, “a magical girl is battling it out with a stray psychic. Judging by your phones’ locations, Futarishizuka is there with you, right? The magical girl appears to be acting alone, so I’d like you to resolve things promptly.”

“What about everyone who’s watching?”

“I’ve already got people on that. Your task will be to disable the target and, if possible, secure the stray psychic. Considering your surroundings, though, I’d prefer if you refrained from doing anything *too* crazy.”

“Understood, sir.”

As he’d said, there were a *lot* of people at the scene this time. Dealing with the magical girl would be a tough job, but so would the cleanup work. In that sense, I was glad I was only responsible for one of the two. Anyone engaging *and* cleaning up after would probably end up with stomach ulcers.

Once my call with the section chief was over, I put away my phone and

addressed my colleague, who was all ears. “We’re been put on the job. The magical girl is on a rampage.”

“Oh? The magic child from before, is it? How that discourages me...”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to take her on my own, so I’ll need your assistance.”

“Boss’s orders, I suppose. I’ll give it my best,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka reluctantly as she stepped out of the car.

There wasn’t much I could do out in the open, but I’d put my all into supporting her.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

Today is my second round in this “survival game”—this proxy war between angels and demons.

I’m heading to school when sound vanishes from the world. I walk silently down a familiar road by myself. Well, actually, I’m with Abaddon, who sticks to my side from the moment I wake up to the moment I fall asleep. As I walk through a residential area, everyone nearby suddenly disappears.

In spite of myself, I grow flustered. I can’t hide how my whole body tenses up.

A moment later, Abaddon, who was walking beside me, says, “*Oh? It looks like another game has begun.*”

“...That it does,” I answer, pretending to be calm.

Whenever he looks at me with that smile, it seems like he somehow knows everything about me. I have complicated feelings about this. Since meeting him, I’ve learned that even though I don’t have much in my life, I still have my pride.

Abaddon has been here with me ever since the first day I saw him. He stays outside while I use the toilet or bathe, and if I told him I wanted him to go away for a while, he would. But other than that, he’s always just inside my field of vision.

And no matter what I do, I feel like he’s judging me, though that’s probably a side effect of living my life so separate from other people. He sticks closer to me than family but doesn’t have much to do with my day-to-

day activities. It's a contradiction I find extremely uncomfortable.

I can't help but wish he was the man next door instead. I want *him* to see everything. Every nook and cranny.

Incidentally, after he failed to provide my reward, I demanded that Abaddon use his power to wipe the incident where my mother's boyfriend tried to assault me from both his and my mother's memories. For the time being, at least, we will be able to go on living as we always have. I have nothing to fear from either of them now that I've formed a contract with Abaddon and learned to use some of his violent power even outside the isolated spaces.

"What is it? You look like you found a bug in your favorite food."

"I was thinking that, for humans, demons and bugs really aren't all that different."

"Ooh, harsh. Stopped pulling your punches now that you've opened up to me, huh?"

"I don't have much experience communicating with others, so I'm bad at setting boundaries."

"I see. In that case, I guess it's up to me, huh?!"

"....."

It really feels like he's toying with me, I think as I watch Abaddon theatrically fold his arms and nod to himself. But I don't have any way of opposing him right now.

"Anyway, what do you say we head on over and exterminate some angels?"

"You're always so full of confidence."

"The less confidence someone has, the more they see in others during the most trivial situations."

"...Is that so?"

Like before, I can *feel* the direction and distance of the ones who brought about this isolated space. It's like following a sound coming from far away. Or the scent of curry wafting out from homes as you walk through a residential area.

If I followed it, I'd naturally meet the angel's Disciple. The same is true for the other party, of course, so I can't afford to get careless. That *presence*—for lack of a better term—is something you can consciously conceal, apparently. Abaddon partially conceals his own, pretending to be an average demon as he

takes the lead in hunting for the angel and their Disciple.

But this time, the enemy seems to want to come right up and crush us, just like we do them. Compared to our previous encounter, the presence I feel in the distance is denser, thicker.

“Shouldn’t you turn into that awful, fleshy thing while you have the chance?”

“Do you like that form better than my current adorable one?”

“I don’t care which you use, but I don’t want you to be at a disadvantage in combat.”

“Like I said, my manifestation the first time was a way of introducing myself. Against an average angel and their Disciple, I’ll have no problem in this form. Plus, they won’t realize who I really am, which gives us a big advantage.”

“Oh.”

“Whoops! Looks like they got to us first, though.”

Abaddon’s gaze moves away from me to point in another direction. In the middle of a single-lane road, from which car traffic has vanished, I can see several people.

Half of them, from my perspective as a modern human, are practically in cosplay. They all have immaculate white wings spreading out from their backs.

When they spot us, they stop moving. Naturally, we do the same, and Abaddon comes up alongside me. About ten meters separate us as we face one another down.

“There seem to be a lot of them...”

“I hope you’re not going to get frightened and give me strange orders.”

“Will you be all right on your own?”

“Just leave it to me... Here we go!”

Soon after I stop moving, I hear a loud *boom!*

A moment later, my vision sparks white, like a flash bulb going off in front of me at night. I immediately shut my eyes for a few seconds and feel Abaddon take off. Then frantically, I look around for him—and find him with one arm thrust out behind his body.

Near the end of his arm is one of the men—he looks like an angel—collapsed on the ground. Far off in the same direction, I can also see a woman who appears to be his Disciple, hiding behind a building.

“Such an obvious ambush.”

“Did you beat him?”

“As you can see.”

The fallen angel doesn't budge. Seeing that, the woman behind the building—most likely the angel's Disciple—runs away in a hurry. I hesitate to give chase considering the distance between us. I'm scared a second wave will jump out the moment I turn my back on the group directly in front of me.

Just then, one of the teams in the opposing group launches into the sky in pursuit of her.

“What happens to Disciples who lose their partner?” I ask.

“Oh, let's just say they're beyond help now.”

“.....”

It seems she'll have to continue the game without an angel. Compared to the monumental strength possessed by the angels and demons in these isolated spaces, the Disciples they support are far weaker. I hesitate to carelessly expose Abaddon to the enemy's forces, but he's raring to go, so there's not much I can do.

Maybe I should prepare for the future and find allies, I think. This game will, after all, be taking place over the course of several years, if not several decades.

“He may have been a lower-ranking angel,” I hear a voice say, “but this isn't just any demon if he could take him down in one hit!”

“W-would it be best to withdraw for now, then?”

“Angels can die and be fine, but if we die, that's it!”

“Hold on, everyone! He's just one opponent!”

Confusion is visible in the enemy ranks after Abaddon's little show. Most of the voices are from the Disciples. Our opponents seem to be considering their options.

Either way, it appears they'd underestimated our power, probably due to Abaddon partially concealing his demonic presence. Considering the circumstances of the game, I doubt many powerful players go around without masking their presence to some extent. No matter how strong they are, they'd want to avoid being surrounded by a large group. In that case, our opponents are probably beginners, just like me.

“By the way, would you mind giving the order?”

“You can ignore the Disciple woman who ran away. Just beat the ones in

front of you, please. We should be able to pursue the angel and the Disciple who chased her once we're done. If what you say is true, it won't take long anyway."

"That's a good decision—the kind of decision I want to follow."

"...Really?"

"I'd give it a sixty out of a hundred, I guess."

"The remaining forty points concern me."

"Like I said before, the world will be unchanged when we leave this isolated space. These angels are average. I could slaughter the whole lot of them—including the Disciple who ran off—simply by reducing the entire area to a vacant lot."

"....."

I really wish he'd told me that sooner. I decide that, in the future, I'll give him the craziest orders I can think of. There's no reason to hold back with *this* demon.

"Still, your plan does have a lot of merit."

"Why is that?"

"If letting those Disciples and the angel escape proves detrimental for us down the road, I can use it as a reason to scold you and urge you to do better, right? And even if it doesn't hurt us in the long run, the fact that someone who knows about us has gone into hiding will give you a sense of urgency."

This is a long game, so his string of remarks is probably meant to be part of my education. But this is only my second actual battle, and if I consider the first one a tutorial, this is essentially my first time in real combat. Those were strict words to aim at someone so new.

"You're pretty hard on newcomers, aren't you?"

"Humans never learn unless it involves some sort of pain."

"....."

I can't really argue with that. It's true—I was naive, thinking I could leave everything to this little boy without a problem.

"It happens a lot—making a move without thinking, then having it bite you in the butt later."

"Sounds like this is a pretty difficult game."

"When you get right down to it, it's just one group fighting the other. Inferior numbers translate to more restrictions on your daily life."

“.....”

He’s right. The point of this game is to protect yourself both in the isolated spaces *and* in reality. No matter how much of an advantage you hold in this world where time is stopped, if someone sneaks up and kills you when you’re going about your day, it’s all over.

As time passes in the real world, more and more humans will start plotting to use this game for their own ends. These angels and demons promise attractive rewards. Being able to directly affect someone’s mind, for example—anyone with some level of authority would give an arm and a leg for that power. *Maybe having allies really is a requirement.*

“Should I find some other Disciples to ally with soon?” I asked.

“If you’ve gotten that far already, I suppose I could add another ten points onto your previous grade.”

“...Thank you.”

In the meantime, we can hear the arguing voices start to shift in tone.

“Isn’t he the demon who defeated Virtue?”

“He didn’t leave the Disciple’s body behind, right? I think we should withdraw and gather information.”

“Exactly—we don’t have to be the ones to beat him, after all.”

“Y-yeah, I agree with her!”

Seeing that we’ve taken out one of their group already, it seems they are choosing to withdraw.

The Disciples arrive at a decision together first, then begin giving withdrawal orders to their angels. Now the winged ones, who are absolutely bound to the instructions of their Disciples, can’t disobey. They turn on their heels and immediately make to fly off into the air.

“Why don’t we leave our chat there for now and take these angels out? It looks like their Disciples are new to this game as well, so we should use this chance to thin their ranks. The more time passes, the better they usually become at running away.”

“Go for it, Abaddon.”

“Yep! Just leave it to me!” Abaddon nods amicably in response.

One day, I’m going to wipe that easygoing look off his face—and replace it with shock, I decide, watching as the boy runs off toward the angels.



We climbed out of the car and ran toward the center of the commotion, weaving through those who were fleeing. Not to take the words out of Ms. Futarishizuka's mouth, but I did feel like a member of one of those defense organizations you always saw in monster flicks. It was just a pity that no reliable justice-pursuing giants had taken our side.

After running for a little while, we saw a helicopter making a landing. It looked like the on-site personnel the chief had arranged for had begun to arrive. Noises that sounded like ambulance sirens were getting closer, too.

In contrast, there were fewer and fewer bystanders. Personally, however, I was more concerned about those looking out of building windows.

It must have been about a kilometer to our destination. By the time we arrived, sweat covered my brow. Ms. Futarishizuka could run at a blistering pace, and since I was desperately trying to keep up with her, I started losing my breath after only a few minutes. I was heaving and wheezing all through the second half of the run. It hadn't been far, but the bottoms of my feet now hurt through my leather shoes.

Ms. Futarishizuka stopped ahead of me and turned back, saying, "You may want to think about working out, you know." She stared at me with exasperation, like she wanted to follow up with "But I really doubt it would matter." Considering her superhuman physical abilities, she'd probably already been going slow on my account, and I'd still disappointed her. She must've been totally fed up.

"I... I can't apologize enough..."

Loosening my necktie, I looked around. When I did, I spotted the magical girl's back several dozen meters up the road, which was a relatively large, two-lane street. She was right in the middle of it, amid a peppering of overturned vehicles.

As always, her outfit made her look like an anime character. You could see her vivid pink top and skirt from the next town over. Her hair fluttering in the wind was the same color. We couldn't see her face, but it had to be her.

"I wonder what happened here," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Since she's alone, how do you like the idea of giving her a fair fight?"

"You *do* remember that if she uses her Magical Field, I can't lay a finger

on her, don't you?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, I remember that went badly last time..."

"There you go again."

The magical girl didn't seem to have spotted us. Her attention was focused instead on a person lying at her feet—probably the stray psychic the chief had mentioned.

Maybe someone had awakened to their strange powers and started acting cocky around others, only to be found by the magical girl before the bureau could take them in. The bureau would have disciplined them but wouldn't have threatened their life, at least.

We watched for a few moments, but the figure at her feet didn't move an inch. It made me really uneasy, watching from afar.

"Why don't I send some water in there like last time?" I suggested.

"The safest option would be to watch how she reacts to it, I suppose."

"Let's go with that, then..."

In the meantime, the magical homeless girl shifted, and her small body turned around to face this way—she'd spotted us. We'd been told at the start that we'd be up against the magical girl, so we hadn't been trying to conceal ourselves. This was also partly to protect the stray psychic—the chief *had* told us to secure them, after all.

Even so, there was still a fair bit of distance between us and the magical girl. She was a sharp one.

"Oh, how scary! A crazy child is after us."

Just as Ms. Futarishizuka spoke, the magical girl launched toward us, floating into the air and hurtling toward us at a breakneck speed. Without wasting any time to speak, she used the stick in her hand to fire a Magical Beam. This time, though, she'd narrowed its focus, turning it into a pinpoint laser about the thickness of a telephone pole and aiming it at Ms. Futarishizuka—an act that made this magical middle-aged man a tiny bit happy.

"Your colleague was just shot at—why do you look so pleased?" she complained.

"Well, you're safe," I said. "That's all that matters, right?"

"You look like a serious man, but sometimes you take matters altogether *unseriously*."

Oops. I guess she could see it on my face.

Using her superhuman physical abilities, Futarishizuka had dodged the beam coming toward her and made it out unscathed. I'd put up a barrier spell just in case, but thankfully, it hadn't been needed.

I felt as though I'd become more accustomed to dealing with the magical girl. Up until now, I'd been rather slapdash, but maybe if I learned more advanced spells from Peeps I'd have a chance at overwhelming her.

The magical girl landed, then called to me, cautiously and with her stick at the ready. "Are you getting in my way again, mister?"

Behind her, I could see several people—bureau members, probably—going for the stray psychic on the road now that she'd moved away. Leaving the psychic in their hands, we focused on handling the magical girl.

"Well, I am a police officer," I replied. "I have to protect the city."

"Whoa, talk about cheesy," quipped Ms. Futarishizuka. "Going overboard playing the hero, are we?"

"Ms. Futarishizuka, would you mind *not* interrupting everything I say?"

"But you always treat me like cannon fodder! Just *watching* you makes me angry."

"You did a lot last time, remember? You helped."

"That's one way to put it."

When I answered her, I did think maybe I was acting a little *too* cool. *I'm well aware, so please don't make fun of me.* This was exactly the kind of thing that'd come back to me later when I was trying to fall asleep and overwhelm me with embarrassment.

Back when I'd lectured Lady Elsa, too, I'd barely been able to sleep that night as I remembered how arrogantly I'd acted. Recently, I was building up a real collection of memories I wanted to forget. All these fantastical occurrences happening on a daily basis were bad for my mental health.

"Mister, are you friends with that psychic?" asked the magical girl.

"Oh, he sure is," chimed in Ms. Futarishizuka. "He and I are *best* friends, you know."

"Hold on!" I insisted. "Don't put words in my mouth like that."

"Why, how cruel! *You* were the one who *just* said he wanted to get along with me better."

"Things like that are context specific."

As we engaged in pointless banter, I checked our surroundings. Having guessed our plans, the bureau members focused on cordoning off the

neighborhood. In a matter of moments, nobody was left on the streets, and pedestrians and vehicles disappeared from view.

I could still see people watching from the building windows, but I was certain they'd be disappearing quite shortly as well. In the distance, I could see police officers and members of the Self-Defense Forces. I bet the bureau was sending them in with some overblown excuse like a terrorist bombing. Those at the bottom of the food chain never got to hear the real story, so the officers on the ground probably believed this was a national crisis.

"...You do seem like friends," remarked the magical girl.

"Well, personally, I'd like to get to know you a little better, too," I suggested.

"Moving straight from one girl to the next, eh? What a playboy."

"Ms. Futarishizuka, would you *please* be quiet for a second?" She was in high spirits today—maybe because Peeps wasn't around. I supposed she must get stressed out whenever he was with us. Perhaps she was venting.

"Why are you friends with a *psychic*, mister?" asked the magical girl, the word *psychic* dripping with bitterness.

She wasn't attacking us; she probably knew from our last couple encounters that she didn't have any effective means of doing so. We, on the other hand, had already shown that we had a way of interfering with her Magical Barrier.

But she still didn't run away. She must have known it would be easy to use the Magical Field to flee. And though bureau members were tightening up the perimeter, she didn't seem to care one bit about them, either. No—her attention was on Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Isn't it more fun to be friends with people than to get in fights with them?" I asked.

"No," she said. "No, it isn't. I want to kill that psychic next to you."

"...I see."

Her hatred of psychics was unwavering, and the situation wouldn't allow for any negotiation. Personally, I wanted her to leave as quickly as possible. I didn't want to have to betray her to the bureau. I doubted Ms. Futarishizuka, who would be doing the bulk of the work, was eager to risk her own safety engaging the magical girl, either.

And then, as we came to an impasse in our conversation and began to consider that more forceful measures might, in fact, be our only option, it

happened.

Suddenly, the world lost all sound.

The distant voices of people, the ambulance-like sirens, the rotors of the helicopter still flitting back and forth in the sky—all of that noise, previously unavoidable, was gone.

“What on earth is this?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka, looking around.

“Tch...” The magical girl looked just as surprised as we were. It seemed like neither of them were involved in whatever this was. Obviously, I hadn’t caused it, either.

“Have you done something again?” Futarishizuka asked me.

“No, I haven’t.”

It was almost like I’d lost my sense of hearing. At first, I wondered if I’d experienced sudden hearing loss from overwork, as I wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with such symptoms. But I could still hear Ms. Futarishizuka’s voice loud and clear. I could even perfectly pick up the sound of my leather shoes scraping on the ground.

It wasn’t us, then—our surroundings had fallen silent.

The bureau employees watching us from behind buildings and such, too—as far as I could tell, every single one of them had vanished. The only people left seemed to be the three of us: Ms. Futarishizuka, the magical girl, and me.

“But *she* doesn’t appear to know what’s happening, either, hmm?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“You’ve never heard of a psychic power like this?” I asked her.

“I couldn’t say—not yet anyway...”

This is a difficult one, I thought. It wasn’t just someone canceling sound—people had disappeared, too. Was it a psychic power that could pick out and remove objects, including creatures, from a specified area? If it was, it had to be rank A. That would be quite the fearsome power. But if that was the case, it raised the question of why *we* were still here.

Seriously, what on earth is going on? I unconsciously looked to my shoulder, but Peeps wasn’t there.

“How long are you going to stand there acting befuddled?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I don’t know!” I exclaimed. “Aren’t you scared that if we make any sudden moves we’ll be crushed out of nowhere?”

“Don’t be such a sissy.”

“That’s sexual harassment.”

Time passed as all three of us remained cautious of our surroundings. However, we saw no more changes besides the disappearance of people and sound. After a short while, the tension in the air started to dissipate.

At last, the other party spoke up and asked, “Did you do something, mister?”

“We were wondering the same thing, actually,” I said back.

“.....”

Just as we thought, the magical girl didn’t seem to understand this, either. There was a low chance any of her friends would come charging out.

But that put us in a problematic position. There was still no sign of an unseen third party.

“It looked as though, for just a moment, a light was engulfing us...,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Really?” I asked. Apparently, Ms. Futarishizuka had good eyes in addition to her physical abilities. I hadn’t noticed anything.

When I thought about something surrounding us, the first thing that came to mind was the barrier magic Peeps had taught me about. I had raised a barrier earlier to guard against any Magical Beams, and it seemed completely possible that some sort of magical phenomenon had been released from somewhere else and my own barrier had unintentionally countered it. Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough knowledge to imagine what that phenomenon from somewhere else might be.

As a test, I checked my phone—only to see it couldn’t find service.

My attention naturally shifted overhead. Above us was a clear, brisk autumn sky, and below it was this strange world where certain things were curiously absent.

And then I saw something move out of the corner of my vision.

Something larger than a bird had just flown by at a relatively low altitude, between a pair of far-off buildings. And if my eyes weren’t deceiving me, it was shaped like a person, flying almost as though with flight magic.

Plus, its silhouette implied it had wings spreading out from its back. Two pure-white wings—like an angel who had descended to the human world.

But if I said that, Ms. Futarishizuka would probably hit me with some snappy comeback.

“Hey,” she said. “Something is flying over there.” Apparently, she’d

noticed it, too.

“Seems like it,” I agreed.

The magical girl couldn't help but shift her own attention to it as well.

As we all watched, the winged figure swept by and weaved between buildings like a crow or hawk might, growing more and more distant. Finally, it dropped its altitude all of a sudden and disappeared out of sight. Hidden behind the buildings as it was, tracking it down would be difficult.

“Does it have anything to do with this, I wonder?” murmured Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Hmm. I'm not sure, either.”

Having wings growing out of your back seemed a little *too* unconventional for a psychic power. And I couldn't grasp how it related to this unpopulated world. But I couldn't be sure it *wasn't* related, either.

In the meantime, we heard a booming roar in the distance. It came from pretty far away, and I could only make it out because there was no other source of sound here.

“My, there must be a party happening over there,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Yeah...” I had a sneaking suspicion this wasn't the time to be fighting with the magical girl. Once I'd come to that decision, this magical middle-aged man turned to her and said, “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“...What?” she replied hesitantly.

“I know you have a lot of history when it comes to us. But we have no idea what's going on here, so if we want to get out of this, shouldn't we cooperate? Actually—we don't even have to cooperate, but can we at least agree to a temporary truce?”

“.....”

Between a magical girl we could *maybe* manage and a strange, empty world, it was obvious which one we needed to focus on. Fighting the magical girl wouldn't have been easy, either, which was precisely why I suggested a compromise.

It would be a real shame, after all, if we were all attacked from behind and crushed.

“This could make it impossible for you to take your revenge on psychics,” I pointed out. “You wouldn't want that, would you?”

“...Okay. I'll cooperate with you, magical middle-aged man.”

It was an awful excuse. Still, I'd managed to secure her consent.

"Oh-ho?" murmured Ms. Futarishizuka. "May I take that to mean you will *not* be attacking me, then?"

"....."

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed a little uneasy about the arrangement, but things would probably be fine. As long as I put a barrier on her, it would nullify the magical girl's attacks. For now, we had to strike while the iron was hot.

"All right, then let's head after that figure," I told them.

I doubted the winged person we'd spotted in the distant sky flitting between buildings was completely unrelated to our present situation. With the other two in agreement, we formed a temporary truce, then set off in the direction we'd seen the figure disappear.



Without any people, the world was quiet no matter how far we progressed.

We didn't see anyone besides each other, and there were no cars being driven around. So to get to where we were going, this magical middle-aged man requisitioned a bicycle parked nearby. Thankfully for me, it wasn't locked.

I'd learned during my training that we could commandeer vehicles in cases like these. It was one of those things I'd always kind of wanted to try someday. Plus, they said another department would handle all the little details like getting the bike back to its owner and compensating them.

"My, isn't that sneaky of you?" teased Ms. Futarishizuka. "Are you sure police officers are allowed to do things like that?"

"Don't you have those powerful legs of yours to carry you, Ms. Futarishizuka?"

"Are you still mad about what happened on the way here?"

"No, no! Of course not."

My lack of any real exercise over the past several years had lowered my endurance to the level of a grade schooler. Running normally, I'd never be able to keep up with these two. Especially not the magical girl, who could soar through the air using Magical Flight.

According to Miss Hoshizaki, bureau members could be supplied with the

funds to pay a gym entrance fee and a monthly subscription—everything would be covered. She went regularly herself, and now I was thinking I couldn't start too soon. I wondered if there was any magic that could increase your physical abilities; I'd have to check with Peeps next time I saw him.

Just then, we heard a noise from right nearby. It sounded like a series of bangs.

“Oh, we're close,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Let's move in front of that building with the convenience store on the first floor—”

I had intended to finish with *hide ourselves and observe*.

But before I could say the rest out loud, someone appeared right in front of us. It was a woman who looked about twenty or so; she'd dashed out from between the buildings.

When she spotted us, she was so shocked she froze in her tracks. “What...? Why?! There were more of you?!” she practically shrieked. She looked aghast. The creases on her brow marred her features, which would have looked charming had she smiled. But instead, she glared at us like we'd killed her parents or something. She had her guard up now, like she'd run into someone suspicious on the road at night.

We naturally stopped walking as well. She was several meters away from us. I climbed off the bicycle and parked it on the curb.

“Oh!” I called out. “Excuse me, would you mind speaking with us—?”

“Don't come any closer!”

She rejected my offer outright. Hatred and revulsion were clear on her face. Did I really look that suspicious? I only had a moment to reflect on my appearance before she yelled again, this time turning her attention to the magical girl.

“You, the one floating! You're a demon, aren't you?!”

“...Me?”

For a moment, I wondered if they were acquainted, but the magical girl's reaction seemed too uncertain for that. Having been unfairly called a demon, she looked back in blank confusion. Though I supposed that from the point of view of low-ranking psychics, the magical girl basically *was* a demon.

“And the man next to you—he's—he's your Disciple, right?!”

“What is a Disciple—?” I started.

“Eek! Don't come any closer! Please, stay away!”

I took a step forward, but that only made her shriek again. She put even more distance between us before continuing.

“Please, *please* let me go!” she begged. “If you do, I’ll be sure to thank you! I’ll do anything you want! So please, let me escape! Please? It’s a good deal, isn’t it?”

And now she was trying to win me over. She had on a vulgar smile, and her frightened eyes were a little terrifying.

But what was a Disciple? “I’m sorry,” I said, “but I’m actually not related to this girl here.”

“Don’t lie to me!” she screamed. “Why else would you be in this isolated space?!”

“...Isolated space?” Another odd piece of terminology. Was that the name of a psychic power?

She looked too desperate to be joking or lying to us. Maybe another psychic had loaded her up with this nonsense. It seemed plausible a psychic could use the language of religion to gain power over others. After all, if you could fly and passed it off as a divine power, believers would be overjoyed.

“Please, just let me go!” she pleaded. “I’ll come here at the same time tomorrow to thank you properly! Okay? That sounds good, right? My name is Akemi. And I’d do *anything* for a young man as handsome as you!” she pleaded, looking like she was about to burst into tears.

She was making me look like the bad guy here. Plus, her calling me “young” and “handsome” was *incredibly* suspicious.

As we were trying to figure out what to do, two people approached the woman from behind. One of them was a man, whose skin was a similar color to my own. He seemed to be around twenty as well. He was good-looking, with short hair and tan skin.

“Naomi, are you all right?!” he asked.

“T-Takayoshi!”

Hearing her exaggerated shrieks, the man ran straight for her. They must have been acquaintances. A moment later, the woman stuck her finger out at us. “Takayoshi, they suddenly attacked me!” she cried. “They’re trying to kill me!”

“Just leave it to me,” said the man with a nod. “I’ll protect you no matter what, Naomi!” Turning to face us, he gritted his teeth and balled his hands into fists.

Akemi—or rather Naomi—was pretty amazing, giving us a fake name so smoothly like that.

“Well, *her* attitude sure changed quickly,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Anyone would do the same, if their life was in danger,” I replied.

What bothered me more was the man standing next to Takayoshi. After all, he had wings spreading out from his back. Wasn’t he the one we’d seen flying through the buildings earlier? He was about a head taller than me, putting him at close to two meters, and he was good-looking, with long, slender legs and pronounced facial features. His hair was blond, and his skin was an immaculate white. His clothing made him look like a Christian priest. My immediate impression was that he was deeply involved in some religion.

“We’re not gonna let some *demons* kill us!” declared Takayoshi.

“Takayoshi!” shouted Naomi. “I believe in you, Takayoshi!”

“Yes! I promise, we will emerge victorious!”

“I knew I could believe in you!”

“Watch me, Naomi! Demons like this? I’ll take ’em down, no sweat!”

“Go for it, Takayoshi! I love you so much!”

Takayoshi and Naomi seemed to be getting very excited about this.

The magical girl was watching them and asked, “Are you a psychic, mister?”

Hold up a second! That was a very important question. The kind that, if you answered wrong, would put you in a *lot* of trouble.

“Huh? What are you going on about, demon...?” asked Takayoshi.

“I’m sorry, but I’d like to confirm something, if that’s all right?”

Instead, this magical middle-aged man interrupted them first. At this rate, poor Takayoshi would find his life in imminent peril. Since Magical Beams could emerge without warning, they were very difficult to block unless you prepared in advance. If you were unlucky and didn’t have a barrier-type psychic power, one blast would vaporize you instantly.

I’d learned all that from the wreckage of the airplane the magical girl shot down last time, but these people—did they have any idea? As far as I could tell, they didn’t know the magical girl, so this situation was looking pretty dangerous.

“What could a demon’s Disciple possibly have to say at this point?” demanded Takayoshi.

“You keep saying *demon*,” I replied, “but I don’t know what you’re talking

about.”

“Don’t play dumb. The *thing* floating right over there,” said Takayoshi, gesturing with his eyes toward the magical homeless girl. “That’s obviously the demon you obey. I’m not sure about the kid in the kimono next to you, but it doesn’t matter much to me. If we can take out your demon, *you’ll* be no sweat.”

Not only did he not know about magical girls—he didn’t even know about Ms. Futarishizuka. It looked like he was in a similar position to me, a first-year psychic.

“No, she’s a magical girl...,” I started.

“Even after all this, I can’t sense any real power from you,” remarked Takayoshi. “Must not be much of a demon. Arche, get them! We have to take out at least one demon, or we’ll be letting down the angel who was helping Naomi.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Clean ’em up, will you?”

“Understood,” answered the man in angel cosplay, before launching straight toward the magical girl.

Ms. Futarishizuka responded by stepping between the two and raising her arm at the man. The man in angel cosplay thrust out one of his hands as if to catch her fist. It seemed he didn’t even register her as a threat. His arm was right in the path of Ms. Futarishizuka’s descending blow. Had he known about her psychic power, he would never have taken such an action.

Her balled fist touched the palm of his hand, and the change was almost instantaneous.

“Urgh... What—what is this...?” he groaned.

“Well, aren’t *you* the nutritious one?” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka gleefully. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had this much to drink.”

Then the angel cosplayer’s knees gave out, and he collapsed to the ground in front of her. Sliding along the road thanks to the momentum from his charge, he passed right by us and ending up facedown on the asphalt several meters behind. He didn’t move after that. I couldn’t tell if he was dead or alive.

“Arche!” yelled Takayoshi a moment later.

The angel cosplayer made no response.

Ms. Futarishizuka and the magical girl, meanwhile, were having a

conversation.

“...Why did you bother?” asked the magical girl.

“What’s that?” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

“He was after me, not you.”

“We have a temporary truce for the moment, remember?”

“.....”

Ms. Futarishizuka must have acted preemptively to safeguard against being stabbed in the back by an ally. I couldn’t help admiring her thoroughness.

Her strategy had been surprisingly effective, too. The magical girl gave her a little nod, and after that, she didn’t try to object or argue. In contrast to Ms. Futarishizuka, whose physical age and actual age were totally unaligned, the magical girl’s reaction suited her youthful appearance.

Takayoshi and Naomi, however, were panicking.

“Wait! Takayoshi, what’s going on?!”

“Wh-what was that? I couldn’t feel anything from her.”

“What’s the point if you just let her beat your angel?!”

“Yeah, but look, we can still see him. Maybe he’s not...”

After noticing how flustered the pair was, Ms. Futarishizuka turned away from the magical girl to face them again. “Which one of you will be next, then?”

That was one mean look on her face. She must be aware that since they were suspected psychics, we’d want to knock them out and bring them back to the bureau alive. And yet she had threatened them anyway. She was wicked to the core, and it was giving me chills.

“I... Wait!” pleaded Takayoshi. Take me instead; just let Naomi—”

“Then take him!” interrupted Naomi loudly without wasting a second. “I didn’t want to do any of this anyway!”

“Uh? What...? Naomi?!”

“You can do whatever you want with him, so please! I’ll do anything!”

“Huh?!”

I felt so bad for Takayoshi right then. He’d come to help her and everything. Watching Naomi, he seemed just as flabbergasted as I was.

“She’s so unsubtle it’s almost refreshing,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Can’t say I don’t share the sentiment,” I replied. Nobody had done anything to the guy, and yet I wanted to save him.

Ultimately, though, we’d be taking them both to the bureau, so they’d end

up in the same place. At this rate, her future social life could get a little rocky. I'd have to remember to ask the chief to give them separate assignments.

"Wait a minute, Naomi!" insisted Takayoshi. "I came here to save you!"

"And you couldn't, so what was the point?!" demanded Naomi.

"I, well..."

"You're worthless without your angel!"

"Ugh..."

I wasn't sure about the existence of angels, but her argument was sound. It was a very logical conversation. However, an emotional outburst seemed imminent.

"I will kill every psychic," said the magical girl without wasting a moment, readying her stick.

This wasn't good. A Magical Beam was coming. For Takayoshi, it would add injury to insult.

It was just too painful to watch, so I quickly took a step forward. "Hold on a moment, ple—"

But just then, a voice rang out.

"Foound yooou!"

It belonged to a young boy.

All of us naturally turned toward the sound and saw the boy, about the same age as the magical girl, appear from between two nearby buildings—flying, at that. He seemed to be a psychic with a flight-related ability.

The boy had pale-white skin and light-brown hair. From these, as well as his pronounced facial features, it was clear that he wasn't Japanese. Plus, his outfit looked like a cosplay—he wore a black cape across his shoulders, with a matching black king's crown.

"Wh-what the hell is *he* doing here?!" demanded Takayoshi.

"Hey, wait a minute! Why me?!" cried Naomi.

Their reactions to the boy were extreme—their faces stiffened the moment they caught sight of him, like they'd just seen a ghost in a graveyard or something.

"My Disciple's orders are absolute. I'm taking you down."

No sooner had the flying boy appeared than he charged straight toward the pair. He soared at a brutal speed, getting right up next to them in a heartbeat, as though sliding through the air. His arm swung way up, then came down without hesitation. His target had been Takayoshi, and now the boy's small

fist connected with the young man's cheek.

With a bang, everything above the man's neck exploded. It was a pretty gory sight.

Both close by, Ms. Futarishizuka and the magical girl were visibly shocked. They immediately put up their guards, cautious of the boy—as did I. Maintaining my barrier spell, I mentally put my flight magic on standby so we could escape at any moment.

Ignoring all of us, the boy turned to face Naomi.

“Please, help me... I... I don't want to die!” she begged.

“*Oh, that's too bad. Unfortunately, that's not something I can do for you.*”

“Noooooooooooo!”

Her scream only lasted a moment before the boy's fist hit her face. Like Takayoshi, everything above her head was pulverized with a *bang*.

All this occurred within ten or so seconds of the boy appearing. He'd been so swift that we'd had no time to stop him.



(The Neighbor's POV)

The demon whose side I've taken is turning out to be very powerful.

Abaddon trampled over the opposition last time, and he's doing it again now. Leaving aside the Disciple and angel I'd decided to let flee, he takes down the rest of their group in a matter of seconds. The slaughter, including that of the Disciples, takes him no more than a few minutes.

The remains of their massacred bodies now lie scattered about the road. To be honest, this isn't something I want to be witnessing.

Unlike last time, when he became a disgusting mass of flesh, today Abaddon retains his boyish form as he fights with the angels and their Disciples. Naturally, this alters his fighting style as well. Whereas before he'd simply devoured everything, this time he's using hand-to-hand combat reminiscent of some kind of martial arts.

One by one, his opponents' bodies explode as his fists and feet connect with them. Almost as though they are being shot with a large-bore gun, a shrill *bang* marks each time I see a body part burst. The sight is overwhelming.

Several spatters of blood and flesh fly to my feet.

I glimpse some glossy stuff with pink sheen amid all the crimson flesh, and it reminds me of organ tissue—that’s something I probably won’t forget for a while. I’m sure it will show up in my dreams tonight, or sometime soon, at least. At this rate, I begin to wonder if Abaddon’s big fleshy ball form would have actually been less gory.

“*Okay. Should I go after the angel and Disciple that got away?*” asks Abaddon upon returning to my side.

“*Hmm...*”

I’m not sure what he finds so entertaining, but he’s wearing a big smile. The contrast between his expression and his enemies’ scarlet blood covering him from head to toe is stark, to say the least—despite his young appearance, he gives off a sense of unknowable terror.

“*What is it? I noticed you keeping your distance.*”

“Just look in a mirror. There’s your answer.”

“*Ouch. I worked so hard, and all I get is this cruelty.*”

“I’ll be sure to give you more specific instructions next time.”

“*Oh yeah? I like to have some freedom, though.*”

Is he saying that out of spite? Maybe he’s just stressed out at having to deal with me. The latter would make me feel a little bad.

Thinking back, he’d pointed out that I talk too quickly, hadn’t he? I didn’t expect my lack of experience communicating with others to manifest like this. It probably took actual interaction to notice your own faults. It’s so obvious, and I’m just figuring it out now.

“*Also, it looks like they’ve completely hid their presence.*”

“They’d have to, considering they’re trying to escape.”

“*No choice but to get a bird’s-eye view, then.*”

“...I can’t fly, in case you weren’t aware.”

Several of the Disciples who fought Abaddon were flying around just like their angels. I suppose they were probably using the powers their angels shared with them to make it possible.

I, too, had received a mysterious power from Abaddon—the power to drain a mysterious energy, which he called life force, from anyone I touched. I’d used it just the other day to resolve a problem at home, actually. And I can channel it freely, it seems. Storing it up, however, is impossible. While it can heal whoever I transfer it to, myself included, it simply disperses if the target

is in perfect condition.

It's effectively preventing me from collapsing of hunger for the time being, which I'm extremely grateful for. Abaddon must have given me the power with just that in mind. I'll probably be using my mother and her boyfriend to keep myself sated for a while. I could say good-bye to my days of scavenging for leftover school meals in the service room, too.

"I'll float up and look. You can follow me from below."

"You won't give me the power to fly?"

"Each angel or demon can only grant one power unconditionally. I already gave you the power to interfere with a person's life force. It's one of the rules of this proxy war. If you want something more, you'll have to ask me for it as a reward for doing well."

"I see." That seems like a pretty motivating idea from a Disciple's point of view. At least, hearing Abaddon's words definitely whets *my* interest.

"Angels and demons can't actually grant much of their power to their Disciples. Compared to our full strength, which we can wield inside these isolated spaces, the power we can grant basically only amounts to a rounding error. But there's always exceptions—keep that in mind."

"Is it possible for a Disciple to overpower an angel or demon?"

"That has happened in the past, though the reasons behind it are unclear."

"That doesn't ruin the game at all? I feel like it would be kind of a big deal."

"Angels and demons take a penalty if they grant more power than is allowed by the rules as a reward. Just like if we were to harm a human outside of an isolated space, the penalty would affect our true self. In layman's terms, it might annihilate not only the temporary form you see before you, but my real self. It's quite serious."

"...I see."

Personally, I'm itching to get my hands on the power to charm others. Abaddon used a charming spell on the man next door, which unfortunately didn't do the trick. The man's reaction *had* been conspicuous, though. Maybe if I use it on him again, I'll be able to get what I'm after. It's a possibility I can't pass up. I'd even give up my current power for it.

"Would I be safe in that case?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry. Even now, a barrier protects the area around you. It's difficult to do the same thing in the real world, but in an

isolated space, I can manage this much without even breaking a sweat. An average angel wouldn't be able to touch you."

"Oh. I had no idea..." I wasn't aware until he mentioned it. I can't see anything like that, after all.

"If you're fine with being held in my arms, I could take you up with me."

"I see. I'll walk after you on the ground, then. Please show me the way."

"Great! Leave it to me!"

I don't want to let this incomprehensible demon hold me—something the man next door hasn't even done yet. As I follow Abaddon, who is flying overhead, it occurs to me that, actually, I want to hold my neighbor in *my* arms rather than the other way around. I'm overcome with the urge to bury my face in his chest and breathe in deeply.

Abaddon flies faster than I anticipated, so I end up having to run to keep up with him. I'm not the best at exercising, so it's pretty difficult for me. Maybe it would be a good idea to take physical education classes more seriously. I never dreamed the day would come when a lack of regular exercise would potentially put my life in danger.

After a short while of traveling through the empty neighborhoods, I hear Abaddon call out from the sky ahead of me.

"Hey, I found them!"

"Are they close?"

"Hmm... They're a little far, I think."

He holds his palm flat against his forehead as he stares into the distance. He makes every casual movement so dramatically—and it suits him, too, which is frustrating considering I can't trust anything he says or does.

After a few moments, he looks back down at me as I'm walking along the ground. *"What should I do?"*

Just before entering the isolated space, I'd been on my way to school. A full day of classes awaits me after this. Time isn't passing at all in the real world, but mentally, I'll still get tired out. If we spend too long here, it will eat into my school life—going home early because I don't feel well will only work so many times before drawing the attention of teachers and other students.

For that reason, I don't hesitate in making the call. Our opponents had literally come after my life as soon as they'd met me.

"Please defeat them."

“Okay, got it!”

Abaddon zips away through the air, and within moments, he disappears between the buildings.

Right after that, I hear his energetic voice.

“Fooound yooou!”

And then the sound of a *bang* reaches me.

He’s probably using his skills against the angel or one of the Disciples, just as he had before. I hear a series of screams ring out. I’m walking toward the sounds of the fighting at a more leisurely pace than I might have—I don’t want to hurry there and get caught up in the battle. Better to wait until it’s quiet before I arrive.

According to Abaddon, something he called a *barrier* is protecting me. Even if an enemy does make it away from him, the chances of my getting killed by a surprise attack are low. If some crazy-strong enemy shows up, then maybe things would be different, but he must have decided that wasn’t likely.

He really is a talented demon, I think to myself.



The sheer violence of the flying boy who had suddenly appeared on the scene left us awestruck. There was little doubt he was a psychic. The question was, how high was his rank? If he was rank A or higher, our only real option would be to retreat—I was pretty sure that, in that case, the section chief would overlook us hightailing it out of here.

“I do wonder what sort of power this boy has,” mused Futarishizuka.

“From the looks of things, he’s got at least as much physical strength as you do,” I replied.

“Well, I’m certainly not about to square off with him.”

“And he’s flying, too.”

“My, how I wish I could soar through the skies myself.”

Naomi’s headless corpse fell with a thud to the asphalt. The blood spurting from it stained the area around us in crimson. Thankfully, the gory side of the body had fallen away from us, sparing our clothing from any bloodstains. The same applied to Takayoshi’s corpse.

Seeing the two of them were dead, the boy turned to us.

A moment later, everything changed.

Noise returned to the once-quiet neighborhood. Cars began to rush across the road again, and people walked up and down the sidewalks. We could hear the sounds of car exhaust and the chattering of people's voices. It was as though we'd been watching a video on mute this whole time, and someone had just switched back on the sound.

And we were standing right in the middle of it all.

Fortunately, we'd been on the sidewalk, so we weren't abruptly hit by any vehicles, though a woman who had been heading right toward us stared at us in wide-eyed disbelief as if to say, "Huh? What the heck are you doing there?"

Then everyone saw Takayoshi and Naomi—their corpses, that is—and screamed. Some also had their eyes glued to the magical girl who was still floating in midair.

At this hour in the morning, everyone was on their way to work or school, so there were quite a few people around. With this many witnesses, we couldn't pretend the human remains didn't exist. Concealing the presence of a pink, frilly magical girl seemed pretty improbable as well. On top of all that, our mystery boy was still in front of us, perfectly healthy.

Only the angel man was gone. Why was that?

Futarishizuka gave a low groan. "What is going on...?"

"...Are we back in the normal world?" asked the magical girl.

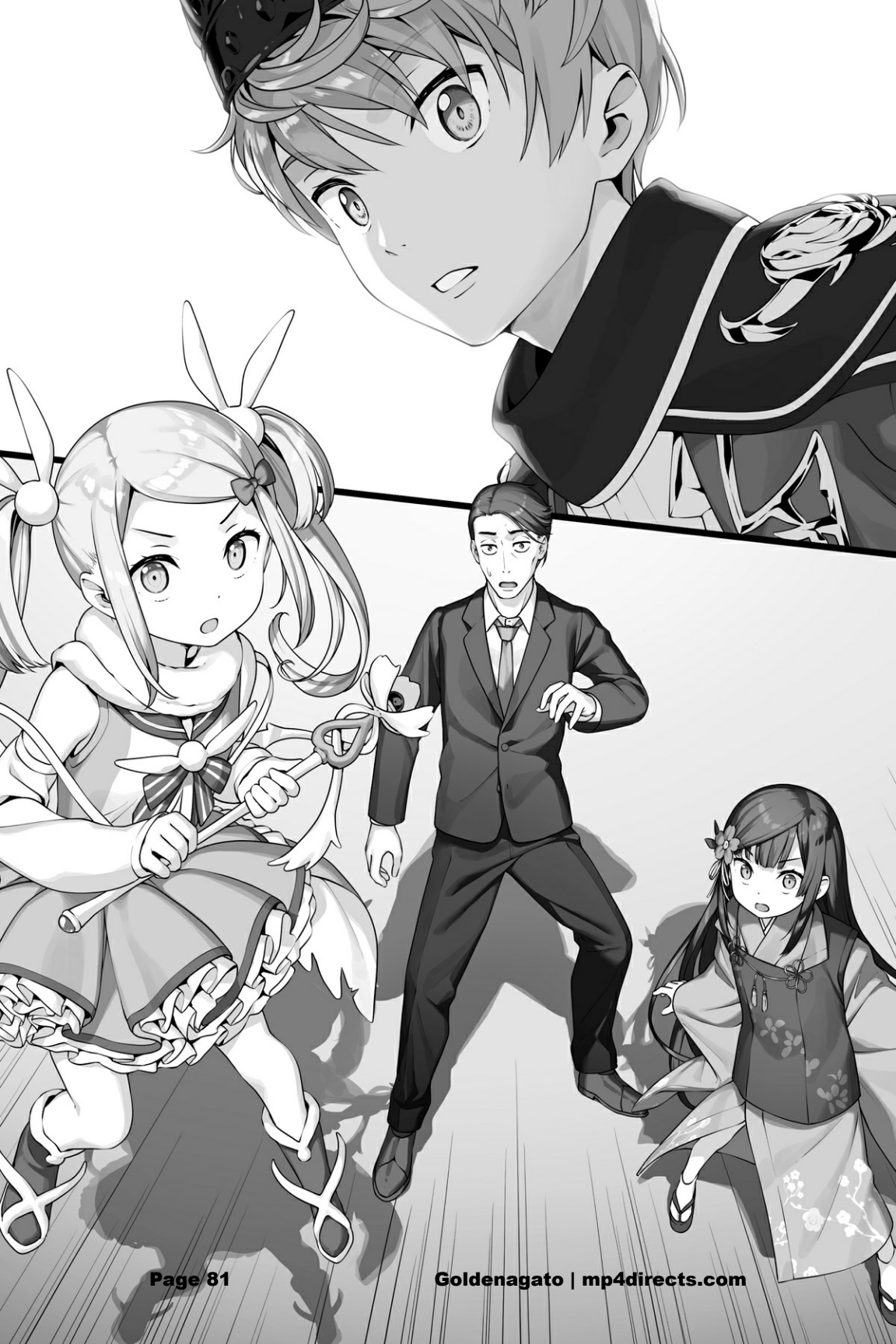
Oh, this was bad. I had no idea where to start, but I had to do something. What I *wanted* to do was abandon everything and flee to the otherworld.

"The isolated space collapsed...?"

I was reaching for the phone in my inside pocket, wanting to at least contact the section chief about this, when the boy started muttering to himself in front of us.

"Divisions of angels or demons who have lost their hosts are forcibly repatriated, no matter what clever plans they might think of. Which means these aren't angels, nor demons—nor even Disciples? No, wait, how is that possible? What does this mean...?"

The boy was looking around with a very surprised expression.



But that only lasted for a moment. After turning back this way, he addressed us once again. *“Hey. Who are you people?”*

We ended up staring at one another across a gap of a few meters. I was willing to introduce myself—in fact, there was a whole lot I wanted him to tell me. But there were people here. We couldn’t speak carelessly. The pedestrians around us were already starting to slip phone cameras out of their pockets.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, please contact the chief,” I said.

“I’m on it,” she replied.

“Magical girl, I’d appreciate it if you came down to the ground...”

“All right,” she answered. “I’ll do as you say, magical middle-aged man.”

“Thank you.”

Ms. Futarishizuka began to contact the chief, phone in one hand, while the magical girl made landfall beside her. I’d be taking charge of the conversation with the boy.

“Were you ever able to see me when we met in the past?”

“What do you mean?” I responded. “I believe today is the first time we’ve met, unless I’m mistaken.”

“.....”

Though he was a boy, I immediately switched into my formal, businesslike tone. After all, the kid was a murderer who could kill with his fists alone. Inside, I was shaking with terror over the nearby corpses, from which blood was still draining.

Perhaps he was like Ms. Futarishizuka: a psychic whose real age didn’t correlate with his appearance. I still had questions about how he’d managed to fly, but his incredible physical capabilities matched the characteristics of Futarishizuka’s energy drain.

Regardless, I needed more information to make any decisions. For now, I’d try to keep the existence of psychic powers on the down-low.

“Anyway, are you all right? That’s a lot of blood.” I asked the question in an exaggerated tone, since the boy was bright red with blood spatter. It was to appeal to the pedestrians nearby—to make them think we were just here by coincidence as well.

From the boy’s point of view, I probably sounded utterly shameless, but I trusted it would be meaningful to those who had just encountered us. Official authority was on our side, and we already controlled the media. All that was

left was for me to make decisions on the ground.

The magical girl had only been floating for a few moments at most, so the bureau could probably cover it up without too much trouble. The problem was the human remains—the corpses of Takayoshi and Naomi. I wanted to hand them over to the bureau before the local police could arrive. That would give us more flexibility.

“I won’t be able to tell her about this,” said the boy.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Right now, my biggest point of focus was the boy in front of me. His actions would greatly affect my future as a public servant. I might even have to fight him as a magical middle-aged man, if the situation called for it. My pockets were lined, thanks to Ms. Futarishizuka, but if possible, I wanted to keep my position as a government employee. Being able to borrow the might of the government meant my days were filled with peace and security. When I’d told Ms. Futarishizuka I preferred to stick with the biggest player, I hadn’t been lying. It was necessary to achieve the laid-back life I’d promised Peeps as well.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

“The police will be here soon,” I told him. “You should contact your parents or guardians if you can—”

But the boy completely ignored me and turned around, the black cape across his shoulders fluttering—another elegant motion. Though young, his handsome features implied that, in a few years’ time, he’d be breaking women’s hearts for sure. In fact, he was quite charming as he was now. To a woman with that kind of taste, the boy’s looks would probably be irresistible.

“Anyway, I’ll be going now!”

“Hey, wait a minute—”

At some point, a human wall had formed around the corpses, and it was through it that the boy left. Without being certain of his capabilities, I hesitated to stop him. It wouldn’t have mattered if Peeps had been with me, but I could only handle rank-B psychics on my own, no matter how hard I tried. Even with Futarishizuka’s help, any A ranks would be a lot of trouble—I had become sure of that ever since my fight with the nerd.

So for now, all I could do was see the boy off without protest. He quickly disappeared into the crowd. At about the same time, I started to hear the sirens of emergency vehicles. I could also catch the roar of helicopter rotors

in the distance.

“Hmm. You know...,” said Futarishizuka, trailing off.

“What is it?” I prompted.

“There’s something that bothers me about all this,” she said, having finished contacting the chief and still holding her phone in one hand. Her eyes were on the screen. “We’ve been walking for quite a while, haven’t we?”

“Yes, we have.”

We were pretty far from her car, too, and it would be a pain to walk all the way back now. The car, at least, was an expensive foreign model, so I doubted anyone would mistreat it even if we left it alone.

The more pressing matter was probably the site of the battle with the magical girl we’d left behind.

“Well, it looks like time has gone back,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’m sorry?”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what she’d said. I decided to look at my own phone, hoping to find an answer.

And she was right—the time had reverted, judging by the numbers on the screen. The clock in the corner displayed something earlier than what I’d seen when I checked the signal after everyone disappeared. I was sure of it; I’d been planning to request overtime pay. You got paid more for early mornings, as well as any other time outside normal work hours.

I looked to the side, but the bike I’d grabbed was nowhere in sight, either.

“It’s almost as if we’ve been fooled by a pack of foxes.”

“I guess I won’t be able to file for overtime now...”

Then what, exactly, happened to those wages? There was supposed to be hazard pay, too, which multiplied my base rate by a fixed amount. In fact, Miss Hoshizaki often worked early in the morning and late at night specifically to get hazard pay.

“...You’re unexpectedly firm about such things,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Not as much as you, I’m sure,” I replied.

I didn’t want to consider it, but maybe the time we spent in that empty world didn’t count toward time in the real world. I was aware of a precedent for differing time flows, at least, due to the otherworld. Once the notion occurred to me, I found myself surprisingly ready to accept it. In fact, Ms.

Futarishizuka already looked more troubled than I did.

After watching our exchange, the magical girl suddenly said, “I’m going home for today.”

“This may sound like a strange question,” I said, “but are you sure?”

For my part, I’d be very grateful if she left. Maybe Futarishizuka protecting her during the angel attack in the empty world had some effect. Come to think of it, she’d also backed down when faced with a wounded child, so she appeared to have a working conscience. She just hated psychics more than she knew how to handle.

“Bye-bye, magical middle-aged man.”

The magical girl waved her stick. There were tearing sounds, and next to her, a pitch-black maw opened up—her Magical Field. I would have preferred she didn’t use something like that with everyone watching, but I couldn’t exactly stop her, so I just let her leave.

It’s a lot better than her flying away through the sky, I decided. Her withdrawal happened in a matter of seconds.

“No good-bye for me, I see,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Hey, there’s always next time,” I assured her.

“I’m not sure I want to see her again.”

“Don’t get greedy now.”

In the meantime, the police arrived on the scene. Right after that, a helicopter landed and unloaded some bureau members. They argued over who was in charge, but once a bureau member in a suit flashed his badge, the local police assumed an attitude of respect and gave in. The total one-eighty really hammered home how strict the hierarchy was in police organizations. It was a little scary, to be honest.

“Excuse me, but might you be Chief Inspector Sasaki?”

“What?”

No sooner had the police department been delegated to fieldwork than one of the bureau members who had alighted from the helicopter came up and asked me a question. I felt a little weird hearing the unfamiliar title alongside my name. If memory served, I was supposed to be a detective.

“I never knew you had such a serious-sounding title,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I don’t remember getting one...”

Wait, no—something like that *had* happened. I got the feeling the chief had

told me I'd be promoted after scouting Ms. Futarishizuka—or something like that. I'd accepted and gone out for some day-drinking, too, all paid for with taxpayer money. Apparently, Miss Hoshizaki had the same position.

Belatedly, I realized why she and I had been given such an ill-fitting title—it was so we could give orders to the local police in situations like these. If I started acting smug or throwing my weight around, they'd probably strip the title from me in no time.

“The situation is in your hands,” said the man from the bureau. “The section chief has already filled us in on the details.”

“Is that in my job description?” I asked.

“You're the highest-ranking person here, Chief Inspector Sasaki.”

“...I see.”

In television dramas and such, being a chief inspector or higher meant you mainly did desk work. And that was probably true in some cases—after all, this situation had unfolded quite suddenly.

But as I spoke with the man, he wouldn't stop directing his attention to Ms. Futarishizuka. He was repeatedly glancing at her even as we conversed. He probably knew exactly who she was.

He must have been able to make a beeline for me directly after arriving because the chief had told him she'd be close by. The gorgeous, kimono-clad young girl would stand out even in a dense crowd. She was the perfect signpost to lead him to me.

“Understood,” I finally replied. “Then first, let's deal with the surveillance cameras in the area...”

There were a lot of things I wanted to keep secret, including our relationship with the magical girl. With that in mind, I decided to handle things as I saw fit. If I racked up some accomplishments I could show off to the section chief, I'd have an easier time at the bureau, too. I'd gotten a promotion very soon after being hired, and it was likely some people wouldn't take kindly to that.

I wanted to make sure everyone—including those in other departments—believed that I was working hard, whatever the actual case may be.

<Convergence, Part Two>

By the time I'd finished the on-site work caused by the fight between the magical girl and the stray psychic and arrived at the bureau, the sun was already beginning to set. Given that we'd encountered them in the early morning on the way to work, the cleanup had taken about half the day. We hadn't had any time to grab lunch—and now we'd been called in to a meeting with the section chief.

"I'd have appreciated at least the time to eat," complained Ms. Futarishizuka, who had been stuck with me the whole time.

"This is all part of a bureau member's job," said the chief. "I'm sorry, but it'll only be a little while longer."

"Ohh, is this the price of honest toil...?"

"Once this meeting is over, you're free to go home for the day."

The meeting was being held in a conference room at the bureau about ten square meters in size. There, we'd met up with Section Chief Akutsu, who now sat across from the two of us. After delivering her complaint, Ms. Futarishizuka slapped her head down on the conference table as if to say she couldn't possibly do any more work than this. Considering her energy-draining power, I wondered about that—I wouldn't be surprised if she could keep going for two or three days without eating or drinking.

"I've already read your report, Sasaki," the chief continued, "but I'm having trouble understanding the contents, so I want to go over everything again. Futarishizuka, don't hesitate to mention anything you might have noticed."

"Understood, sir," I said.

"I'll tell you anything," groaned Ms. Futarishizuka. "Just please, let this end..."

In my report, I'd hidden nothing when it came to the strange psychic we'd

encountered, though I'd excluded the parts about Peeps's world and our relationship with the magical girl.

We'd arrived at the scene. Everyone had suddenly vanished. We'd encountered a psychic. He'd attacked us, so Futarishizuka and I—along with the magical girl—had responded. We'd driven off the psychic, and everyone who had vanished came back. It was at that point we realized we'd gone back in time.

After explaining it all, it struck me how absurd the story was. We were just like Urashima Taro being invited to the Dragon Palace. It seemed only natural the chief would want to ask questions.

"So time reverted for you..." said the chief. "That does make a certain amount of sense."

"It does?" I asked.

"We detected you suddenly disappearing from the site."

"I see."

That was how it must have looked, where we'd originally been. It felt strange hearing it explained, even though I'd had a hunch that's what had happened. The chief had been overseeing things from the bureau and must have noticed our devices' location data suddenly change—I bet that gave him quite the surprise.

"If this is all true," mused the chief, "we should assume your opponent warrants an A rank."

"That was what I figured as well," I said.

The section chief glanced over at Ms. Futarishizuka for a moment. Did he suspect her original workplace? I'd considered the possibility as well.

"Just to be clear," she said, "I hadn't an inkling of who he was."

"Judging by the picture you drew for us, he appears to be a child."

Across from us, the section chief was holding portraits—or rather, full-body depictions—of two of the people we had encountered during the incident. Specifically, the boy who had run off and the man who looked like an angel. Ms. Futarishizuka had drawn them, and they were pretty decent. Good enough to make me wonder if she'd be able to make a living as an independent illustrator.

"He *was* a child," she insisted. "It'd be a little gross for an adult to look like that."

"Do you want to take a glance at a mirror and maybe rethink that

statement?” I remarked.

After that, we were questioned on just about everything—our conversation with Takayoshi and Naomi, the angel Futarishizuka had energy-drained, how we confirmed that time had reverted, and any possible link between the incident and the stray psychic the magical girl had originally attacked. The chief probably didn’t have enough information to make his own report to the related authorities.

As we answered each question in turn, an hour passed in the blink of an eye. Futarishizuka’s stomach started growling during the second half, eagerly informing us of her hunger. She didn’t react to it at all during the conversation, however. Eventually, we’d gotten through the bulk of the questions.

“There is one last thing I wanted to ask the two of you,” said the section chief with a serious look on his face. He straightened up and I tensed in response. “Why were you two the only targets of the psychic reverting time? I’d like to hear any speculation you might have, however unlikely. If there’s anything you’re considering at the moment, I’d appreciate if you shared it with me.”

“We can’t wrap our heads around that, either,” I replied.

“Maybe he was after the magical girl, and we just happened to be close?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

I felt bad for the section chief, but this was one thing I couldn’t answer honestly. I’d already had a good idea of the reason back when it happened. In my estimation, some psychic power or other had interfered with the barrier magic Peeps had taught me—or the magical girl’s Magical Barrier. All three of us had been guarded by some sort of magical phenomenon at the time. Futarishizuka had mentioned she saw a flash of light around us when the change happened.

But if that was the case, then our encounter with that empty world wasn’t meant to happen. In fact, it was more like we coincidentally ended up in someone else’s psychic power, and they hadn’t been expecting us. If that was true, the mysterious boy’s surprise would make sense. And that was why I didn’t want to continue this conversation.

“I see,” said the section chief. “That’s a pity.”

“By the way, Chief, we had something we wanted to ask you about as well.”

“What is it?”

“What will Ms. Futarishizuka and I be doing from tomorrow on?”

“Right. This all seems to be a coincidental encounter, and we’ll continue to investigate it on our end. I want you to keep working on the task I gave you previously. As soon as any new information comes to light on this incident, I’ll send new instructions.”

“Understood, sir.”

Their first priority would probably be to identify Takayoshi and Naomi. That was best left in the hands of the experts, so we had no place there. We’d be continuing our own investigation of the reptilian from the otherworld arriving in modern Japan. It was still all over the news, and while it was mostly limited to living room chats for now, there was no telling how it might develop in the future.

I wanted to find a solution as soon as possible and nip it in the bud.



After finishing up my work at the bureau, I decided to head to the otherworld again that night. Upon returning to my apartment, I set the bureau-provided phone on my desk. Peeps then used his teleportation magic to send both of us straight to the warehouse Futarishizuka had secured. There, we’d pick up the goods for our deal with the Kepler Trading Company and set off for our base of operations in the otherworld. I was starting to feel pretty used to the whole thing.

Ms. Futarishizuka had recently been wanting to accompany us. Unfortunately, I had to refuse. Our short stays in the otherworld were private relaxation time. I didn’t dare bring over any more problems.

In any case, we eventually arrived at Count Müller’s estate in the town of Baytrium, in order to—as usual—gain information on what had happened in the world while we were away. The familiar guard led us straight to the count himself. Eventually, we ended up in the reception room.

“Lady Elsa is getting engaged, sir?” I repeated.

“Yes, she is...”

Count Müller had just informed us of his daughter’s imminent marriage. The count had two sons and one daughter, and I recalled that, partially for

this reason, Elsa was especially cherished by her family. During the inheritance dispute, I'd heard she was loved by the servants, too. In other words, the girl had been brought up like a princess.

And now this pile-hair princess was to have her big moment in the spotlight. I would have assumed this was cause for celebration.

However, the expression on Count Müller's face as he told us was far from celebratory.

"*Who is to be the partner?*" asked Peeps, guessing at the reason behind the man's distressed look. He was such a reliable sparrow, straightforward with his questions even in sensitive situations like these. He was, incidentally, once again perched on a small tree the count had provided so that he might join in on our meeting. As he looked up from the low table set in front of the sofa and chirped, he seemed several times more dignified than when I watched him at home. Maybe I should buy him a higher-quality cage and tree.

"The first prince," said the count, "who has asked for her to be the first of his concubines."

"*Ah, that explains your concern,*" replied Peeps.

"I apologize for bringing up a private matter. However, this may well affect my own position, so I felt it best to tell the two of you as soon as possible. I've spoken with Prince Adonis about it as well, but ultimately, this is a family affair that rests on our shoulders, not his."

Unfamiliar as I was with this world, I didn't know what sort of position being a first concubine would grant Lady Elsa. Taking the words at face value made it seem like one of those *I cherish my wife, but you're the one I truly love* sort of situations. I was pretty sure that wasn't the case here, though. This was the first prince we were talking about—even just a friend with benefits would stand to gain considerable authority.

"*It seems Lewis is making his run for the throne,*" said Peeps.

Lewis was the first prince of the Kingdom of Herz. I'd heard the name personally during our audience; I was sure I remembered correctly. Him wanting Count Müller's daughter as his consort put the count—who supported the second prince—in a difficult position. *Actually, is that even allowed?* I wondered to myself.

"*Then, Julius,*" asked Peeps, "*do you find it acceptable?*"

"As a backwater noble," said the count, "I could never defy the wishes of

royalty.”

“Even so, this is a crucial decision for your daughter, is it not?”

“...I cannot deny that.”

“Can’t you use your relationship with the second prince as an excuse to refuse?” I asked.

“Everything has been in an uproar of late, but both the first and second princes stand to potentially inherit the crown. Either of them taking such a low-ranking noble’s daughter as his first concubine is unprecedented.”

Without precedent, the count seemed to be struggling with whether he might conceivably refuse or if that would be completely unacceptable. After all, given that he was dealing with royalty, the wrong move could negatively affect his family’s future.

I’d been in many similar situations, so I felt I understood him. Just thinking back on any of them gave me a stomachache—like when I couldn’t find any documented decisions in our company’s file that matched what I needed and had to fill out all the necessary forms from scratch. Without any previous cases to reference, my former section chief wouldn’t give me his approval.

“Yes, these problems are yours,” commented Peeps. *“And we aren’t in a position to insist on anything.”*

“Of course,” said the count, “I’m grateful for your consideration alone.”

“Still, feel free to tell us if there’s anything you need help with.”

“...Lord Starsage.” Count Müller began to tremble at Peeps’s casual offer.

But wouldn’t that very offer just ensure the count relied on us even less? He adored the Starsage, after all. That’s what it seemed like from my perspective, at least. What a heartless bird. Plus, the Starsage himself was averting his gaze just a little, like he was playing hard to get.

A moment later, the door to the reception room suddenly swung open, and in came a knight—the one who was always attached to the count as his security. For some reason, he held a limp Elsa in his arms. Was she unconscious? Her eyes were closed, and she wasn’t stirring.

“Sir!” cried the knight. “Lady Elsa attempted suicide!”

“What...?” said the count in disbelief.

“In her room, sir,” stammered the knight, “she—she tried to hang herself! A maid heard her chair fall to the floor and hurried in to let her down. But she hasn’t regained consciousness yet—she’s been like this ever since!”

Yet another shocking piece of news. The knight who had brought Lady

Elsa here seemed a little out of sorts. He was normally so calm and levelheaded, but his voice had gone shrill as he explained the situation.

Count Müller had been on the verge of sobbing from emotion, but his face instantly turned as stiff as stone, his expression one of total shock.

I, too, was dumbfounded. Lady Elsa hung limp from the knight's arms right before my eyes. She didn't seem to be breathing, either—I couldn't see her chest rising or falling.

Peeps reacted immediately. He hopped off his perching tree and landed on the top of the low table. A magic circle emerged at his feet as another one, this one three-dimensional, appeared around Lady Elsa and the knight holding her. They were of similar coloration, and as the first grew more and more radiant, the second shone more strongly to match.

“P-Peeps...!” I exclaimed.

“.....”

The bird remained silent, perhaps because the knight was watching. Calmly, he activated the spell.

I'd heard before that many people lived for a few minutes after hanging themselves. If they could be rescued quickly, it was possible they'd survive without any aftereffects. And when it came to the Starsage, he could do a surprising amount, as long as she was still alive.

As I'd expected, after a few moments, Lady Elsa appeared to react. The Starsage had performed healing magic right before our eyes. The knight still held her small body, but at the end of her limp arms, her fingers began to twitch. Not long after that, her eyes opened. She turned her neck, and when we saw her eyes, they had life in them.

Her lips moved slowly as she murmured, “Fa...ther?”

“Elsa!” cried her father, springing up from the sofa and running to her. “Why? Why would you...do such a thing...?” He took his daughter from the knight's arms and held her close to his chest.

Then she gave a little smile and said, “If it meant bringing you trouble, Father, I would gladly choose death instead.”

“Ugh...”

What a courageous yet extremely concerning remark, I thought.

Count Müller's face was an absolute mess. Apparently, Elsa had found out about her planned marriage. To choose suicide so quickly, though, spoke to her abundant willingness to take the initiative. I assumed most would have

hesitated a little more, though perhaps it was a matter of cultural differences between my world and this one.

Never in my life had I seen a smile that caused me so much anxiety.



We put our meeting on hold to deal with Lady Elsa's attempt on her own life. It took a little under an hour to wrap things up—including changing her clothes, which were all dirty, and dealing with the knight who had seen Peeps's supercool action scene. It caused a veritable uproar in the estate.



I told the knight that I'd had my familiar use a healing spell, and he accepted the explanation. Fortunately, he hadn't heard the bird talk, which helped curb his suspicion.

Lady Elsa's will, however, remained firm.

"To repeat," she declared so that everyone could hear, "I would rather die than cause an issue for you, Father."

She was now sitting on a sofa in the reception room. Count Müller sat next to her. I was across from them, and Peeps was perched on his tree on the low table. The knight had been ordered by the count to leave the room. In the past, that had earned me a glare from him, but now that I'd been made a baron, the man left with a respectful bow.

"Elsa," began the count, "I want you to listen very closely."

"What is it, Father?"

"I would never sacrifice your life to protect this house."

"Is that not an irresponsible stance, as the head of House Müller?"

"....."

The count fell silent. The youthful princess hadn't hesitated for even a second. I watched her father's lonely expression as he struggled to think of something to say, and I wondered how he felt about all this. His emotions must have been a tangled mess—pride mixed with sadness, perhaps.

"Hence," Elsa continued, "my unfortunate inability to thank any of you." Her stare was now set on Peeps and me. She'd fully made up her mind, and the determined look on her face was full of dignity, implying she'd quickly do it again if we left her alone.

"Isn't there any way I can talk you out of this?" asked the count.

"I want to assist you just as much everyone else," she replied. "Barring that, at the very least, I don't want to hold you back. I beg you, Father, please let me go. I could not stomach the thought of living a life that only causes our family trouble."

It was very like her, to get this determined once she'd landed on an idea. But at this rate, she and her father would never see eye to eye.

Then a voice joined in from a different party—one who seemed discontent to simply watch in silence: Peeps.

"In that case, I have a proposition."

My distinguished sparrow returned to his perch on the table. He had to tilt his head upward to look at the count and his daughter, which naturally

emphasized his beak and the fluffy down on his chest, both of which were adorable. All present turned to look at him.

“Wh-what might that be?” asked Elsa.

“I would like to suggest something similar to what you have already done once in the past.”

“...Something I did?”

“Yes,” replied Peeps, his big round eyes drifting over toward me. *“We will pretend for a while that the girl has died and keep her safe in this man’s world.”*

In other words, he wanted to shelter her in modern Japan.

“Time flows at a different rate there. Several years spent here would amount to a mere few months in his world. This way, we will be able to escape Lewis’s scheme without wasting a young girl’s important premarriage life.”

Marriage certainly didn’t make much sense when one party was dead. If we came up with some excuse, like Lady Elsa being kidnapped by bandits on the way to the capital, and hid her away, while it might lead to criticism, the other party would be out of luck. It was possible rumors might spread that the count himself was responsible, but that would also serve to prove the count’s loyalty to the second prince. It wasn’t a completely disadvantageous proposition, considering the feudal attitudes of the Kingdom of Herz.

In addition, the king had set a five-year time limit on all issues surrounding the royal succession, and several months had already gone by. Though it would depend on the nature of the first prince’s plans, if she was to go into hiding for two or three years, the world would move right along without her.

Finally, Lady Elsa herself had spoken of wanting to travel to modern Japan. If Count Müller allowed it, we could implement this solution immediately.

“Please wait a moment, birdie!” insisted Lady Elsa.

“What is it?”

Count Müller’s face broke into panic at his daughter brazenly calling the Lord Starsage he so admired simply “birdie.” It made the man look a little cute, which was totally unfair.

His daughter ignored him and continued to speak. “Sasaki already explained to me that it wouldn’t work out.”

“The situation has changed since then, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would have to agree with Peeps there.”

The sparrow didn't seem bothered in the slightest by the girl's lack of courtesy. His proposal seemed to be based on our relationship with Ms. Futarishizuka.

Compared to when he'd first placed the curse on her, we'd come to realize through our mutual dealings how accommodating she could be. The biggest example of this was the warehouse she'd procured for our otherworldly business transactions. With Peeps's help and Futarishizuka's connections, we could even shelter Elsa overseas. It hadn't been long since she'd joined me as a colleague at the bureau, but I'd already come to understand her a lot better—though I figured much of this relationship was due to our healthy payments in exchange for her services.

“...I-is that true?” asked Lady Elsa.

“We won't force you, of course. It may only be a few months to you, but a few years will go by in this world. Should any misfortune befall your family in the meantime, you wouldn't be able to go to their aid.”

“.....”

“In addition, if anything was to happen to us, you would have no way of returning here. You would never see your family again. You would end up living out your entire life there, without anyone to rely on.”

When he put it that way, I realized she was in a similar position to me—though I didn't worry too much myself. If I were married in my own world, I would never have been able to take the risk. Maybe Peeps had confirmed that I wasn't before talking to me. After all, he'd been adopted into a tiny, shabby apartment. If circumstances had been different, I could easily envision a distressing mishap by which my brand-new sparrow ran away from home.

But that was all in the past, so it was time to stop thinking about it. *We're together now. That's enough, isn't it?*

“I see no problem with it,” she said. “That would eliminate my father's cause for worry.”

“Please, wait, Elsa,” insisted the count. “You should think this through.”

“Father, I've never had such an opportunity before. There's no need to be pessimistic.”

“...What do you mean?” asked the count.

A smile appeared on Lady Elsa's face—it was an expression I'd glimpsed the previous time she'd wound up in my world. “Sasaki's world is so much

more sophisticated than ours. Seeing it all with my own eyes and learning from it would be well worth the risks. If I can bring a part of it back here, I'll be able to help you even more!"

She was coming across like an exam student pestering her parents to let her attend a university in the city instead of the local junior college they preferred. Going to a four-year university instead of a smaller school would net her higher income for the rest of her life, and so on and so forth. I was sure many kids had conversations like this with their families—though, in her case, it involved a little more than just going off to school.

"A-and I won't go around blabbing to everyone that there's another world, either!" added Elsa—this was probably in response to my previous warning. "But if I'm able to apply some of that world's ideas to this one, it might help our town's development."

"Elsa, I believe you, and I think you're correct," said Count Müller. "But doing this would put you in competition with Lord Sasaki's business. I hope you haven't assumed you'll be able to get their assistance that easily. What can you offer them in return?"

She looked taken aback. "That is, well..."

"Everything they've offered has been purely out of goodwill," he chided her gently, likely to show consideration for the Starsage.

The Starsage, however, seemed like he couldn't care less. *"That world's knowledge is considerably advanced. They also use a different spoken language and writing system. I doubt she would be able to gain enough information to compete with us through only a few months' sojourn. Even if she did find something to take back, bringing that knowledge to fruition in this world would likely take many years indeed."*

"But are you certain about this?" asked the count.

"Those are my thoughts on the matter. What about you?"

"If it calms Lady Elsa down, then I'm fine with it," I replied. She already tried to hang herself once—I couldn't exactly refuse. I didn't want to think about what would happen if I did and she made a second attempt.

Also, the proposal was coming from the Lord Starsage this time. At the very least, he was apparently willing to watch over her, and it would only be for a few months over there. That meant I wouldn't have much of a personal burden.

Count Müller's expression shifted into one of apology. "...Lord Sasaki,"

he said hesitantly.

It's been one difficulty after another for him lately, I thought. It made me want to ask the Starsage to shoot him a quick healing spell on our way out.

"I am truly sorry for troubling you time and time again," he said.

"Please, don't worry about it," I replied. "You've done so much for us already."

Without the count, we would have had a much more difficult time gaining a foothold in this world. Especially when it came to the royal palace. If not for his good relationship with the second prince, everything would have been a lot tougher. He had truly helped us; that wasn't a lie.

Appearing to understand my feelings, the count nodded slightly. "All right. Elsa, if Lord Sasaki and his familiar are in agreement, then I will honor your decision. But you will swear on the family name that you will never cause trouble for them, do you understand?"

"Yes!" said Lady Elsa. "I'll be sure to keep my promise with you, Father!"

And so thanks to Peeps's proposal, Lady Elsa would be traveling back to modern Japan with us. I couldn't say I had zero qualms about it, however, given how much we owed Ms. Futarishizuka at this point. *I'd better add a little extra to our next round of ingots,* I mused.



We spent the night at Count Müller's estate, then headed for the Republic of Lunge the next day. We had a deal to make with Mr. Joseph and Mr. Marc.

In the meantime, we asked Lady Elsa to prepare for our eventual departure. I knew girls needed several things when staying over at someone else's place, and the same was probably true in this world. What's more, we didn't have a concrete duration for her stay, so we had prepared for the possibility of an extension.

Meanwhile, Peeps and I got to work transforming our modern goods into gold ingots. Like before, we had a large quantity of sugar, as well as several types of manufactured goods that had already proved their worth here. In addition, now that the healing properties of the sample drugs we'd brought had been confirmed, we'd added more of that stock as well.

With everything included, we made about twice the amount we'd left with

Mr. Marc for the construction of the bulwarks. Now that Ms. Futarishizuka had officially joined our little team, we'd increased our sugar imports, which had led to big returns. We could expect similar selling prices in the future.

All the products we brought in would be sold under the name of the Marc Trading Company, which itself was now under the Kepler Trading Company's banner. Mr. Joseph and Mr. Marc would take care of all that; the agreement was that Peeps and I would stay clear of that aspect of the business.

"By the way, Mr. Joseph," I said, "I don't see Mr. Marc today."

"After your discussion last time, he headed for the site," replied Mr. Joseph. "He'll be overseeing the establishment of the Baytrium branch and staying there for a while. It will probably be a bit longer before he returns."

"Ah, I see." *He might really be devoting a lot of his time to this*, I thought. Knowing he was running around for our sake made me feel pretty guilty, though it was a bit late for that now.

Unfortunately, our stays in this world had a time limit for the moment. The section chief had given me that new task, so I could only spend a few hours of Earth time here. This trip would be over soon, too, once I'd figured out Lady Elsa's passage with Ms. Futarishizuka.

All I could do was send some financial support. *I'll pass on some of our profits, just in case.*

"I deeply apologize for asking something like this of you," I continued, "but the next time you see Mr. Marc, would you give him half of the profits on this sale as additional capital and my own thanks?"

"That would be a hefty sum," pointed out Mr. Joseph. "Are you sure?"

"I am." I could simply wait for the payment to come from the Kepler Trading Company and pay Mr. Marc a visit directly, but going to him with such a large lump sum of gold would probably cause him trouble. And after all, none of that was urgent, so the Elsa matter took priority in my mind.

"You're a very prompt decision-maker, Mr. Sasaki," remarked Mr. Joseph.

"My relationship with my supplier has improved, so I have a little more room to maneuver these days."

"...I see."

I was already leaving everything to Mr. Marc, so I at least wanted to make sure his funds didn't run out. I could always start bringing in more product the next week.

Apparently, a lot more inquiries had been coming in for our wares, and the modern industrial goods were starting to become a hot topic in the Republic of Lunge. I wasn't surprised to hear that solar-powered calculators were highly prized here as well.

The sedatives, too, were flying off the shelves. Evidently, there were tons of people who, for example, feared assassination on a daily basis. Given that this world was fairly dangerous, the upper class was practically begging for them. I was told that if I was to bring the same number of them next time, I could sell them for twice the price. I did, however, make myself very clear when explaining the need for caution regarding dependence. In any case, our worlds may have been different, but human hearts seemed just as frail in both.

After finishing our business negotiations, we stayed in the Republic of Lunge for the night at Mr. Joseph's insistence. We were given perfect hospitality at an expensive-looking inn. The very next day, we returned to the town of Baytrium. My hangover was gone in a flash thanks to a healing spell.

Our destination was the high-class lodgings we'd been using ever since first coming to this world. In local time, we'd known the maid assigned to our room for several months now. Of course, it felt like much less to me.

After getting comfortable in the room, Peeps headed out, saying he would change all the gold coins from Lunge into ingots. In the meantime, I practiced the teleportation spell in the guest room. At this point, I doubted I'd forget its incantation for years to come.

I tasked myself with memorizing other incantations, too—specifically, the one Peeps had used to take out all the Ohgen Empire soldiers. My lightning magic had a pretty limited range, so I wanted a more wide-range attack spell. This spell was apparently classified as higher than advanced, so I was certain I wouldn't have an easy time learning it. Still, memorizing its chant was a necessary step, so I'd decided to just learn the words, if nothing else. I'd already asked my pet sparrow for them and written them down.

Sitting calmly on the sofa, I muttered them to myself again and again. Naturally, the sight of the spell being cast came to mind. The flash of light had lit up the entire Rectan Plains that night, and it was still fresh in my memory.

As I was doing that, about halfway through the chant, something happened. I heard a *vwoom*, and a magic circle appeared at my feet.

“...!”

Oh, this is bad, I thought. *If I had finished the chant, would it have actually gone off?*

Considering I was in a private inn room at the moment, the idea rattled me. If it *had* gone off, it wouldn't have just demolished this room—it would have leveled the entire building. No, the whole town. Just trying to imagine the number of casualties was terrifying.

What's more, even Peeps had told me he would have trouble using it unless he was resting on my shoulder. I had no idea how much of a strain it would put on my body if I used it all by myself.

The sudden tension in my body made my mouth clamp shut, and in response, the magic circle at my feet rapidly darkened over a span of ten or so seconds, eventually losing its form and vanishing without a sound. It looked like I'd avoided casting the spell.

“...Magic is insane. This is insane.”

I realized my armpits were slick with sweat. Part of my apprehension was probably because I'd been learning everything in relative safety under Peeps's supervision. This was a belated wake-up call, reminding me how incredibly scary magic could be. I'd never intended to use it carelessly, but I decided to be a little more cautious in the future. That went double when it came to this spell—I would only practice it with Peeps from now on—and never, ever chant it by myself.

Later, a guest arrived at the inn. According to the maid, the visitor was a servant of House Müller. Long story short, preparations were complete. I wasn't told the details, but the knight serving as a messenger did ask me to head over to the estate. That had to mean they were finished setting up for Lady Elsa's false death.

I would have preferred to have paid a visit to Mr. Marc, but I couldn't make the servant of a count wait. While I was debating what to do, Peeps returned from his ingot making, and we ended up heading to the estate that day.



The plan was set: We'd be taking Lady Elsa back to modern Japan the very

next day.

At the moment, Peeps and I were sitting in a wagon traveling up the road that led from the town of Baytrium to the capital, having set off from Count Müller's estate. Our pretext was that we were traveling to Allestos for Elsa's engagement with the first prince of Herz. Other than the two of us, only Count Müller and Lady Elsa knew what was to happen.

To suit the occasion, we had a pretty impressive procession of carriages. The hundreds of people walking nearby, including the soldiers escorting us, were a sight to behold, and there were more carriages than I could count on one hand.

One of those carriages was particularly extravagant—the one that held Count Müller and his daughter. Peeps and I were in the carriage behind them, standing by. The other carriages held the maidservants and the knights leading the escort, as well as some other related VIPs, apparently. Clearly, this was costing a fortune both in personnel and food expenditures. They even had one carriage with a kitchen set up in it.

For someone accustomed to riding bullet trains and airplanes, this view was new and different. But as the sun drifted along its arc, I found myself growing bored of it all pretty quickly. Long journeys by carriage were more arduous than I'd realized. Without healing magic, it would have absolutely ruined my hips.

A few days had passed since we left Baytrium when Peeps finally looked through the window at the scenery outside and said, "*We should be clear.*"

It seemed like the time had come to put our plan into action. With the Starsage himself as both planner and executor, I figured things would be fine. I was still getting jitters, though.

"I should just wait in here, right?" I asked.

"*Yes. You may leave everything in my hands—well, talons.*" The sparrow nodded to me, then fluttered up off my shoulder and out through the carriage window.

A moment later, events began to unfold.

The soldiers forming an escort perimeter around the carriages suddenly started shouting and yelling. According to the voices I could hear, it was bandits—bandits were attacking. I looked out the window and saw them all positioning themselves to defend the carriages.

As the horses were stopped, our surroundings grew raucous.

According to what Peeps had told me, he would be using an illusion spell. The plan was simple: Fake bandits would show up to attack and confuse everyone, then Peeps would use another spell to put everyone to sleep. While they slumbered, he would destroy the carriage Lady Elsa was in, and we would escape back to modern Japan with her.

In fact, I couldn't actually see the bandits the soldiers were fighting. It looked like they had begun swinging their swords and spears at a calm, empty part of the road. It was pretty funny from my point of view.

And yet everyone present other than myself was afraid of something I couldn't see. The servants in our ranks hid behind the carriages and trembled in fear. Some squatted to the ground and hugged themselves. It certainly didn't seem like an act.

The only possible exceptions were the horses pulling the carriages. They were watching everyone with a sort of incredulousness.

A little later, there was a loud booming noise. It had come from pretty close by, so that was probably Peeps's spell demolishing Lady Elsa's carriage. I leaned out of the window to check—and as I expected, her vehicle's roof had been blown off, and the whole thing was now a wreck. I couldn't help but feel it was a little wasteful. However, the count had been clear they couldn't afford to pull any punches.

Peeps returned to my carriage a few moments later, with Lady Elsa and Count Müller beside him.

Elsa carried a big travel bag. It was rectangular and made of wood and leather—the sort of trunk you might see in old black-and-white films. And it was fairly large, too; Lady Elsa herself could probably fit inside. I imagined she was getting some magical support to lift it.

The two of them climbed into the carriage, then closed the door behind them. Immediately, Count Müller offered me a deep bow. “Lord Sasaki,” he said, “please, take care of my daughter.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I will protect her with my life.”

“*Are you sure you're ready to make that promise?*” remarked Peeps.

“...That's what Peeps said, anyway,” I hastily tacked on to my earlier statement.

“*She will be safe with me.*”

“But I'll provide as much support as I can.”

Lady Elsa left the count's side and came over to me and Peeps. The count

watched all three of us; the carriage had been made for longer journeys and was just big enough to fit two adults and one child inside. Peeps had landed back on my shoulder as soon as he came in; he apparently needed to be in physical contact with me to cross worlds.

“I am truly sorry,” said the count. “If she acts selfishly, I want you to scold her for me.”

“H-hey, Daddy!” exclaimed Lady Elsa. “I’m not going to be selfish!”

“In my world, we have tools that can record video—moving pictures,” I explained. “I’ll record Lady Elsa, hale and healthy, and bring it to you during my next visit. That way, you can stay in touch, even if you can’t meet in person.”

“Thank you so much, Lord Sasaki. I can never repay you for this.”

“Let us be off, then. The rest is up to you, Julius.”

“Yes. Please, keep her safe.”

Peeps spoke, and a magic circle appeared at our feet—the teleportation magic I’d grown so used to seeing over the past several weeks. A moment later, everything went black.

I sensed someone move right next to me. Lady Elsa yelped softly, probably because she wasn’t used to the feeling of weightlessness. But she didn’t panic. She’d experienced this once before, so she was fairly calm.

We ended up in a hotel room Ms. Futarishizuka had prepared for us. No sooner had our vision gone black than the scene of a cramped carriage was replaced by a large living area. For someone like me, who always stayed in business hotels, this one was so gorgeous it felt like a whole different world.

Sleeping quarters were separate, and the living area was almost forty square meters in size. The windows were large, granting a view of the cityscape below, and through them we could see the morning sun glistening on the horizon. I checked the room’s clock; it was still early in the morning.

“Oh, you’re finally here,” came the familiar drawling voice. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

Now that we’d arrived, the girl in the kimono rose from her seat on the sofa. We’d told her about everything in advance, so our reception went smoothly. We’d also already inspected the place; otherwise we would have had to warp outside of the building first and bring Elsa in with us.

“She will be in your care for some time,” said Peeps. *“Thank you for your*

help.”

“I must say, you’re quite the slave-driving sparrow, aren’t you?”

“We’ve paid in full. I trust there are no issues?”

“Well, you *did* add some extra onto the payment, so...” Ms. Futarishizuka smiled, probably remembering the gold ingots we’d given her in advance—it had been much more than last time. Even subtracting the cost of our hotel stay and Lady Elsa’s living expenditures, she should have made a hefty profit.

Lady Elsa looked at her and offered a greeting. “You’re the girl I met last time, aren’t you? Th-thank you for doing this!”

“What is this girl saying?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“She’s thanking you,” I replied.

“Oh? What a polite child.”

“As previously discussed,” I continued, “she is from a privileged class in the otherworld. I do feel bad for asking you to do this, but we’d really appreciate it if you treated her as such.”

“A noblewoman, was it?” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “I’d love to see her homeland for myself.”

“No matter how many times you ask, we can’t say yes.”

“Such an unreliable man you are. As ever.”

“Get too carried away, and the curse will devour you.”

“And such a terribly scary sparrow. Heaven forbid...”

Incidentally, this hotel was located in Tokyo. Ms. Futarishizuka had told us she’d need time if we were going to move Lady Elsa somewhere overseas. She’d apparently picked out a few candidates and would inform us once those preparations were complete. I figured she’d helped out high-ranking defectors in the past or something.

“We’d also like to live here for the time being,” mentioned Peeps.

“Yeah, I think that’s for the best as well,” I agreed.

Like Lady Elsa, the two of us were strictly prohibited from leaving the hotel. What we feared right now was the section chief—we had no idea where he had eyes. To get anywhere, we’d probably have to use Peeps’s teleportation magic. Still, now that our stocking problems were solved, it wouldn’t be that much of an obstacle, and it would only be for a few months at most.

“I’ll contact you from my apartment once I’m done with work,” I explained

to Peeps. “Could you come pick me up then?”

“Indeed, we shall make that our process for the time being.”

“Hey, hey!” interrupted Ms. Futarishizuka. “May I sleep here as well? This all sounds rather fun.”

“I don’t see why you need to ask,” responded Peeps. *“You can do as you wish.”*

“Yes, but you always say such cruel things to me, don’t you? I thought I might be left out once again.”

“...In exchange, I’d like you to do well by this girl. Can I ask that of you?”

“Oh, of course! She is a guest, after all. You can put your full trust in me,” answered Ms. Futarishizuka with a grin.

If not for the curse on the back of her hand, I’d never have believed that one. It seemed like it would be extremely difficult to develop a genuine bond of trust with her. After all, I didn’t believe her in the slightest.

After a few moments, Lady Elsa murmured, “So I’m the only one who can’t understand what she’s saying, huh?”

“I will serve as your interpreter for the time being,” said Peeps. *“I have nothing but free time during the day, after all.”*

“I’m sorry for making you go through all this trouble, little birdie.”

“Why don’t we use the internet to acquire knowledge about this world?”

“Inter-net? What is that?”

“Oh, the internet is a wonderful thing, indeed. For example...”

Peeps launched into an explanation of the internet for the youthful princess. When I last checked the browser’s history, I saw that the bird had moved on from simply looking at internet dictionaries and news sites—lately, he’d even been poking around on social media. The Starsage’s thirst for knowledge apparently couldn’t be sated. I could picture him coming to me in the near future and begging for my credit card number.

In any case, Peeps had a tendency to ramble when he got like this, so I turned to Futarishizuka to discuss future plans.

“Regardless of what we decide,” she said, “we’ll have to do something about her attire.”

“I know I’m sort of dropping everything in your lap, but could you handle that?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. As long as you’re paying me, I’ll set her up, head to toe.”

“I appreciate it. My one request is that you choose something as inconspicuous as possible.”

“Mm. Some troublemakers already have an eye out for her, after all...”

Every minute we spent here brought us closer to when we needed to be at the bureau. Without much time left, we could only arrange a few things to make Lady Elsa comfortable for the day. We decided we’d procure some essentials for her and take care of other minor tasks once we returned.

With Futarishizuka now an official bureau member, neither of us was very free to go about our own business during the day. Lady Elsa’s welcome party would have to wait until the evening.

I felt bad about that, but at least she’d be with Peeps all day.



Once we had finished getting Lady Elsa settled, we headed for the bureau as normal. I would be returning to my apartment first, then meeting up with Ms. Futarishizuka on the way. Just like yesterday, she picked me up in her car. Now that I’d experienced the comforts of an imported luxury vehicle complete with a driver, I doubted I could ever go back to being a sardine packed into a train car.

The magical girl’s attack had held us up the day before, but this time we managed to arrive at work without any issues. Normally, the bureau didn’t permit its employees to come into the office by car, but Ms. Futarishizuka had negotiated with the section chief and won herself a space in the parking garage.

As soon as we walked through the bureau’s doors, the section chief called for us. Like always, we headed into a cramped conference room, not even ten meters square.

There, he spoke to us from across the table. “Today, you two will be investigating this school.”

One wall of the room had a big-screen TV on it. It showed a photograph of a building that appeared to be a Japanese high school. Next to it were several abbreviated pieces of information, such as the school’s name, a map showing its location, the number of students in attendance, and other related details. It was similar to what I’d been shown before being sent to recruit the boy with

the glasses.

“What are we investigating?” I asked.

“One of those killed in yesterday’s incident was a young man who attended this school,” explained the chief.

“So he was in high school...,” I murmured.

“He had a commuter ticket in his wallet; that’s how we found out his identity.”

“You’re very quick with this sort of work, as always,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

I’d thought for sure the man had been an adult. High school kids these days sure looked mature.

“We identified the other victim—the woman—by her driver’s license. We already assigned another team to investigate her last night. She worked at a brothel, so we decided someone tougher and more aggressive would be better suited.”

“Was she an adult?” I asked.

“She was twenty. Why? Did you notice anything suspicious?”

“No, not exactly...” Recalling how Naomi had talked to the young man, I felt kind of sad. *Takayoshi must have been trying his best, even though he was only in high school.*

“Well,” continued the section chief, “we want you to search the school and look for evidence that the young man was a psychic, as well as get a handle on what sort of power he had. We’d also like you to gather information on any other psychics he might have been in contact with, if possible.”

The section chief used his computer to update the information on the screen. This time, it showed a series of photographs of Takayoshi. Most of them seemed to have been taken at school events, such as athletic and cultural festivals. The bureau must have rushed to contact the school and obtain them. All of them showed the young man leading a seemingly fulfilling life.

“I’ll send more details to your phones,” he said. “Look over them on the way there.”

“Understood, sir,” I replied.

“All right, then,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

Since the school had released what appeared to be private information on the victim, they must have already been informed of our visit. Just like the

time with the glasses boy, we'd be pretending to be observing the school in order to get inside. I assumed the chief would be sending those details to our phones.

I doubted we'd need to verify every last aspect of the job with the section chief—if nothing else, he was good at his work, which was a very nice quality in a boss. At my old job, I always had to double-check everything before I got to work.

“Any questions for me while you're still here?” he asked.

“Hmm...” But just then, I did think of something.

Miss Hoshizaki wasn't present in the conference room today. Normally, the two of us were called here as a set, given our respective psychic powers. She, too, seemed to consider my power handy and frequently asked me to go with her on assignments. But the chief hadn't even mentioned her.

“Will Miss Hoshizaki not be joining us for this job?” I asked.

“No,” he answered. “And there's something I'd like you to keep in mind.”

“What is it?”

“This happens to be the same school Miss Hoshizaki attends.”

“Wait. Really?” That was surprising. I knew she was still in high school, but now I'd accidentally learned exactly which school she was at. And since we'd already exchanged contact information, I worried I might start to come off as a stalker. “If she's a student at this school, wouldn't she be the best person for the job?”

“We operate like the police—in other words, we don't put bureau members on investigations they're closely related to.”

“I see.” They were probably concerned about issues like favoritism or personal bias arising. Maybe something along those lines had happened in the past. Above all, the bureau couldn't deny the possibility that Miss Hoshizaki had been in contact with Takayoshi somehow.

In that light, the section chief's decision made sense.

Ms. Futarishizuka gave me a questioning look. “That's quite the coincidence, isn't it?”

“Your concerns are reasonable,” agreed the section chief. “We've already started looking into it via other channels.”

I'd just have to hope they didn't turn anything up. She was a pretty boisterous person, but she'd done a lot for me. I appreciated having her around and hoped we could continue on good terms in the future. Although if

we got *too* close, that would cause its own problems, so I wanted to maintain a healthy distance.

“Naturally,” he continued, “we haven’t told her about any of this. In fact, she’ll be at school today, as usual. I want you both to be cautious as you carry out your investigation. Contact me if you run into any problems with her.”

If she found out about the investigation, she’d waste no time getting to work on it. We’d have to make sure she didn’t find out. In fact, we probably wanted to avoid being seen by her entirely.

“Understood, sir,” I said.

“Time to roll up our sleeves and get to work,” added Ms. Futarishizuka.

Our meeting ended, and we headed for the school right away.



After leaving the bureau, I climbed into Ms. Futarishizuka’s car for another ride. As a rule, the bureau was fine with its members using taxis for these jobs. A private vehicle, though, would allow us to talk freely, so I asked if we might use her car. It would be more convenient for her anyway, so she happily agreed.

We’d driven for a little while exchanging light conversation, when the girl at the wheel abruptly changed the subject. “By the way, there was something I wanted to tell you about that man.”

“Section Chief Akutsu, you mean?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

I’d asked her before to look into the chief, and it seemed she had more information to share. Her tone had turned suddenly serious, too, so I unconsciously straightened up to listen.

“This intel isn’t from the gross one with the long hair,” explained the girl in the kimono, “but apparently, there are going to be a few positional changes in the bureau. Rumor has it the vice director might be getting transferred—apparently, he took the fall for what happened with us.”

“You’re referring to the incident at the bowling alley, right?”

“I am, indeed.”

“I thought you said the entire thing had been set up by the chief.”

“It was, but it seems the one who was fed false information and ordered the

mobilization wasn't the section chief, but his superior. In fact, rumor has it the section chief actually *opposed* the operation."

"Wait. Wouldn't that mean...?" I trailed off. This was all sounding even shadier. If she was right, the chief was completely crooked.

"Exactly," she agreed. "The position of vice director would naturally fall to our boss—the one who sold out his colleagues for his own benefit. Quite the villain, if you ask me."

"Hold on a minute. A *lot* of people died in that incident."

"And nobody knows that he was in contact with my old haunt."

"....." *I see*, I thought. *She has a point*. We'd been able to get a whole bunch of info when Peeps and I had beaten that nerd. If that hadn't happened, the information would have stayed completely secret. The section chief must have known that.

"Let's suppose you're right," I said eventually. "Wouldn't that put you at a pretty big disadvantage?"

"It would," she replied. "I believed I joined the bureau of my own volition, though now I wonder if this was all part of that man's trap. Though it's too late to change anything, I can't help but consider the possibility."

If Section Chief Akutsu had gotten someone like her to say that, then he truly was a force to be reckoned with. Was promotion an attractive enough prospect for him to do all that?

Ms. Futarishizuka's expression was pretty cool as she kept her eyes glued to the windshield while she spoke. That, combined with what she was talking about, made her seem like a very reliable woman. I found myself captivated, despite her young appearance.

"In any case," she continued, "you'd do well to be cautious."

"Could he be a foreign spy?" I wondered aloud.

"We may want to consider that as a possibility."

"...Understood."

This was a pretty heavy burden for a regular employee. It made me want to report him to the authorities. *Oh*, I thought. *The acquaintances she mentioned before—maybe they're part of the "authorities."*

"We don't have any reason to defy the government, do we?" she said. "So we can take it easy and relax for now."

"You're right," I agreed. "Let's just try to hold on to our current positions."

And as for this conversation—I'd take it to the grave. Nobody would

benefit from my revealing it. In fact, not only would it cause problems for related agencies, it would make me a wanted man in my own country.

I also had the laid-back, leisurely life Peeps was after to consider. So for now, I'd stick to my role as a completely harmless bureau employee and maintain a proper distance from all this—not getting too close and not straying too far. And with my magic from the otherworld, I had faith I'd be able to survive even the somewhat crazier assignments.



A short car ride later, we arrived at the high school. They'd already been informed of our visit, so we simply showed our business cards and police badges to security and were hastily led to a reception room. The school principal then came to greet us. It was just the same as when we'd investigated the boy with the glasses.

Incidentally, I was the only one who entered the premises. Ms. Futarishizuka was waiting in the parking lot. She was a small child, no two ways about it—I couldn't exactly bring her inside. The chief hadn't given me any specific instructions, but I very much doubted he would have approved of the fallout. It was just common sense. I won her agreement by having her provide backup from the shadows.

She could also communicate with me via the earpiece I wore. I had a microphone disguised as a tie pin, too; I could hardly believe we even *had* these. It was like something out of a spy movie. I also had a small camera in my bag. That way, she could see what was happening inside the school as well. *The bureau is really pulling out all the stops.* Ms. Futarishizuka had said she'd come running from the car if she saw anything happen, so I was free to work on my assignment without too much concern.

“...And so our school not only values student independence, but also aims for excellence in both academic and athletic fields. The packet I gave you lists some of the universities our students have advanced to, but aside from those, students who wish for employment are...”

The principal was in the middle of an impassioned speech, seated across from me over a low table. According to the info the section chief sent to my phone, my observation was being treated as part of the selection process for a

country-wide event sponsored by the National Police Agency. The event itself was real, but the selection process was a ruse.

The man was old, probably close to retirement. You could make out his side-parted white hair from a distance, but it was still thick on his head. *I hope I have as much hair when I'm his age.* That must be part of why he came across as energetic. He also seemed toned; he probably exercised regularly. All in all, he seemed like the kind of affluent older man who always strove for self-improvement.

“I have to agree,” I replied. “This seems like a model school.”

“Yes, it’s wonderful—my pride and joy.”

I listened to him praise the school for about an hour, but quickly tired of all the talking. This was a public school, so maybe the man was after post-retirement employment or something. It was a pretty common scenario—principals from public high schools becoming teachers or principals at private high schools. To manage that, however, you had to have a certain amount of recognition.

Section Chief Akutsu sure knew how to work people.

“Will you be going to observe the classes directly now, Mr. Sasaki?” the principal asked finally.

“Yes, I’d like that very much.”

If our talk in the reception room was finished, it was time for a stroll through the school. The principal himself would apparently be showing me around. The fact that a man with his position was fussing over me naturally brightened my mood. Having been a long-time corporate drone at an exploitative company, I wasn’t used to this sort of reception, so I couldn’t help but feel giddy even about the little stuff.

Compared to the noble treatment I received in the otherworld—which still didn’t feel quite real to me—to be treated this way in a more familiar context made me feel like I’d gone up a rank as a person and entered a new stage in my life. It was like living in another world right here in Japan.

Of course, all this could come crumbling down at any moment depending on the chief’s mood.

“Classes are in session right now,” explained the principal, “so I’ll show you around the building.”

“I really appreciate it.”

The principal proceeded to give me a brief tour of the school. The place

wasn't old, per se, but it wasn't new, either. It looked like any other public high school. Compared to the suburbs, and due to the nature of the surrounding land, it felt a little cramped, but that was about it. The principal seemed to have a lot to say, but the school itself didn't really stand out.

He was also making a mad push for the information-processing room. They'd apparently replaced all their electronic equipment last year, so the room contained rows of brand-new, shiny desktop computers. He spoke very passionately about how they had introduced computer skills classes into the curriculum, with a particular emphasis on programming.

Eventually, we'd made a full loop of the school. Wanting to get on with my actual assignment, I stopped the principal and made a request. "By the way, sir, may I ask you something?"

"Yes," he replied. "Please, ask me anything."

"I apologize for putting it this way, but when I'm with you, the students and faculty all seem to tense up. If it's all right with you, I'd like to take a look around on my own for a little while."

"Ah, I see. That makes sense."

"Would that be all right?"

"Why, yes. Take all the time you need. I'll either be in my office or the faculty lounge. I mentioned your observation to the rest of the staff this morning, so if you have any questions, feel free to ask anyone you see."

"Thank you so much for understanding." *Good*, I thought. *Now I can look around the school freely.*

The principal and I parted ways in the hall. After seeing him turn a corner, I started my little walk.

First, I headed to Takayoshi's former classroom. Essentially, my plan was to figure out which classmates he'd been close with, then pull them aside and question them individually. As long as I could get a photo of their faces, the bureau could verify their personal information. It would be a piece of cake using my bureau-provided phone.

Takayoshi's death still hadn't been made public, as that might prompt anyone related to the case to flee. His family had put in a search request, but at the section chief's instruction, it had been accepted, then not pursued. That's what he'd said in our meeting, at least. He probably wanted to wait and see if Futarishizuka and I turned anything up.

I was walking through the halls toward the classroom when I heard the bell

ring to indicate the period was over.

Students began pouring out of their classrooms all at once. Many of them shot glances at me when they saw I was an unfamiliar older man in a suit. As an undercover agent, I sped up to avoid their gaze. I wanted to ask my questions before the break was over. If I missed this chance, I'd have to wait for the next period to end.

"You just glanced at the panties of that girl going up the stairs, didn't you?" came Ms. Futarishizuka's voice through my earpiece.

"What on earth are you talking about?" I replied.

Apparently, she'd been watching my actions through the camera. I'd shifted my weight, causing my bag to sway from side to side; she must have tried to imagine where my eyes had been. It had happened pretty quickly—I found myself impressed with her eyesight.

To be fair, my gaze had started to drift in that direction, but I'd quickly stopped it. I had faith that meant I was—just barely—in the clear. I wasn't lying, so I wished she'd understand the effort it had taken for a male like me to go against his instincts.

"You say that, but you're pretty pent-up, aren't you?"

"Even if I was, this is hardly the time or place."

Ever since meeting Peeps, I'd had almost no time to myself. Even when I wasn't with my bird, I was usually with someone else. Not to agree with Futarishizuka, but it was only natural I was "pent-up." Though things had calmed down for me in that respect over the past few years, that didn't mean my biological processes had *completely* stopped. When I thought about it that way, it made me miss my freer, single life—but only a little.

"With how pathetic you look, that finicky girl will find you."

"She's in a different year, so I think we're fine, but..."

Takayoshi had been a third-year student, which meant he'd be on a different floor from Miss Hoshizaki. I'd still been keeping a close eye out, though.

"Her location marker is very close to you. If you can't see her from where you are, she must be on another floor. Just don't take the stairs right now—or you're sure to bump into her."

"Keep your eye on where she's going for me, then."

"I'd expected as much, but the bureau's jobs sure are boring."

"I much prefer boring jobs like these."

I'd come here under the pretext of observation. I couldn't walk around with a smartphone in my hand forever, so I was grateful for Ms. Futarishizuka's backup. I was communicating with her through the mic at my chest, but just to be safe, I had my phone up to my ear. Still, the students kept casting me curious glances.

"There's the classroom. Let's stop talking for now."

"Okey dokey."

After ending our conversation, I turned toward the classroom. And not a moment later, I heard a familiar name.

"Hey, did you hear Takayoshi never went home last night?"

"Wait, really?"

"He didn't text us that he was taking the day off, either..."

"He didn't go home? Are you sure he's not just sick?"

"His mom called my mom, so it's true!"

"Are you sure he wasn't visiting that new girl he kept bragging about?"

The voices were coming from a group of three male students off to the side of the hallway; they had formed a ring as they chatted. Thanks to them, I got the feeling at least one part of my job would be nice and easy. I didn't even need to create an opportunity for me to speak with them. I'd been racking my brain over how I was supposed to approach the students, so this would really help me out.

I pointed the camera in my bag at the students. I was pretty sure Futarishizuka had heard them. Once we'd sent the pictures to the bureau, they'd quickly start identifying all the kids. It was very handy to have a colleague so used to this sort of work.

Since the boys were all civilians, and we knew which school they attended, identifying them probably wouldn't take much time. I expected to have a response before classes let out for the day. That meant we could start the questioning phase before the day was out. That was pretty safe work as well, so they'd be able to mobilize other bureau members.

"Oh no. She's moving," came an alert from Futarishizuka. She must have been referring to Miss Hoshizaki.

I doubted the younger girl would come to the third-years' area, but a middle-aged man in a suit stuck out like a sore thumb in a group of teenagers. If she'd begun to move, I wanted to put as much distance between us as I could.

“You can use the west staircase to head downstairs and leave the school building. We have enough footage to identify those boys. You should be able to wait until the break is over and go back to the principal.”

I hurried through the halls in accordance with my operator’s instructions, going down the stairs and outside onto the path leading from the main school building to the other facilities.

And then I got yet another warning from Ms. Futarishizuka. *“Argh. I think she’s getting closer to you...”*

“Huh? Wait a second!” I said, accidentally raising my voice.

It was hard for me to get a read on her location data in my current position. Panicked, I looked around but couldn’t spot anyone who looked like her. The thing I had to be most cautious of was being seen from the school building’s windows. If she looked out and spotted me, I might never know.

With that in mind, I took a different route leading to the rear of the building.

“...She’s stopped!” Ms. Futarishizuka said a few moments later.

That report was unnecessary. I’d already found her—right where I’d been headed.

“Excuse me,” came her voice. “You were the one who called me here, right?”

“Y-yeah. Sorry. I know it was kinda sudden.”

Miss Hoshizaki was standing with a male student behind the building, holding what looked like a letter in her hands. The boy was eyeing the letter with a nervous expression.

Naturally, my younger senior at the bureau wasn’t wearing any makeup today; instead, she looked just as she had during the kerfuffle with the glasses kid. Her hair hung in braids, and she wore unfashionable, round glasses, making her look like a stereotypical bookworm.

The boy, on the other hand, was tall and tanned; he seemed like an athlete. His shoulders were broad, and you could see his muscles even through his shirt. He had short hair and a chiseled face. He was definitely attractive, and he seemed well put together to boot.

And now a middle-aged spy was watching them from the shadows of the school building.

“Hoshizaki, please go out with me!”

Whoops. It looked like Miss Hoshizaki had just been asked out by a guy.

I'd guessed as much—and it seemed I'd been right. I certainly didn't anticipate *this* situation. Good for her, enjoying her youth.

“.....”

“*Oh-ho, what a youthful scene,*” remarked Futarishizuka.

For now, it didn't seem like they'd noticed us. While by all rights I should have left immediately, she *was* my coworker, so I couldn't help myself—I just had to listen in. Was she going to say yes? If she did, I might have to be more considerate about certain things when working with her in the future.

But before I had too long to think about that, I heard her reply.

“I'm sorry. I can't.”

“Ngh...”

The boy clenched his teeth at the rejection—his hopes had been shattered in seconds.

What a waste, I thought. Her businesswoman attire from the bureau aside, looking at her now, she seemed pretty plain. Naturally, she would have a lower social position at school to match. An attractive young man asking her out seemed like an obvious stroke of good luck. I had no doubt that was why he'd called her here personally, too. I bet he went in thinking it was a sure thing.

“If you'll excuse me,” she said, turning around to leave.

“B-but! Wait a second!” called the boy. He seemed pretty flustered.

“...What?”

“Are you already going out with someone?”

“I'm not.”

“I thought so! So then, why...?”

He seemed as curious as I was about her refusal. The kid was clearly one of those types who was used to getting what he wanted, so he'd probably never dreamed he'd be spurned. From what he was saying, it seemed he'd already verified she was single.

In a solemn tone, she explained, “There's already someone I like.”

“Wait. Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

I had to admit, it was really, *really* weird hearing her speak so politely. Normally, she didn't bother with pleasantries and simply yelled my name. It was like she was a totally different person depending on how much makeup she was wearing. In fact, I could easily believe she was a mature woman

wearing a school uniform and pretending to be a high school girl.

“Oh,” said the boy. “I guess that settles it, then.”

“I think you should choose someone cuter than me,” she added.

“But I think you’re the cutest girl at school.”

“All the more reason not to go out with me.”

“...What do you mean?”

“If you judge a book by its cover, you’ll get burned one day.”

That was strangely persuasive, coming from her. It seemed like Miss Hoshizaki might have had a rougher time of it in the adult world than I had. Come to think of it, how long *had* she been working at the bureau? *I mean, I’m sure my history as a corporate drone is longer, but still.*

“But wait,” said the boy, “if you’re going to go out with someone, wouldn’t you prefer someone good-looking?”

“Perhaps, if we were just hanging out casually,” she replied. “But if I was serious about someone, I’d be more interested in who they were on the inside.”

“Well, yeah, I guess I can understand that. Wait, does that mean you think I’m all looks? If that’s the case, you should try hanging out with me sometime. I’ve actually got a good head on my shoulders.”

“That isn’t what I meant. I meant comparatively speaking.”

“Wait, then...what? Have you got your eyes on one of the teachers or something?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Wow, seriously? I mean, I guess I can’t beat someone like *that*.”

“Is it all right if I go back to class now?”

“Oh! Do you want to exchange contact information, at least? I guess you don’t want to hang out with me, but if you change your mind, you can give me a call. I can listen to your problems—or whatever. I’d really like to be friends.”

“I’m sorry. Unfortunately, I don’t think I have much room for another person in my life.”

“O-oh. Okay, I get it. Sorry for calling you back here.”

Huh. Does Miss Hoshizaki actually have a lot of friends? Considering the bureau’s work environment, I didn’t think she’d have the time for that. Any casual assignment could be fatal for the both of us. That alone was reason enough to eliminate any cause for hesitation. In fact, I’d seen her get into

very tight situations not once, but *twice* in the short time I'd known her.

"Please excuse me." Miss Hoshizaki bowed slightly and turned her back to the boy.

The moment her gaze shifted in the direction of her stalker—namely, me—I hastily withdrew behind the building. Dampening my footsteps to avoid her notice, I left the area. Ms. Futarishizuka navigated for me so I wouldn't run into her a second time.

After that, I went back inside the school and investigated several other locations. Unfortunately, I came up with nothing. I was back in the principal's office before lunch break to officially conclude my observation, and after that I left the school behind.



It took a little less than an hour to get a response after Ms. Futarishizuka sent the pictures to the bureau. We got back some pretty detailed information—everything from the boys' names to their addresses and family compositions. It even included whether they were delinquent in paying their utility bills, the balances of their bank accounts, and their own as well as their *relatives'* criminal records. It left me pretty terrified at the extent of the bureau's authority.

Still, the information didn't lead to any conclusions. The person from the bureau had agreed; there was no trace of them being psychics.

And so as initially planned, we decided we'd wait for school to let out and make contact with one of the boys directly. We'd be intercepting him on a road he used to commute a little ways from the school. That way, we'd catch him alone. At times like these, I found the weight of the police badge in my pocket very reassuring.

Ms. Futarishizuka would be acting separately once again. Just as before, she'd provide support from her car. She had a police badge just like I did, but she looked so young she probably couldn't get anyone to come with her if she tried. After all, people seemed to find even *me* suspicious. It disappointed her, but there was nothing we could do.

I stood on the road for a while, waiting for the target.

"*Oh, great. She's on the move,*" came a warning from my earpiece.

That must be Miss Hoshizaki. “Again?” I asked.

“She’s headed your way. Hide somewhere—that alley over there or something.”

“Will do.”

Apparently, the place we’d been staking out was also on *her* way home. Attempting to let her pass, I hid behind a building, still keeping my eyes on the road. This was a small street that didn’t even have a center dividing line, and there was very little car traffic. A modest sidewalk graced only one side of it, but I barely saw anyone walking past. We’d picked a place that would be convenient for us, so that was all expected. We were trying to ensure nobody was around in case the deceased boy’s friend turned out to be a psychic.

After waiting for a few moments, I saw a familiar face coming down the road in my direction. “She’s here. It’s definitely Miss Hoshizaki.”

“I told you so.”

“She seems to be with friends from school,” I said, noting that she was walking with several other female students.

But they were acting strangely. If they were all friends going home from school, why weren’t they talking? Girls their age usually had lively conversations on their way home, right? I saw a lot of students chatting with one other even on packed trains.

Eventually, the group made a turn at the T intersection in front of me. That took them into a pretty narrow alleyway—just barely large enough to fit a small car—between the outer wall of an apartment building and a block fence surrounding a house. Every one of the girls rounded the corner.

A moment later, I heard Ms. Futarishizuka—who still had her eye on Miss Hoshizaki’s location—speak up. “*How odd,*” she said. “*That should be a dead end.*”

“I’ll go take a peek,” I replied, looking into the alleyway while still keeping my distance. I was doing this with my phone in one hand, pretending to be a salesperson stepping away to receive a call.

“...She’s surrounded,” I said.

“Huh? What does that mean?”

Just as Ms. Futarishizuka had said, the narrow side street was indeed a dead end. They were a ways back in the alley. Miss Hoshizaki stood on one side—my left—while the girls from her high school had spread out horizontally in

front of her, putting on the pressure. I was essentially looking in from the side, which meant I could see into the blind alley without being noticed.

To summarize, things were looking bad. And sure enough, I heard one of the girls start to speak in a raised voice.

“Shindou asked you out, and you turned him down?” she said roughly. “What’s the big idea?”

“...What are you talking about?” asked Miss Hoshizaki. “What do you want, Manami?”

“I—I mean just what I said! What’s the big idea?! Just explain it to me!”

It was the girl directly in front of Miss Hoshizaki who was getting so worked up. Apparently, her name was Manami—and it seemed she and the others had gotten wind of what I’d seen behind the school building earlier. I assumed this Shindou kid was pretty popular with these girls.

“He called me aside during lunch and asked me out. That’s all that happened.”

“Ugh... Th-that attitude of yours is pissing me off! Who do you think you are anyway?!”

The female students standing beside Manami all seemed to agree, given how much they were nodding. They didn’t seem to think very highly of Miss Hoshizaki receiving a confession from, and then rejecting, this Shindou kid. Or that was my read on the situation, at least. I remembered my school days and how the girls loved talking about this stuff, mostly by passing notes in class. At the time, I’d been at the bottom of the school hierarchy, so I’d always been really curious what the notes said.

“I wasn’t trying to be arrogant,” replied Miss Hoshizaki curtly.

“You don’t think about your words at all, do you? That’s why you’re always alone in class! You don’t care about getting along, and you don’t have a shred of empathy for the people around you. It’s like you want to be an outcast!”

“.....”

Watching them made one thing clear—Miss Hoshizaki was all alone at school. I’d thought maybe that was the case, but actually seeing her classmates victimize her made me feel pretty bad. She didn’t seem to care at all, though, so as her colleague—who had secretly watched all of this—my emotions on the matter were complicated.

“At times like this, we’re supposed to call 110 and report the bullies!”

interrupted Ms. Futarishizuka, her cheerful voice coming through my earpiece. Apparently, she could hear the girls, too.

“Could you not joke around like that?” I chided her.

Manami continued. “You pretend to be super studious and everything, but I bet you were just trying to seduce him. You know he likes serious girls. Even though you got a failing score on the midterms like a normal person! You want boys to look at you that badly or what?”

I wondered if Miss Hoshizaki was just as much of a meathead as she seemed. Though as Manami said, looking at the girl now made her failing marks seem fraudulent. I bet the glasses boy would agree.

But that comment seemed to prick at Miss Hoshizaki. She began to argue. “That’s going too far.”

“It’s the truth, though!” replied Manami. “Why are you pretending?”

I was starting to get a little antsy watching my colleague. I was afraid this argument would devolve into a brawl. Though perhaps I was just too used to my image of her from work.

“I sure hope you didn’t do this just to make us angry since you know Nami is into him!” Manami said, glancing at one of the girls to her side for a moment. “Because if that’s the case, we’re not going to stay silent!”

The girl she’d glanced at must have been Nami. I could see her quickly nod in response.

“Why on earth do you think I know anything about your private lives?” asked Miss Hoshizaki, still indifferent.

“...!”

Manami was taken aback. Anyone could see that Miss Hoshizaki was fanning the flames here; she was probably a little angry at having her failing grades pointed out. I decided I wouldn’t ever bring up her schoolwork when we talked. Now that I thought about it, she *had* said she’d be joining the bureau officially after she graduated.

“E-everything people do gets around *somehow!*” insisted Manami. “I know all kinds of things about you, you know! Like how you fake that whole meek demeanor of yours and go out fooling around with guys all the time. I feel so bad for Shindou, the way you deceived him.” She was probably frustrated that Miss Hoshizaki had refuted her argument, and now she was trying to steer the conversation elsewhere.

“Oh, wait. Are *you* interested in Shindou, too, Manami?” Miss Hoshizaki

observed sharply.

“N-no, I’m not!”

“Because if you are, then I apologize. I should have been more considerate.”

“Ugh...” Manami looked like she was about to explode. The other girls, too, started looking in her direction.

Seeing her chance, Miss Hoshizaki quickly continued. “Also—and I’m only saying this because I don’t want any weird rumors starting up—I’m a virgin.”

“What?” said Manami. “Wh-why are you telling us that now?!”

As a middle-aged eavesdropper, I felt pretty bad about having heard that. I doubted she would, but if she ever found out about this, it was sure to hurt our coordination in the field. *Just going to pretend I didn’t hear any of this—including what she said behind the school building, whether or not it was true.*

“How long do you intend on staring?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s get back to business.”

With a good handle on what Miss Hoshizaki was up to, it was time to get back to work. Assuming Ms. Futarishizuka would alert me if the girls moved anywhere, I turned right around and left the blind alley. Then, with her instructions, I started off toward the designated spot.

But then, a moment later, there was a change.

Almost as if I’d lost my hearing, all the sound in the world simply stopped. That included the girls’ voices, the distant roars of cars, and the buzzing of the air conditioners in nearby windows—everything was silent.

Immediately, I peered into the alley. Miss Hoshizaki was nowhere in sight.

“Ugh...” There was no mistaking this sensation—it was the same as the day before. And immediately prior, I’d made out the flash of a defensive barrier spell around me. Just like what Ms. Futarishizuka had mentioned last time.

I’d put up a barrier just in case one of Takayoshi’s friends happened to be a psychic, and it had probably reacted to whatever this phenomenon was. At the same time, Ms. Futarishizuka’s voice in my earpiece had gone silent, too.

In a panic, I made a dash for her car. But the girl who’d been inside was nowhere to be found. After all, I hadn’t put a barrier on her this time. That only backed up my previous hypothesis: It seemed like this strange psychic

power had a reaction to my barrier magic.

“.....”

I took out my phone and looked at the screen; like last time, it said I was out of service. I made sure to check the current time in the screen's corner, too. That way, when I got back to the regular world, I could put in for overtime.

Who was using this power and for what purpose? I wondered, feeling a strange terror as I began my investigation, now all on my own.

<Angels and Demons>

I walked alone down a residential street in a silent world devoid of people, where nothing moved except for me. It felt like exploring a haunted house.

The day before, Ms. Futarishizuka and the magical girl had been with me. This time, though, I was taking a solitary stroll. Belatedly, I realized how reassuring it had been to have the two of them around. *If only I could get in contact with Peeps*, I thought in spite of myself.

Last time, a strange boy had attacked Takayoshi and Naomi. I began mentally putting together a game plan in case I encountered him again.

“.....”

I was fairly certain his physical abilities far outstripped my own. Plus, he could fly. It all came down to how strong my barrier spell was—but if he was to get in close, and my barrier failed, he’d kill me instantly. A single punch to my gut would send my organs flying, and it’d be all over.

With that in mind, I forbid myself from challenging him directly. He was the type of opponent I had to settle things with strictly through negotiation.

I wondered how Peeps would handle it. Unfortunately, that was only a passing thought, and it didn’t help me at all. *He’s the Starsage, after all. He’s amazing—he could take just about anything head-on.*

“...I can’t afford to be reckless,” I told myself. Finding the cause of all this was a problem best left for later.

I’m too scared. I don’t want to die. This is exactly the kind of situation where I’m supposed to request backup from the bureau. Strength in numbers—ah, what a wonderful phrase. I truly wished I could *always* outnumber my foes.

That meant my only course of action was to wait quietly until, like the day before, this empty world came to an end. I didn’t know how the phenomenon was created, but based on my previous experience, it didn’t seem to last

forever. I'd need to prepare myself to survive at any cost—even if it meant eating the flesh of the dead.

When I returned to the real world previously, time had reverted. It seemed likely that even if I grew old in this world, I'd be back to normal when I returned.

According to what Peeps had told me before, by the otherworld's standards, I was an elite version of a human. My life span was apparently longer than a normal person's, and with healing magic, I could probably manage to survive for a few decades here.

With all that in mind, I decided on my primary goal: doing whatever it took to avoid dying. Mentally, I felt like a passenger who had survived a shipwreck and drifted to a deserted island.

But just as I was desperately trying to cheer up my near-shattered spirit, I heard an unfamiliar voice call out, "Eriel, reveal thyself!"

Being on a small road in a residential area with lots of houses, there were plenty of places for someone to hide. Frantically, I looked around. Eventually, I spotted two people on the roof of a nearby house.

"I don't see any demons around. Be careful!"

"I shall."

One of them was a young man who looked like a teenager. He wore cargo pants and a parka. His black hair was a little long, parted in the center in a bowl cut. If he wasn't wearing a school uniform at this hour, maybe that meant he'd already graduated and was employed. *Actually, wait. It was possible he'd changed to conceal his identity.*

The other person had wings growing out of her back. She had such fair skin she couldn't have been Asian, and her hair was blond. She reminded me of the man in angel cosplay from last time, but this one appeared to be female. She was shorter than the boy but a little taller than Ms. Futarishizuka. The rest of her was basically in line with her height.

As soon as I noticed them, they moved, floating up into the air and coming down to the ground in front of me.

"Eriel," asked the boy, "what's a Disciple doing walking around on his own like that?"

"He may have been fragmented from his demon," responded the angel. "It's a common occurrence."

"Does that mean he's someone even we would be able to beat?"

“Yes. It is possible.”

The boy and the angel were discussing something I really didn't like the sound of. Apparently, they were mistaking me for something called a Disciple. *Was I going to be dragged into a fight over a misunderstanding? You've gotta be kidding. What's a Disciple anyway? Didn't Takayoshi and Naomi say something like that last time, too?*

“Hold up,” commented the boy. “Isn't this guy a little old to be a Disciple?”

“I cannot hazard a guess as to what the demons are thinking.”

“Well, this is a lucky break. Let me score a win here for once, Eriel. If we contact the main force, they're sure to steal my kill. And I'm too much of a small fry to ever get my wish granted otherwise.”

“Understood. Eliminating the target Disciple.” The angel squared up to me.

We just met, and they're already ready to fight? “Hold on a second,” I said. “Are you mixing me up with someone else?”

“The words of a demon reach not my angelic ears,” said the girl with the wings, flying at me in a straight line at low altitude as if using flight magic.

But was she stronger than an elite orc or weaker? If she was stronger, even Peeps's barrier spell might not hold. Afraid to confirm the angel's specs for real, I immediately put an attack spell on standby. Combined with my healing spell, I could take out a leg or two and then heal it up right away.

That was my excuse anyway as I fired a lightning spell at her right leg.

Thunder cracked through our surroundings, and in the same moment, the angel crashed to the ground. The leg I'd shot was completely gone from the thigh down.

She tumbled across the asphalt like a pedestrian hit by a car, veering off to the side. Eventually, she collided with a block fence facing the road and stopped. Blood spurted out from her wound, staining the road red—it was quite a grotesque sight.

“E-Eriel?!” cried out the boy as he saw the angel fall.

As the perpetrator, the bitter grief in his voice stung my heart. After all, the angel girl appeared to be very young—late elementary school or possibly middle school. What she didn't appear to be, though, was a normal person, so I hesitated to run over to her. The same went for casting healing magic. First I wanted to find out who these people were.

“I'm sorry, but could you let me explain for a moment?” I asked, taking a

step toward the boy.

“Ugh... S-stay away!” he shouted in response. His eyes were wide with shock as he stared at me. “An angel would never lose to a Disciple! What the hell are you, old man?!”

“Could you possibly tell me what a Disciple is?” I asked.

“Wh-what? You’re a demon’s Disciple, aren’t you? What are you going on about?”

Angels, demons, Disciples, and isolated spaces—all key words I’d learned in this deserted world. At the moment, I still believed they stemmed from that strange boy’s psychic power. But if that was the case, the terminology seemed unusually standardized. And now a third party was dishing out the very same words. Maybe the strange boy’s power was able to create some kind of miniature world with its own rules.

“What group of psychics do you belong to?” I asked. “You’re not with the bureau, right?”

“Psychics? What the hell are you talking about, old man? Are you senile or something?”

“No, I assure you...”

I’d thought for sure that *psychic* would be a shared term between us. But the boy didn’t seem like he was lying. After mulling it over for a few moments, I suddenly had a realization.

Maybe this empty world was like the others—the fairy world the magical girl had contact with and the otherworld Peeps was from. They were strange, fantastical worlds, each with its own set of rules that differentiated it from modern Japan. Could this world be the same?

If it was, I could understand this young man not knowing what I meant by the term *psychic*. But this was still something of a leap, so I hesitated to make that call right now. I needed to get a little more information out of him first.

“I’d like to know more about these angels, demons, and Disciples,” I said.

“...Stalling for time? What, was that the only card in your hand?”

“If you answer my question, I’ll heal her wounds,” I explained, glancing over at the angel. However, her leg had already begun to heal on its own. With a sizzling noise, it was slowly morphing back into its original form, the bones lengthening and the skin growing. I could probably leave her alone, and she’d fully regenerate.

Should I have been upset this frustrated my attempt at negotiation—or

relieved that I hadn't inflicted too serious an injury on the little girl? Since they seemed convinced I was an enemy, I felt a little of both.

"Hey," said the boy. "You wouldn't happen to be Abaddon's Disciple, would you?"

"Abaddon?" I repeated. "I'm sorry, but I've never heard of a person or a group with that name."

"For real?"

"Yes, for real."

As I turned to check on the angel's condition, she moved. Raising her upper body, she kicked off the ground and into the air. In the blink of an eye, she was next to the boy again.

"A Disciple's power is proportional to that of their demon partner," she said to him. "There is a very low chance this Disciple's demon has been felled. We must vacate this place immediately and inform the main force that there is another as powerful as Abaddon."

"Guess running's the only option, huh?" he remarked.

"I cannot handle this Disciple on my own."

The girl stood in front of him, protecting her leg, which still wasn't fully healed. Very courageous of her. Her dedication certainly fit the whole "angel" vibe.

"You can't even beat a Disciple, huh?" said the boy. "You must be the weakest one out there, Eriel."

"...I sincerely apologize," she said.

"But I still love you anyway."

"....."

Was it just me or was this turning into some strange romantic comedy? I felt a little jealous despite myself. *I wish I'd had that kind of romance when I was young.*

"Anyway," the boy addressed me, "could you maybe let us go?"

"I would be fine with that," I replied, "but in exchange, I'd like you to tell me something."

"...Huh? Really?"

"I've figured out that angels and demons are getting people called Disciples mixed up in some sort of battle. So this empty world is like a battlefield for them, right? If that's correct, I want to know what causes this world to appear."

“.....”

Angels and demons. My question was predicated on this being a *third* world, in addition to the otherworld and the fairy world.

The boy made a dubious expression and fell silent for ten or twenty seconds. Eventually, he came back with a more honest answer than I'd anticipated. “It appears when at least ten angels and demons enter a specific area.”

“I see. So that's how it's set up.”

In that case, the magical girl, Ms. Futarishizuka, and I had accidentally run into just such a situation. And through the coincidental use of our respective barrier magic, we'd ended up in this empty world—this isolated space—or something along those lines.

Actually, maybe that wasn't the right way to put it. This battle between the angels and demons was supposed to be happening in secret. So it was more like we'd unintentionally resisted their efforts to cover everything up. The boy's shock at my presence made sense in that context. Normally, only angels, demons, and the people they called Disciples were supposed to know about this world.

“Thank you,” I said. “You've helped me understand a little better.”

“...Anyway,” said the boy, “we're going to head off, okay?”

“Yes, please do. And be careful.”

Considering I'd encountered this phenomenon twice already in the same neighborhood, did this mean the area had become a hot spot in the war between angels and demons? I could easily see myself getting punted into this world over and over again if I overused my barrier magic.

“D-don't shoot us in the back, got it?” warned the boy.

“I'd never do that. Don't worry.”

But in that case, how was I supposed to report it to the section chief? If I went about it the wrong way, it was very possible he wouldn't believe me. If I hadn't visited the world personally, I wouldn't have believed it, either. If I brought up the existence of magical girls, would he believe me then? Or I could simply keep silent about it.

“Eriel!” called the boy.

“Withdrawing from the area,” replied the angel.

The two of them floated up above the asphalt, just as they'd floated down when they first saw me. They seemed to possess strange abilities similar to

psychic powers, the otherworld's magic, and the magical girls' magical whatevers. I would have liked to find out about that as well, but I hadn't bothered to, since I really doubted they'd be forthcoming.

And so this magical middle-aged man simply watched as they flew off.



(The Neighbor's POV)

Today, Abaddon and I are being targeted by a legion of angels.

The isolated space appears after classes are over. I've had to deal with some minor tasks from my homeroom teacher, and I'm getting ready to head home. It happens after I finish working in another room and head back to the classroom to get my things; as I'm walking through the hallway, all the sound around me stops.

"Abaddon?" I say.

"Ooh," comes the answer. *"It seems an angel's Disciple has arrived."*

Abaddon floats next to me. He's always nearby, from when I wake up to when I go to sleep, and he very rarely strays from my side.

"It's a little cramped in here," he continues. *"Why don't we head out to the schoolyard?"*

"All right."

Leaving my things in the classroom, I run down the hallway. My gait is steady. Abaddon has given me the power to interfere with a person's life force, and using it lets me resist my hunger. My main sources of nutrients are my mother and the men she brings home. I've practiced it over the past few days, and now I can absorb just enough life force to make them dizzy but not make them pass out. My chastity is now safe and sound.

This stroke of luck has led to an improvement in my health, and now I'm physically feeling great. I run down the stairs, change into my outdoor shoes at the entrance, and rush outside. Looking up, I can see the near-blinding evening sun in the sky.

"Such a pretty sunset, isn't it? Wish I could stare at it until night comes."

"So even demons think things like that, huh?"

Until a few moments ago, I could clearly feel an angel's presence. But now that I'm outside, I can't sense it at all. They must have completely concealed

their presence. Had they come here by chance, or was it intentional? I'm not sure. *If it was intentional, this might be a trap.*

Abaddon, on the other hand, is the same as always, masking his presence only partially. This is how he likes it—he wants to take the initiative and hunt the angels' Disciples down. They probably sense him as a middle-of-the-road demon, not too powerful.

"You know," he remarks, "*when I was an angel, I would admire the flowers and sing to the skies, too.*"

"I'd have expected you to be pouring water down ant nests."

"*Hey, that's your hobby. I wish you wouldn't project your weirdness onto me.*"

"...No, it isn't."

I sort of remember doing something like that back in elementary school. I avert my gaze as I recall this. But I certainly don't remember doing it enough times to consider it a hobby. Maybe a few times at most.

"*In any case, it looks like we need to get down to business. They've located us.*"

"....."

I follow Abaddon's gaze toward the sky, where some humanoid figures come into view. They're flying straight toward us from outside the school's front gate. A good number of them have wings; I can see their blond hair glistening in the sunlight even from this distance. There's little doubt they're the angels who've come to crush us.

And there are a lot this time. A quick glance shows twenty or thirty of them. Plus, where angels go, their Disciples are sure to follow—they're probably moving along the ground, out of sight. The Disciples probably had escorts, too, which meant the total number of angels was even higher.

"They've brought a lot of friends," I said. "Will you be all right?"

"*We probably missed shooting one of them down last time.*"

"Wait, are you criticizing me right now?"

After the previous incident, Abaddon told me he'd defeated every last enemy. Even if we'd let one escape, that was less my fault and more the result of our opponent's ingenuity, right? I wasn't there, though, so I couldn't say much for sure.

"*No, I'm only stating the facts. They must have had buddies.*"

"...I see."

“Even I didn’t expect them to come at us with such a huge group this soon, though,” says Abaddon—sounding weak-spirited all of a sudden. I haven’t been with him very long, but he always has this aura of supreme confidence about him whatever he does, so his comment surprises me. It must be the first time I’ve heard him say something like that.

That must mean we’re in big trouble.

In the meantime, our opponents continue closing the distance.

“Should we flee?” I ask.

“That is one option,” he says. *“But even if we decide on that, I’d like to try to wipe them out first. I think keeping them in check whenever we bump into them is for the best—we don’t want their momentum to snowball too much, after all.”*

“Will that even work?”

“I wish you’d trust me a little more.”

“...All right.”

Right now, my life is what’s most important. Apparently, this game’s playtime is on the order of years, if not decades. Abaddon hadn’t said it this way, but if fleeing now gave the angels an advantage on the whole, while we might escape today, it could lead to prolonged difficulty in the future.

On the other hand, if we were able to defeat this many angels, we would be safe and secure for a while. The fact that I’m calculating risks like this is probably why this proxy war is called a death game. I feel like a piece on a shogi board or something.

“In that case,” I say, “please take them on with everything you have.”

“May I ask for your command like last time?”

My command—the magic words that will allow him to assume his true form. Once again, I say the phrase he taught me. “Abaddon, please reveal thyself this instant.”

“Okay! Just leave it to me!”

In response to my words, his body begins to change. His human form melts away, balling up into a fleshy, writhing mass. By some mechanism, that mass immediately expands, growing much larger. All the clothes and accessories he’d been wearing are swallowed up into it. Within moments, he’s about the size of a car—and he’s still pulsating, as though he’s going to grow even larger.

The enemies all visibly react to Abaddon’s metamorphosis. Things I

assume to be magic circles appear in front of the airborne angels. Wondering what's going on, I look closer. Countless geometric shapes come together into a pure-white circle, which then begins to glow as brilliantly as the sun.

I don't need an explanation to know I'm in a very dangerous spot. *A beam or a laser or something is about to fire out of the middle of that circle, isn't it?* I think to myself.

"Stay right where you are for now!" Abaddon calls out.

I nod, and a moment later, my whole world is blocked out by the white radiance.

At the last moment, my partner bounces into my field of vision. I shut my eyes against the painful amount of light.

"Ugh..." I feel an overwhelming desire to crumple to the ground, but I endure, my legs shaking. If I fell here, I'd never hear the end of it from Abaddon.

The glow on the other side of my eyelids begins to recede after a few seconds. Nervously, I open my eyes and see a massive hole gouged into the surrounding schoolyard, covering everything but the area behind us. It's like the ground has caved in. Over half the campus has transformed into a bottomless pit.

The only platform left measures two or three meters across the flat part. It feels like standing on the edge of a cliff. Abaddon must have used some sort of barrier to protect me.

"My turn now!"

Without wasting a moment, the mass of flesh shoots forward. It hurtles through the air toward the group of floating angels, who scatter like baby spiders. A few are late to react, and they end up tangled in the enlarged flesh.

I've seen this before. The flesh stretches, growing thin before swallowing up the angels whole. It's like watching someone make a giant sweet bun. Then, the horrible snapping noises reach my ears. "Agh..."

A few of the angels who escaped now turn toward me and prepare themselves. One of them in particular carries an ax and looks quite capable in close-quarters combat. That's the one who charges at me. He's a large man with rippling muscles and a handsome face, like an actor in an action movie. He swings his ax high above his head, aiming for my neck.

Disciples can't hope to match the power of angels or demons. He's not an opponent I can handle. Instead, I do as Abaddon told me and stand perfectly

still.

Then, a piece of flesh splits off from Abaddon's main body and descends toward me, stopping the angel's weapon. A moment later, it spreads out and opens up, trying to engulf the opponent just as before. In response, the angel immediately releases his ax and jumps backward. He doesn't need more than a few seconds to rejoin the rest of his group waiting behind him.

"*They have a seraphim with them?*" comes Abaddon's voice from inside the smaller chunk of flesh—the one that stopped the ax. It's unsettling how his voice remains the same even in this form. "*Ugh, what a pain...*"

"Does it look like you can safely win?" I ask him.

"*I'm thinking I'll whittle down the numbers of lower-ranking angels, then we'll get out of here.*"

"Understood."

Ever since I got mixed up in this proxy war between angels and demons, I've been proactively gathering what knowledge I can about it. My main sources of information are the school library and the computer room. I frequent them during lunch break and after school.

If the information I've gleaned from books and the internet is correct, *seraphim* are a very high order of angels. Several sources mention that the more powerful boss demons had originally held the rank of seraphim.

In other words, some of the enemies before us are the kind we can't afford to underestimate.



For a short while after the girl angel named Eriel and the young man with her left, I tried to come up with some way to return to the real world, wandering the streets of this one like a stray. I walked aimlessly for the most part, wherever my mood directed me. At first, the deathly silent streets had been a new and fascinating sight. But after looking at it for so long, I started to get sick of it.

Eventually, I heard a very loud rumbling.

"....."

Since there was no other sound here, it rang very clearly in my ears. I could even pick out exactly what direction it had come from. Now that I'd learned

how this world had been produced, I immediately had an idea of what was making the noise—a battle between angels, demons, and the people they called Disciples. I found it easy to imagine the sight of a whole bunch of them having a big, flashy battle.

And that was exactly why I hesitated to get closer to the source of the noise.

Unfortunately, there was no guarantee they wouldn't become a threat sometime in the future. Currently, I knew more about them than they did about me, and learning more ahead of time would work to my advantage if the bureau was ever forced to interact with them. Including, for example, in cases like these.

And if the section chief caught on to their existence, I wanted to stay in an advantageous position. I'd already been made painfully aware of how important that was through my dealings in the otherworld.

"...Guess I'll go," I said to myself.

Maybe it would be okay to watch from afar. Depending on what happened, if I was able to figure out the conditions to return to the real world, I could negotiate to have them let me return in one piece. The glimpses I'd had of this world had made it seem pretty barbarous, so I very much wanted to excuse myself as quickly as possible.

With that in mind, I decided to head toward the source of the sound. I didn't fly there, hoping to avoid someone shooting me down before I noticed them. I did let my feet hover just a few centimeters off the ground, though, to move more quickly along the road.

Soon, I found what I was looking for. It seemed like a nearby middle school yard was serving as the ring for this fight. Then I saw the angels flying around between the buildings, which all but confirmed it. They held dangerous weapons like swords and axes in their hands as they flew. Thanks to the wings on their back, I knew right away—even from this distance—that they were angels.

As for the demon they were fighting...that was something I didn't quite understand. What looked like a giant ball of flesh was flying about in the air the same way as the angels.

"....."

Keeping the battlefield in sight, I attempted a careful approach. I used the houses located near the school as cover to slowly get closer. Once I reached a

road leading to the school grounds, I heard people talking.

“Not much for us to do, huh?”

“Hey, the less we have to do, the better.”

“You said it. It’s much safer back here.”

“I don’t know if we’ll get much of a reward, though...”

“I wish I could take out at least one by myself.”

“I doubt that’s possible. Even in a group, we’re just Disciples.”

“But maybe if it was a weak demon?”

I saw a group of people standing in front of the middle school’s gate. They were all young men and women, with the oldest in their midtwenties and the youngest in their teens. They wore a variety of clothing, from suits and ties to more casual getups like sweaters and jeans.

Several nearby also had wings coming out of their backs—they had to be angels. Some of them were just as young and cute as Eriel had been, while others had a slender, muscular attractiveness to them. They all wore clothing with designs that didn’t seem to belong in the modern era. *The first group must be the people they were calling Disciples.*

“Let’s just wait here quietly. That was the plan, right?”

“But why are we even here if we’re just gonna wait?”

“Seriously! If we’re not getting a reward for this, what’s motivating us?”

“They could let us deal with just one on our own, couldn’t they?”

“Yeah, and our angels wouldn’t be able to tell us no, either.”

Given that they were angels, I naturally wanted to have a friendly relationship with them. Unfortunately, as they’d wasted no time challenging me earlier, I was hesitant to walk up and talk to one. If I messed things up, they might all turn on me and attack at once.

First, I needed to figure out what was going on, which meant hurrying over to the school grounds. I took a different route that led around to the school’s rear gate.

I could hear sounds coming from the schoolyard. I went through a parking lot—probably for the teachers—and headed to the yard, hiding myself behind parts of the school building as I went. As I moved, I could tell people were fighting very close by. I was growing more and more nervous.

Finally, I got a good look from around the building.

The first thing I saw was the enormous chunk of land gouged out of the schoolyard.

“Wh...?”

I almost cried out in spite of myself. It reminded me of the spell Peeps had used on the Ohgen Empire’s forces—the one that created a humongous hole in the ground. It was so deep I couldn’t see the bottom. But what surprised me more was the person standing on the only remaining piece of land at the center of the hole.

It was someone I’d seen before.

My next-door neighbor. I’d never mistake that sailor uniform.

“.....”

The angels were flying busily around her, like bugs swarming around a streetlight at night. Apparently, they were after her.

As if to resist their attacks, several strange masses of flesh were flitting around the schoolyard. They would fling back the angels closing in on her with swords and spears and block what looked like magical effects being fired intermittently. The clumps of flesh were quite grotesque. If someone told me that this was what demons looked like, I’d have accepted it right away.

And the clumps weren’t neatly cut, like meat might be—rather, they looked like they’d been ripped off of the bone, then left out to rot for a little while. It was enough to make me almost think, just from their appearance, that they were attacking my neighbor.

I listened more closely and heard her speak.

“Abaddon,” she said, “don’t you think it’s inconvenient that I can’t fly?”

“Don’t you think it’s a waste of time to want what you can’t have?”

“If we escape safely, I’d like to be able to fly. As my reward.”

“...Fine, I’ll consider it.”

Who was she talking to? I felt like I’d heard the voice somewhere before, but I didn’t see anyone else near her.

It sounds crazy, but maybe she’s talking to the clumps of meat, I thought. As she spoke, I could see the tension in her expression even from the side. Her words were casual, but it was easy to tell she was in dire straits right now.

Given the situation, I had a feeling my neighbor was a Disciple. Angels were attacking her, which meant her partner was almost certainly a demon.

That made me curious about what, exactly, the angels and demons were after in this war—their reasons for fighting. The name *demon* made the latter

seem like the bad guys; as a good guy myself, I was hesitant to speak with one. But on a personal level, I wanted to help out my neighbor unconditionally.

“Ah...!”

Meanwhile, the combat situation changed. One of the angels destroyed my neighbor’s platform. She was essentially standing at the edge of a cliff, so she began to tumble down into the deep hole. One of the fleshy fragments flying in the air caught her in the nick of time.

“...Abaddon, you’re very slimy,” she said. “And disgusting.”

“The fact that you can say things like that at a time like this is so satisfying to me.”

“Thank you for rescuing me.”

It seemed she *had* been talking to the fleshy fragments flitting through the air this whole time. The sight was even more surreal than psychic powers and magical girls.

Still, the rescue only granted them a moment’s reprieve. Seeing it as a golden opportunity, the angels pressed their assault, sending what looked like magic into the hole and laying down a focused barrage on my neighbor, who was floating in the center of it.

The ball of flesh supporting her responded by changing shape and protecting her. It suddenly grew very large, then wrapped around her like a seashell.

Its defenses did the trick for ten seconds or so, blocking all the angels’ attacks. Unfortunately, it seemed like their offensive was aimed at holding their opponents in place. As that group let up their suppressive fire, another angel had already moved underneath my neighbor—still fixed in a defensive posture—and began shooting at her.

The attacking angel was a girl whose age didn’t seem much different from Eriel’s. Her striking blond hair reached down to her waist; on her back were three pairs of wings, six in all. That was curious; it was more than the other angels. Sword in hand, she swung, slicing through the wall of flesh in a single strike.

“Ugh... Not a good matchup for me.”

“Wait, Abaddon, is this game over?”

Flames rose from the sliced flesh, burning brightly. A moment later, my neighbor began to fall. She was now undoubtedly at a disadvantage against

the attacking angels.

At this point, I couldn't allow myself to stay put and watch. She was someone I knew, after all.

Letting my body float into the air with flight magic, I shot toward a point beneath her as fast as I could. It was lucky the hole in the schoolyard was so incredibly deep. Because of that, I was able to catch her before she plummeted to the bottom—though it was very close, despite the fact I'd combined my flight spell with one to make other objects float.

Wrapped in my arms, she looked up at me and cried out "...M-Mister?!"

I could understand her shock. I probably would have cried out the same way if I'd been in the otherworld and she'd swooped in to save me from some predicament. And that only made me more certain these were two separate worlds.

There were a million things I wanted to discuss with her, but I focused on responding to the situation at hand by putting up a defensive barrier.

"You wouldn't happen to be a demon as well, would you?"

A moment later, one of the chunks of flesh swung down from overhead and positioned itself right next to us. The six-winged angel pursued it, swinging down the sword in her hand.

It was terrifying. As a frightened magician from another world, I wasted no time in firing a lightning spell. It struck the tip of the sword with a crack, causing it to veer from its course in the nick of time. The tip soared past my shoulder with blinding speed. A moment later, there was a bang as the defensive spell vanished from around us.

What's this? I thought. *That spell came straight from Peeps. How did she break it?*

"What was that I felt just now...?" wondered the sword-wielding angel girl aloud. She had a pretty voice.

A relatively large fleshy mass immediately whipped down from the sky and attacked her. It opened up like a huge mouth and tried to swallow the angel whole.

The angel pulled back, then flew out of the hole.

"....."

Wow, that was way too close. If I'd taken her on with just my barrier spell, both my neighbor and I would be in two pieces now. I wanted to pat myself on the back for that shred of daring. After all, this was the first time anything

had ever broken that barrier. If I got out of this alive, I'd have to discuss it with Peeps. *That is one sharp sword.*

"Abaddon," said my neighbor, "please trust this man."

"Well, you know I can't refuse an order from my Disciple."

"I should hope not."

"I'm really looking forward to how this decision affects the game."

"I'm positive you will thank me for it."

My neighbor was talking with the ball of flesh. Hearing this, I suddenly realized who that voice belonged to—it was the boy who had massacred Takayoshi and Naomi.

Now wasn't the time to think about that, however. The angels had assembled in a perimeter around the big hole. We had to get out of here.

"I have a question," I said. "No need for detail."

"All right. Ask away!"

"I would personally like to get away from this commotion as soon as I can. Is that possible?"

"I'm happy to hear it! We were just thinking the same thing."

Despite how chaotic the situation was, we were able to communicate quickly; he seemed used to battles like these, which only raised more questions about this fleshy mass floating in front of me and his relationship with my neighbor.

But the answers could wait until we got out of here. If we messed this up, all three of us could end up following Takayoshi and Naomi.

"At this rate, though, that might be a perilous choice."

The lump of flesh shook. The surface that had been pointing toward me shifted to face upward. Was he telling me to look up?

When I did so, I saw that the angels had entered a formation above the hole. I could see another waiting before the main gate. To top it off, that one had a humongous magic circle or something floating in front of it. This looked pretty bad. They were ready to finish us off, once and for all.

They must be planning to shoot some kind of magic out of the middle of that circle to destroy us. After all the recent craziness in my life, what with the otherworld and the psychics and magical girls, it was easy to imagine. This magic circle's design was fancier, different from the kinds I'd seen in the otherworld and from the magical girl.

"This isn't like you, Abaddon," remarked my neighbor.

“Well, the one at the front is a high-ranking angel...”

“Is she stronger than you are?”

“I’m not sure. I just know that it’s a terrible matchup for me.”

“I’m pretty sure all the angels you’ve taken out in the past were thinking the exact same thing.”

“Ah. Those words do inflame my fighting spirit.”

As I wondered how to deal with the situation, my neighbor and the fleshy mass exchanged words. Despite being a team, they didn’t seem to be totally in tune. Their banter was actually kind of cool, like they were playing two parts in a comedy routine.

But such lines didn’t really fit a magical middle-aged man. What was I to do? If we went on like this, we were sure to die. That angel had broken my barrier spell with one swing. I doubted anything we could throw at them would get through; they’d probably brush it aside like nothing. Even without prior experience, that much was obvious.

“Now, I have a question for you.” The flesh lump addressed me, making a half rotation in midair; this must have been his front. *“Got any good ideas?”*

“Good ideas, huh...” I murmured.

My most powerful means of attack was the lightning spell, but all it had done was slightly divert the course of the six-winged angel’s sword. And my greatest defensive spell, the barrier, had been nullified in a single strike.

We were in a deadlock. But if we just accepted that as reality, we wouldn’t survive the day. Wasn’t there any way out of this?

As I racked my brain searching for an answer, I suddenly recalled the spell I’d been practicing. I’d decided to simply memorize the incantation, but when I’d read it off my cheat sheet at the inn in the otherworld, the magic circle had popped up on my first try. I was so frightened I’d canceled the cast. I hadn’t had a good chance to discuss it with Peeps since then, so I’d put the matter on hold.

But maybe that spell could help us.

It had wiped out over ten thousand Ohgen Empire soldiers in one blast and created an enormous hole in the ground. Its power was beyond debate. Plus, the fact that we were in a world without people meant I didn’t have to consider collateral damage, which lowered my reservations considerably.

The idea still made me uneasy, though. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to handle it. Peeps had mentioned how much spells of the advanced level and above

strained a person. Something about his frail body not being able to withstand the technique. Apparently, Java sparrows were pretty fragile. I supposed that made sense, given their tiny size. I'd been supporting him this whole time so he could avoid that kind of strain.

“.....”

On the other hand, that might mean I could use certain spells he shied away from even without his help—though, of course, I might still run into the issue of not having enough mana.

With all that in mind, I decided it was worth a try. We didn't have much of a choice anyway. If we waited for our opponents to attack, they'd annihilate us.

“I can't make any promises,” I said, “but I may be able to help out somewhat.”

“*Huh? Really?*”

“Though if you have any ideas of your own, I'll gladly step aside.”

“*...No, if you've got something, by all means give it a shot.*”

“All right, then.”

We didn't have the time to discuss it at length anyway. Overhead, the angels' magic circle was quickly growing brighter, whirring with a low, repeating noise. Watching all the shining energy, or whatever it was, converge at its center had my heart in my mouth. They might fire at any moment.

I hurried to begin the spell's chant. Fortunately, the cheat sheet was still in my suit pocket. I took it out and started rattling off the words as fast as I could manage. My neighbor gave me a dubious look, but I didn't have time to worry about her. Someone who didn't know what was going on would definitely think I was a crazy old man.

But a moment later, her expression turned to astonishment.

“Huh...?”

She was reacting to the magic circle that had just emerged. The familiar design hovered under our feet, glittering with light.

It appeared. The spell's working! I thought. *So I really had triggered it before.*

This time, I didn't hesitate—I read off every last word on my cheat sheet. I wanted to pat myself on the back for chanting all the words perfectly in the middle of such a desperate situation.

No sooner had I finished the spell than I heard the voice of an angel overhead—the six-winged girl who had just pierced my barrier spell with her sword.

“Fire!”

At her order, the angels’ magic circle gave off an even more brilliant glow. But my spell was prepared as well—so in that same moment, I released it.

“H-here goes nothing!”

Maybe it would have been cooler to shout out the name of the spell as I launched it, but unfortunately, I didn’t actually know what it was called.

From above and below, a ribbon of light burst from each of our magic circles.

In the center of the great hole, they clashed headfirst.

“*Hmm...*”

“Mister!”

It was *blinding*. Before I knew it, I’d clamped my eyes shut. The low-pitched whirring reverberated inside the hole, much louder now that it was bouncing off the sides. It was like motorcycles with huge engines were idling right beside me.

Nevertheless, I didn’t let off the gas; I kept up the spell’s power. As I did, I felt something slowly draining out of me—my pep, or my enthusiasm, or something like that. *This must be what it feels like to consume your mana.* Peeps had explained it to me before, but this was the first time I’d actually felt it since starting my magic training.

I assumed the vast store of mana Peeps had given me meant I wouldn’t be able to feel the consumption with intermediate spells or below. He’d said that if you kept going, ultimately, you’d pass out—or in the worst case, you might die.

But since we’d die anyway if the angels beat back my spell, I was going full power. I put as much strength as I could into it.

The rays of light seemed to clash for about ten seconds or so.

Eventually, I felt something crumble, as if my spell had broken through an obstacle.

With narrowed eyes, I looked up and saw the light of my magic stretching out of the hole and high into the sky. It towered magnificently above us. From down here, I couldn’t tell how far it reached.

Did that mean it had pierced through the group of angels?

I stopped pouring mana into the spell. It felt like closing a fully opened hose.

The stream of light, thick enough to fill the entire hole, immediately narrowed until it scattered and disappeared. In the clouds was a single open circle, through which I could see the afternoon sun. Apparently, the beam had gotten pretty high.

Had I pulled it off?

Unfortunately, my overwhelming sense of accomplishment only lasted for a moment.

One angel descended from the sky.

It was the six-winged sword-wielding girl, and she was charging straight for my neighbor.

“Ack...”

Before I realized it, my body had moved on its own. My arms wrapped around my neighbor, protecting her, and my back turned to the angel. Then, I used my flight spell to get away from her sword. Flying in a loop around her, I secured a path to the other side. I had taken off more rapidly than ever before, and the g-forces made it feel like my organs were all leaning to one side of my body.

Moments later, a dull impact rippled through me.

“Ngh... As I thought, my power has sharply decreased,” came the angel’s voice from right next to me.

I ignored her, soaring past and heading straight out of the hole.

“M-Mister!” cried my neighbor.

After the impact, my body had suddenly grown lighter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a mass of flesh attacking the angel. Leaving her up to him, I decided to focus on getting my neighbor out of here and plotted my course.

I recklessly sent my body hurtling toward the hole’s opening. In a matter of seconds, I’d left it behind and spotted solid ground in a corner of the schoolyard. A moment later, however, I abruptly felt a sense of irresistible exhaustion. Panicking, I dropped my speed and let my neighbor down onto the ground. Then I positioned myself for my own landing.

Or at least, I tried to.

“Oh,” I said. “My feet are gone.”

“Mister! Mister!” shouted my neighbor.

My body collapsed to the ground with a thud.

I looked more closely and saw that it wasn't just my feet—everything below the waist was gone. I could see my organs leaking from my body; it was extremely grotesque. The blood pouring out of me was dyeing my neighbor's lower half red as well.

Frantically, I used a healing spell. A magic circle appeared beneath my fallen body.

But in a troubling turn, the recovery was going very slowly.

In the meantime, darkness began to creep into the corners of my vision.

"Mister!" cried my neighbor, supporting my upper body with her arms. "Don't die! Mister! Mister!"

This is the first time I've ever seen her lose her cool, I thought. I knew it was an odd thing to be thinking, given the situation. *I guess she can make faces like that, too.*

"I'm glad you're safe," I said.

"...I—I don't matter!" she stammered in reply. "But you have to live!"

"...Please, live a happy life for the both of us. You still have so much ahead of you."

"M-Mister! Mister?!"

There was no saving me now. Once I realized that, I started spouting what sounded like my final words. As soon as they were out, I regretted not saying something more considerate. But when I tried to say more, I discovered my tongue wouldn't move.

All the while, my vision continued to darken.

Soon, I could no longer see my neighbor's face in front of mine.

I'd always taken "safety first" with the utmost seriousness. *And now look at me.*

I wished I could have said one last thing to my beloved pet bird.

I'm sorry, Peeps.

"Abaddon! Hurry and deal with the angels' Disciples!"

"Hey, you can trust me. I already handled it."

I heard my neighbor talking to the mass of flesh.

But those sounds grew rapidly distant, too, until I couldn't hear them any longer.

Finally, I lost all feeling in my body, and my sight went black along with my consciousness.



My sense of total resignation lasted only a moment, however.

My consciousness returned as though I were waking up from a deep sleep.

The first thing I perceived was the engine exhaust from a car; I didn't know where it was coming from. Such things had vanished once I'd entered the empty world. A moment later, I felt something soft behind my head. *When did a pillow get there?* I wondered. This only raised more questions.

I opened my eyes and immediately saw my neighbor.

She was very close, too—almost close enough for our noses to touch.

Apparently, the soft sensation on the back of my head was from her thighs. Due to my position, I'd mistaken them for a pillow, but now it dawned on me—this was the first time I'd ever gotten to rest my head in someone's lap. It was much more comfortable than the old, roughed-up pillow in my apartment.

"You're awake!" she cried.

"....."

Partially out of embarrassment, I let my gaze wander to my own lower body. There I saw my lost legs, all in one piece again. And for some reason, even my clothes seemed unscathed—despite all the entrails scattered everywhere before.

"Uh," I said, "were you the one who—?"

"Ahhhhh!" she exclaimed. "Thank goodness, thank goodness!"

"Ack—"

My neighbor interrupted me with a tight embrace. I found my face buried in her chest. When I'd first seen her, her sailor uniform had been covered in slimy blood, but the fabric touching my cheek now was completely clean. It almost felt like nothing had happened at all.

Like it had just been a dream—a delusion I'd had.

My neighbor was too overcome with emotion for that to be the case, though. I'd never seen anyone this happy about my safety.

A moment later, I remembered the last time I'd been in the empty world—time had completely reverted.

"....."

Did that effect influence even wounds on a human body? That sounded absurd.

It did, however, explain what was going on perfectly. Perhaps, just as the hands on the clock had moved backward, my injuries, too, had reverted. I'd experienced it once before, so the idea seemed pretty credible.

In the meantime, I heard a familiar voice. *"It's great that he's safe and you're happy about it, but maybe you should pick a better time and place for this?"*

It was the same voice as the hunk of flesh that had been flying around my neighbor. His words were accompanied by the sound of his approaching footfalls.

"The whole world could be watching for all I care," answered my neighbor. "As long as he's safe."

"Perhaps that's true for you," responded the voice, *"but I'm sure he has concerns of his own."*

"....."

He was right. I looked pretty miserable right now. I was resting on a middle school girl's lap, and now she was cradling my head in her arms. It would be very bad if a stranger saw me like this.

Frantically, I shook free of her arms and sat up. As I did, a familiar boy came into view. "You're..."

"Hey," he said. *"This is your second time meeting me in this form, isn't it?"*

This was the boy who had murdered Takayoshi and Naomi. Like before, he wore a cape and a crown, looking like a prince straight out of a fairy tale.

"What do you mean by that, Abaddon?" asked my neighbor.



“I’m not entirely sure myself. In fact, I’d like to ask him about it.”

“...Him?”

Watching their exchange out of the corner of my eye, I took my phone from my inside pocket and quickly checked the time. Once again, it had gone backward. The phone displayed just about the same time as when I’d checked it immediately after everyone disappeared.

I also had one missed call in the notification bar at the side of my screen. I opened it up to check—it was from Ms. Futarishizuka. She’d probably seen my location suddenly change and tried to contact me. It looked like she’d called just a few minutes ago.

“Excuse me,” I said, quickly standing up and turning back to the boy, “but what happened to that small angel?”

We were still in the corner of the middle school’s yard. At least classes were over for the day; I didn’t see anyone around. If this had happened earlier, it would have been terrible—I would have looked like a middle-aged man who broke into a school and started doing something untoward with one of the students—or something like that.

“I drove her off, at least,” replied the boy. *“Though even I can’t imagine what the other side will do next. Considering an unknown element has entered the mix—you, that is—if they want to improve their chances of victory, they’ll probably stay clear for a while.”*

“Then, you weren’t able to defeat her?” asked my neighbor.

“They made quite the speedy retreat. I took down most of the other Disciples, though.”

“...I see,” she said, seeming disappointed by his explanation.

I took the opportunity to worm myself into the conversation. “I heard that strange world is produced when at least ten angels and demons assemble in a specific area. Would I be correct in assuming that, since the angels have left, we’ve returned to our world and our wounds have healed?”

“How odd. You’re almost right, but...”

“Am I mistaken?” This was information I’d received right after entering the deserted world this time, from a boy who’d appeared to be a Disciple. He’d had an angel with him, so I doubted he was faking it.

However, the boy in front of me came back with some corrections. *“First of all, the numbers don’t matter. And it’s based on the Disciples, not the angels or demons.”*

“Disciples,” I repeated. “Are they the ones with the angels and demons?”

“Yep, that’s right,” he said. “*Since I killed most of the Disciples and forced the rest to flee, it put distance between her—a demon’s Disciple—and them, and that caused the isolated space to collapse. Outside of that space, angels and demons can’t use much of their strength, so you’ll be safe for now.*”

“Then I narrowly avoided death. I owe you my thanks.”

“*You helped her, too, so we’re even. No need to thank me.*”

Apparently, Eriel’s Disciple had fed me false information. Or maybe he’d been testing me. Whatever the case, I wasn’t particularly interested at this point.

“*You really don’t know anything about this, do you?*” asked the boy.

“I’d appreciate you explaining things to me, if at all possible.”

“*I’m sure—but I’m in the exact same boat, you know.*”

“Are you?”

“*Remember when I called you an unknown element?*”

The angels and demons didn’t seem to know about psychic powers—probably a sign of how well the bureau did its work. I’d entered that “isolated space” on my own, despite being neither an angel nor a demon. From his point of view, that must have been very strange.

I’d probably have to tell him about psychic powers, at least. He was with my neighbor, so I wanted to avoid making an enemy of him. I still had doubts about him based on his previous actions, but now was the time for compromise. There was still room to consider how much about them I would report to the section chief, however.

“Then would you agree to an exchange of information?” I asked.

“*Oh, I’d love that,*” he answered with a friendly smile.

I decided not to think too hard about what was going on *behind* his amicable expression. For now, my first priority was my neighbor. As soon as I glanced her way, she hurriedly addressed me.

“Mister, I was really happy you came to save me,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

“Don’t mention it. I wasn’t quite sure what I was doing anyway...,” I replied, remembering what we’d said to each other just before I lost consciousness.

...Please, live a happy life for the both of us.

You still have so much ahead of you.

Or something like that.

“Also,” she said, “I’m so sorry for causing you trouble.”

“No, no, it’s fine. You can forget all about that.”

And now I had yet another awkward event in my past I didn’t really want to think about. It had been a life-and-death situation, so the adrenaline was probably pumping. Thinking back on it, I started to feel like the words I’d spoken belonged to somebody else.

It was time to change the subject—by force if necessary. I turned back to the boy and picked a random topic. “Could I ask you something right now?”

“What is it? Ask me anything, and I’ll answer to the best of my ability. My Disciple directly ordered me to trust you; so as long as nothing crazy happens, I won’t lie.”

“The short, six-winged angel with the sword...”

“Oh, you noticed? That angel was quite a bit higher in rank than all the rest. I’m shocked you survived her attack. This world calls her Michael or Miguel or something like that. She’s pretty hard for me to deal with.”

He made it sound like he knew her personally. Apparently, angels and demons were familiar with each other.

I moved this high-ranking angel into the “very dangerous” category in my mind along with the magical girl and Ms. Futarishizuka’s old boss, deciding to retreat on sight if Peeps wasn’t with me. After only one hit, I’d seen that little Mika was hard for *me* to deal with, too. *If possible, I’d like to never run into her again.*

Meanwhile, Ms. Futarishizuka had found her way to us. “Hey!” she called out. “May I come over there? I won’t be attacked out of the blue, will I?”

She was on the small road in front of the schoolyard, peering at us over the metal fence surrounding it. The lower half of her body was hidden by the block fence forming the walls of the alley. As she watched us from afar, I couldn’t tell if she was genuinely hesitant to come over or if it was just a joke.

“Do you know her, Mister?” asked my neighbor immediately. The boy looked my way as well.

“Yes, she’s a colleague from work, I suppose...,” I answered.

“She seems a little young for that.”

“She does, but she’s actually older than you—in fact, she’s an adult.”

“Really? I can’t see her as anything but a child...”

At any rate, I didn't want to keep talking in a place like this. Despite school being out for the day, students might still show up. I was sure there were plenty of kids staying late for club activities. A teacher might even come snooping around. I could get out of most problems with the police badge in my pocket, but it was always better not to have to use it at all.

"I'll explain," I replied. "Could we maybe go somewhere else?"

Fortunately, my neighbor answered immediately. "All right."

The boy called Abaddon had mentioned not being able to refuse her requests, so I doubted he would be a problem. And this way, I'd get more information about the link between Disciples and their angels or demons.

"Shouldn't you go back to your classroom to pick up your things before we leave?"

"...It's so annoying to be a student and a minor."

"Personally, I'd rather you took those things a little more seriously."

There was one thing I was still curious about, though.

Had Miss Hoshizaki managed to smooth things over with her schoolmates?



We headed away from the schoolyard in Ms. Futarishizuka's car, driving around with no real destination in mind and the kimono-clad girl at the wheel. She'd asked me if I wanted to take a turn, but unfortunately, as previously mentioned, I was a veteran "papers-only driver" with basically no experience. Since nobody else had a license at all, she'd ended up sitting in the driver's seat. My neighbor and Abaddon were in the back while I rode shotgun.

"A proxy war between angels and demons?" mused Ms. Futarishizuka. "That is quite a tale, if I do say so myself."

"I'm not lying," replied my neighbor. "Whether you believe it is your choice."

"Oh, no, I wasn't doubting you."

Once we were in the car, my neighbor explained all the strange occurrences that had taken place—including the one the day before that had involved Ms. Futarishizuka as well. Since our information had been so fragmentary up until now, I was glad we were starting to get a fuller picture. My neighbor

went on to explain the situation she'd been placed in.

"A death game?" I said. "I don't much like the sound of that."

"Are you worried about me?" she asked.

"I'd think *anyone* would be worried if someone they knew ended up in this situation."

Two people had already died in front of me—and the culprit was the demon she was with. From my point of view, it was difficult to mentally reconcile. But now we knew that if he hadn't done that, my neighbor would have been killed instead. That made sense to me. After all, I'd personally been in similar predicaments several times before.

"*You are right in assuming she is in a very dangerous situation,*" said Abaddon.

"A dangerous situation you personally invited her into," I pointed out.

"*You live near her, right?*"

"Why?"

"*I'm pretty sure that if you'd just gotten a little bit closer to her, she never would have met me at all. And even if she had, I doubt she'd have accepted my invitation.*"

"Don't say things like that, Abaddon!" exclaimed my neighbor.

"*But it's the truth, isn't it?*"

Apparently, he was aware we knew each other. Not only that, but it seemed my neighbor had recently ended up in a situation that had forced her to rely on him. Based on how he described it, I assumed it had something to do with her family environment.

"*Either way,*" continued Abaddon, "*it's very reassuring to have you two here.*"

"I'm not too fond of danger," replied Ms. Futarishizuka. I agreed with her, but I didn't want to leave my neighbor out to dry, either.

"*This proxy war between angels and demons doesn't only take place within isolated spaces. It happens here, too—during a Disciple's normal life. Disciples compete with, scorn, and hate one another. You need more than just physical strength for that, wouldn't you agree?*"

"I believe I understand what you're saying," I replied.

"*Joining forces with an angel or a demon brings benefits—which I've already mentioned.*"

According to Abaddon's and my neighbor's explanations, angels and

demons granted their Disciples wishes in proportion to their accomplishments in the proxy war—and the wishes could be anything. It seemed Disciples were able to negotiate what they would get.

“But we aren’t Disciples,” I pointed out.

“It seems that my partner likes you a lot, though,” replied Abaddon. *“Play your cards right, and I might even be able to do something for you through her. You both seem to be fairly well-off in human society.”* He looked dramatically around the car.

Negotiations like these probably happened frequently among other participants of the game, which meant it was only a matter of time before the bureau caught wind of the existence of angels and demons. I had little doubt they would soon end up at the top of the pecking order. In that case, I would have to seriously consider our involvement. Most importantly, this had to do with my next-door neighbor—someone I’d known for years.

“It is dangerous,” murmured Ms. Futarishizuka, “but interesting.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you plan on asking this boy to undo your curse,” I said.

“H-how did you know?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Though, your response was a little hammy.”

“Well, you *do* treat me like some kind of chauffeur. Or a taxi driver.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m really grateful to have you...” If I was behind the wheel, we wouldn’t get three kilometers before crashing. In fact, I was 100 percent sure I’d hit a pedestrian. This was a huge sedan, after all—there was no way I could drive it safely.

“This incident will alert angels far and wide to our existence,” Abaddon continued.

“Then it’s possible they might go after your partner, too,” I said.

“And I do feel guilty about that! But this was going to happen sooner or later no matter what. That’s why I feel so fortunate to have met the two of you.”

“...I see.”

I supposed I could understand his panic. According to him, this proxy war had only just begun. Making deals like these early on was for the best. If they secured Ms. Futarishizuka’s cooperation, they might be able to settle everything fairly quickly. In a death game, her powers would be practically cheating. If she got serious, they’d hardly even need those isolated spaces. That is, as long as other psychic groups—the bureau, especially—and

magical girls stayed out of things.

“Excuse me for prying,” I said, “but do you not have any other Disciples as your allies?”

“Unfortunately, my partner is a very shy kind of girl.”

“Abaddon, why do you keep telling him more than he needs to know?” asked my neighbor.

Ah, I thought. Then, she’s like Miss Hoshizaki. Given my neighbor’s family situation, I couldn’t really blame her. I thought about it and realized I’d never seen her with friends. After a moment, though, I realized my arrogance. How was that any different from me over the past few years? When was the last time I went drinking with friends? I wondered. Of course, my life has been more fulfilling lately thanks to Peeps’s companionship.

“In any case,” I said, “we are willing to cooperate with you.”

“Wow! I’m so happy to hear that.”

“You really don’t need to force yourself,” insisted my neighbor. “I can handle things fine on my own.”

“Wait a second,” interrupted Ms. Futarishizuka. “Don’t I get a say in this?”

Ensuring my neighbor’s safety necessitated a quick decision. One option was to take her to the otherworld, but time passed terrifyingly quickly there. Given her description of this game’s rules, we’d want to avoid that as much as possible. I was sure the Abaddon boy would disapprove, too.

At the same time, if we planned to intervene in this proxy war, I’d run into certain issues with my barrier magic. In cases like the one earlier—where I was out and about on my own—having it up constantly didn’t cause *that* much of a problem. However it *would* pose a problem when I was sleeping or doing clerical work at the bureau. In the latter case, people would keep banging into an invisible wall. And I was pretty certain I wouldn’t be able to interfere with isolated spaces at all if I was in the otherworld.

Deciding what form our cooperation should take would require careful consideration.

“I’ll be direct,” I said to Abaddon. “If that six-winged angel attacks again, will you be able to deal with her yourself? In the worst-case scenario, it’s possible an isolated space could appear this very moment, right?”

“One-on-one, I don’t believe I’d lose, at least,” he replied.

“I saw a lot more angels than her in the sky, though...”

“Are you that worried about this girl?”

“If I wasn’t worried, I wouldn’t have intervened.” I’d known her for a while now, and although I had no intention to delve deeper into her business, I wanted to help her out where I could.

“Well, they suffered a lot of damage in that battle, too,” he continued. *“Unless the Disciples are total morons, I doubt they’ll try to challenge us again right away. They don’t have enough information on you, either.”*

“I see what you mean.”

“If anything, we want your help in the fights between humans, not angels and demons. After all, they mobilized a lot of angels for this battle and still failed. I’d imagine they’ll try a different angle of attack next time.”

“That does ease my mind. Somewhat anyway.”

Depending on our future efforts, there was no telling how the cookie would crumble. I wondered if showing them Peeps’s magic would change their mindset at all. But apparently, for the time being, I’d be helping them out in a more physical sense in the real world instead.

“In that case,” I told him, “I’d like to take the day to think about it.”

“Go for it!” he said jovially. *“I think it’s a good arrangement for both of us.”*

Whatever the case may be, I’d have to consult with the big man—well, sparrow—back home. I couldn’t decide our strategy by myself, and that went for how to handle Ms. Futarishizuka as well. This would probably take quite a lot of time and money, so I shied away from making any decisions on the spot.

And knowing the Starsage, he might come up with some sort of ingenious plan.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

Today I am experiencing something very difficult as well as something very pleasant.

Both things involve the man from next door.

Whoever first said “All’s well that ends well” was right.

When that angel attacks the man, and he falls to the ground, missing his lower body, my mind goes blank. The world may as well be ending. But with

the isolated space's disappearance, everything goes back to the way it was before. I see him smile, and it makes my heart start pounding with joy instead of fear.

Once again, I have him to thank for my own life.

When I think about that, it makes me feel warm inside.

"What's up?" asks Abaddon. *"You've got a creepy grin on your face."*

"I'm surprised to hear *you* of all people say that, Abaddon," I reply.

We've been in a car for a little under an hour, driven around by a woman in a kimono—whom my neighbor calls his colleague. By the time the sun sets and the sky grows dark, they've already brought Abaddon and me back to my apartment.

Since then, I've been sitting with my back to my front door.

What time is he planning on getting back? I wonder. After letting me out, they drove off again, saying they still had work to do. He seemed really busy, so maybe I won't see him again today. Still, even the slimmest chance makes my heart flutter.

"We never got a chance to figure out who they really are," remarks Abaddon.

"My neighbor is my neighbor. That's all I need to know."

"I think that particular attitude could use some work."

"I'll rephrase, then," I say. "We're not in a position to demand they tell us who or what they really are. Instead of prying into their affairs and making a mistake, I think we should wait for them to open up."

"I suppose you're right about that..." Abaddon raises his arms and shrugs. The dramatic gesture suits him perfectly. *"But you have done a bunch of research on him, haven't you?"*

"I've done nothing of the sort."

"No? What about all those times you tried to listen in on him through the wall?"

"....."

What can I say? I couldn't resist. Whenever I sense someone's presence in the next room at night, my body moves on its own. Like the sound of the shower running—I can't help it. Hearing it makes the lower parts of my body heat up. *If only Abaddon wasn't with me, I think, I could let myself enjoy it more.*

"I've seen you peeping in through his window, too."

“...Promise not to tell him about any of this.”

“Oh, what a shame. If only you hadn’t ordered me—I could have told on you.”

Is he joking, or did he mean that? As always, the demon’s words and actions are beyond my comprehension.

I glare at him to drive home my point. He continues to smile, though. The reaction fits his title of “demon” to a tee. Are all the other demons like him?

Never mind. Thinking about Abaddon at all is a waste of time.

No, I want to feel *his* presence instead.

I want to think about him—fill my head with him. Ahh, how wonderful he is! I want to talk with him forever. I want to gaze at his face. I want to hear his voice.

Just thinking about him makes me so happy.

“Still,” remarks Abaddon casually, *“I wonder who that person with him was.”*

“Ugh...”

But my happiness wavers at Abaddon’s words. That’s something I’ve been questioning as well but trying not to think about.

That woman in the kimono who could easily fit in with a pack of grade schoolers—according to her, she’s over twenty. She said she has a driver’s license, and it’s true she drove us back to my apartment. My neighbor seemed quite calm in the passenger’s seat, too.

“He said she was a colleague from work, but she’s clearly a child, isn’t she? Does she have some kind of disease that halted her growth, I wonder? But even if she did, wouldn’t her skin and hair still deteriorate?”

“Wait, did you notice something about her?”

“Not really. I’m pretty sure she isn’t normal, though. Just like him.”

“...I see.”

I’m a child. She’s an adult.

And my neighbor is an adult, too.

Thinking of the two of them together upsets me.

Work colleagues? What kind of relationship do they have, exactly? Are they like classmates who don’t talk to each other much? Or members of the same school group? Good friends, even? I don’t want to consider it, but what if they’re more than that?

No. That’s not right. He’s all alone, just like me. That’s what makes us a

perfect match. There's no way he's friendly with some woman from work.

"What's wrong? You suddenly got quiet."

"It's nothing."

Thinking back, they were chatting pretty casually.

And he seemed a little different from when he talks to me.

"....."

It's fine. He and I are made for each other. We're a perfect match.

And today he was worried about me and rescued me from a dangerous situation. I want to be the one to help him next. By spilling blood in turn, we'll further deepen our relationship.

Ah, how wonderful. Just imagining it makes my lower body heat up.

I've decided—the next time we meet, I'll figure out who that woman with the strange way of speaking really is.

<Territory and Development>

After parting ways with my neighbor, we rode in Ms. Futarishizuka's car back to our base at the hotel.

By getting the details of the angels-versus-demons proxy war, we had essentially accomplished the objective put to us by Section Chief Akutsu. How much we would report to him, though, was still a matter of consideration.

Hence, we added Peeps into the mix to work things out. We could easily deliver our report to the chief the next day. I appreciated how my current workplace left decisions like these—at least to an extent—to the employee's discretion. It was like night and day compared to my old job, where they recommended meetings first thing in the morning and clocking out even if you were staying late.

I never wanted to return to working conditions like those ever again.

"I see," said Peeps. *"You've been through a lot."*

"Yes," I replied. *"So we wanted to hear your opinion on the matter, too."*

I was in the living space in our hotel room, relaxing and spending time with my pet bird. Peeps was perched on a small tree set atop the low table in front of my seat on the sofa. Lady Elsa had plopped herself down on the sofa opposite mine.

The privileged girl from the otherworld looked completely different in this one, now dressed in modern clothing. She'd let her fancy hair down, too, the same way she had on her last visit. It felt odd to see her like that—like seeing a famous TV comedian who always dressed in crazy outfits wearing a suit and tie on his day off. Incidentally, Ms. Futarishizuka had picked everything out for her, from her dress to her shoes.

"Not psychic powers, nor magical girls, but something else. Yes, that is quite fascinating."

“Do they have this in your world, Peeps?”

“A proxy war between angels and demons, you say? I’ve never heard of it, at the very least. I know of things somewhat like it, I suppose, but they’re of a different flavor, so to speak.”

I was very interested in the beings Peeps categorized as “like angels and demons,” but pursuing that would derail the topic at hand, so I’d have to ask him about it some other time.

“You are more knowledgeable about this world than I. Would things not turn out better if you made your own decision rather than asking my uninformed opinion? I also know very little about this boss of yours.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said. “My apologies for asking.”

“That said, this is all very fascinating, indeed.”

I nodded—I’d basically expected that response. He always made his opinions clear. Personally, I really appreciated that part of him.

“In my opinion,” drawled Ms. Futarishizuka as she watched our exchange, “we should drip-feed him the information, even if it draws suspicion.” She was sitting to one side of me, leaving an empty seat between us on the sofa.

“May I ask why?”

“You know how shady our boss is, don’t you? If we go to him wagging our tails and spill everything, he’ll probably just end up taking advantage of us. I bet he already suspects all sorts of things.”

I’d been feeling the exact same way lately—even more so after we delivered our previous report. And if problems did arise, it was likely my neighbor and the Abaddon boy would cooperate on a shared story to tell the bureau. That seemed like quite the bargain for gaining our help.

“I suppose so,” I eventually replied.

“For now,” she continued, “I think we should tell him it’s a psychic who can create a specific kind of space—or something like that.”

“Do such powers exist?”

“I can think of one, certainly—and a fairly troublesome one, at that.”

“How high is their rank?”

“A. And on the higher end, to boot.”

“Won’t claiming that cause a big commotion?”

“Well, if our estimate is too low, *we* might end up with the job.”

“Good point...”

They probably wouldn’t order the two of us to take care of a powerful

rank-A psychic on our own. Even if we did investigate, the section chief would be taking the lead, and the entire bureau would be acting with a lot of caution. And with our recent lack of on-site personnel, the chief would probably be hesitant to move forward.

News of this proxy war would probably reach him soon anyway. When that happened, it would be clear our reports were mistaken—in which case, the less time we spent on this job, the better. That way, we could simply say we were poking into it in our spare time and apologize for having bad intel.

“The angel side has seen my face, though,” I pointed out.

“...That’s one thing we can’t do anything about.”

That had been entirely my own fault, and I felt really guilty about it. I should have at least hidden my face. Realistically, though, I wouldn’t have had the time. Between that and saving my neighbor, I knew I’d made the right decision. I’d have to put some thought into it for next time, though.

“Well, you *do* have a very plain face,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. “I’m sure they’ll forget it soon.”

“I think that’s the first time anyone’s ever complimented me on my face,” I said.

“That was *not* a compliment. Please don’t twist my words like that.”

“*Is that so?*” said Peeps. “*In my opinion, his face has something of a charm to it.*”

“...Thanks, Peeps.”

I’d meant it as a silly joke, but my bird’s backup only dealt me additional damage. As I watched Ms. Futarishizuka grinning at me, I firmly decided that joking wasn’t my thing and that I shouldn’t have bothered trying.

As our discussion on what to report to the chief came to a stopping point, Lady Elsa spoke up, her voice reserved. “...Was it all right for me to hear that?” she asked.

“I apologize for boring you,” I said. “It’ll be fine as long as you keep silent about it.”

“I...I know. I’ll take it to the grave, just you watch!” The youthful princess nodded.

At most, she’d only be sticking around for a few months, so there shouldn’t be a problem. In fact, I figured telling her some of what was going on would help her avoid getting caught up in any of it.

Incidentally, I noticed she was sitting up straighter than usual, and she

seemed nervous. She'd been like that since the morning, so I'd thought of something to cheer her up. "By the way, Lady Elsa, I'd like to hold your welcome party today."

"Wh... A welcome party?" she repeated.

"It'll only be the people here right now," I explained, "but we had some food brought to the other room. Would you like to head over there? I was hoping it'd help you feel a little more at home here."

"We? I think you mean *me*. I prepared it all," complained Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Yes, Ms. Futarishizuka handled all the preparations."

I'd been counting on her for a lot lately, not just this party. I was totally dependent on her, in fact. As time went on, it was starting to worry me a little.

"Are you sure?" asked Elsa hesitantly. "A welcome party? Just for me...?"

"What did she say?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"She's perplexed and wondering if this is really all right," I explained.

"Ahh, what a humble, sweet girl! I should hope a certain sparrow learns from her example."

"Unlike her, I do understand all the words you're saying..."

"There's no need to be modest," continued Ms. Futarishizuka. "Eat and drink your fill." Her expression was kind—she understood she was speaking to a child who looked as young as she was. She was just like a grandmother making food for her granddaughter. But Futarishizuka looked like a small child as well, so the whole thing was very weird. *How old is she, really?* I wondered.

"Um, S-Sasaki," stammered Lady Elsa, "what did she just say?"

"She says not to be modest and to enjoy yourself," I said.

"Thank you!" she exclaimed, getting up from the sofa and bowing. "I really appreciate it!"

Ms. Futarishizuka looked on, seeming pretty satisfied.

After that, we all moved to the dining room and dug in.



As a suite in an upper-class hotel, our room contained not only a bedroom

and a living room but also a dining room. Ms. Futarishizuka had probably arranged for the separate rooms out of consideration for how cramped Elsa would feel during her stay.

I had to hand it to my colleague for how thoughtful she was with details like this. Her personality had flaws, but as a working adult, I could definitely respect her.

Dinner was already set up in the dining room, and as we walked in, the steam rising from the feast on the table greeted us. It wasn't a multi-course meal, probably to prevent exposing our situation to outsiders. Otherwise, I might have expected her to summon a sushi chef or two. That's how incredible the spread was.

The food was a blend of Japanese and Western cooking, with dishes from nations all across the globe squeezed together on the large table, like it was supposed to be a multi-day feast. I assumed the aim was to figure out which cuisines our otherworld guest preferred. However, I very much doubted the three of us, plus one bird, would be able to eat everything.

"...This is some excellent work," commented Peeps.

"Oh, you!" answered Ms. Futarishizuka jokingly. "This is nothing."

I was getting the sneaking feeling that Peeps was just as excited as I was about all the food. His eyes were darting from one dish of meat to the next.

At Ms. Futarishizuka's urging, we took our seats and picked up our chopsticks.

In the corner of the room was a bar cart containing everything from soft drinks to alcohol, allowing us to enjoy basically any drink we wanted. At a glance, I could tell the labels all came from high-quality brands.

It seemed like everyone was hungry, so we made a toast as soon as we sat down and began sampling whatever food struck our fancy.

I knew everyone present, which made it easy for me to relax and eat. It was more like a get-together of close friends than a corporate drinking party, which I appreciated. The food was so delicious, my chopsticks practically moved on their own.

"Lady Elsa, your glass is empty," I pointed out. "I'll bring you something to drink."

"Really? Thank you," she replied.

"If there's anything in particular you like, please tell me."

"I don't really know anything about this world's liquor."

“Then why don’t I get you something from this country?”

“Really? I can’t wait!”

She’d told me that in the otherworld, despite her age, she drank alcohol as a matter of course. I’d confirmed it with Count Müller just to be sure. And I could cure hangovers with my healing magic if need be.

A little bit couldn’t hurt, I thought, moving to the drink bar. There, I found top-quality sake. *Ms. Futarishizuka is just too capable!* I would simply have to try the sashimi, I decided, remembering the boat of it at the center of the table. I’d love to have some squid skewers with wasabi soy sauce.

“The sauce on this meat is uniquely delicious,” commented Peeps. *“I believe I could eat this forever.”*

“That meat is exceptionally fatty,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Are you sure a sparrow will be all right eating it?”

“If I feel unwell, I shall cure myself with healing magic. And I would prefer that to the horror of eating bugs.”

“That’s a very persuasive argument...”

Peeps was manipulating his small golem, typically used with the laptop computer, in order to sample the foods to his heart’s content. It not only placed the food on a plate for him, but even cut it up. The sight of this strange creation walking around on the table was new for me. Ms. Futarishizuka watched it as well, looking fascinated.

Unlike the drinking parties at my previous job, which were always filled with boisterous merrymaking, we were simply eating and drinking as we pleased. It was a comparatively modest gathering, and personally, I was much more comfortable here. Even Lady Elsa had relaxed and seemed to be enjoying herself. I was sure that wasn’t mere self-satisfaction on my part.

This amicable little party continued for some time.

The food on the table showed no signs of depleting, but we had plans for later that night. Considering the difference in the flow of time between this world and the other, we couldn’t afford to neglect our interworld trade even for a day. I wanted to head over before midnight. Thinking I’d relay this idea to Peeps, I stood up.

“Hrm? Where are you off to?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “The restroom?”

“Just wanted to go over my plans for later,” I explained.

“Ah. Is it that time already?” she replied, looking at the clock hanging on the room’s wall.

I gave her a small nod, then headed over to my distinguished Java sparrow, who was enjoying a pleasant chat with Lady Elsa. They were sitting across the food-laden table from one another—though I supposed Peeps was actually on top of it.

“The internet is wonderful. Just wonderful.”

“That’s the clicky-clacky thing you were doing on the desk today, isn’t it, little bird?”

“Yes, that is the internet. The tool most emblematic of this world.”

Lady Elsa and Peeps were talking about the internet.

I saw a small cup sitting in front of the bird as he spoke. In it was a clear liquid—Japanese sake—which Lady Elsa had also been drinking. In fact, she had been the one to recommend it to him; she’d liked the refreshing taste. Apparently, the bird liked it, too. It made me vaguely happy, knowing my homeland’s cuisine had gone over well with them. *I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen Peeps drink alcohol.* Up until now, he’d been quite insistent about his food, but he’d never touched liquor.

“Um, Peeps,” I said, “about our plans in the otherworld today...”

“I’m sorry,” he replied, *“but could we possibly wait? Just for a short while.”*

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure. But why?”

“I’d like to describe to this girl the wonders of the internet. I will likely be away from this room with you in the future. During my absence, if she can use the internet, she will be able to spend her time to greater benefit!”

“If you say so, Peeps...”

How strange, I thought. He got pretty passionate there.

He must have been responding to Lady Elsa’s desire to know more about this world. As she couldn’t leave the hotel room, I, too, wanted to give her the freedom to at least watch animal videos on the web. Those were great.

I’d started watching videos of other people’s Java sparrows lately myself. One day, I wanted to record Peeps and brag about him on social media. Bird lovers across the world would surely appreciate it.

“I shall inform you when I am done,” he insisted. *“In fact, you may feel free to take a nap in the meantime.”*

“Okay, then.”

I’d brought the laptop here from my apartment; it was in the living room right now. Peeps and Lady Elsa got up to head over to it. The bird fluttered

into the air and left the dining room, and the girl followed him. The living room was part of the suite but was separated from the dining room by a hallway. There was no chance they would be seen, so I decided to leave them to it. She did have the Lord Starsage with her, after all.

In fact, from Peeps's perspective, wasn't I a bigger cause for concern? I certainly wasn't going to betray Count Müller's trust, but I figured it was still best if I were to keep a degree of distance from his daughter. Nothing was more absurd than quarrels between men and women. And if something happened while I was drunk—well, that would be the absolute worst.

Right after they left the room, Ms. Futarishizuka piped up. "In that case, why don't I keep you company?" she said with a suspicious smirk.

"As long as you go easy on me," I replied. Was she trying to get me drunk and find out my weaknesses? The possibility was there, I supposed.

But the healing spell I'd learned straight from Peeps was great for these situations. No matter how bad the hangover, poof! I'd already tested it in the past, so I knew it worked. I wouldn't pass out drunk.

And actually, seeing as she'd been doing so much for us these past few days, I really didn't mind the opportunity to pay her back. I couldn't give her anything I didn't have, but I wanted to make sure she knew I was open to compromise in our future dealings.

"I want to thank you again for everything you've done," I said.

"Oh, really? Hmm. Then why don't you empty a bottle for us?"

"Well, both of our cups do appear to be dry..."

We poured each other drinks, then downed them in one gulp.

Sake is the best! I thought. And since there's snacks here, we might as well partake. Grilled crab with sea urchin! What is this, heaven? It's even got caviar on the top. What's more, I haven't picked up a hint of that alum smell from any of the sea urchin in today's menu. I can't taste any alcohol, either. It's practically ambrosia. Freshly caught! I want to shout at the top of my lungs that this is what sea urchin should taste like!

"Ahh, you make it look so delicious," she said. "Here, have another cup."

"You should have some, too," I insisted. "It wouldn't be right for me to have all of it."

At any rate, her cup was empty, so I refilled it. Mine was, too, and she poured another round before I knew what was happening. I had to focus on letting her drink to her heart's content—she'd be my guest today.

Bring it on. As long as I had healing magic, I'd be fine.

"You know what's truly delicious?" she remarked. "Having this *shiokara* right after the dry sake."

"Would you mind if I tried some, too?"

"Oh, these are my favorite. Right out of the ocean, additive-free..."

Owing to the curse on the back of her hand, Ms. Futarishizuka usually ended up doing a lot more listening than speaking. Now, though, she was regaling me with her extensive knowledge. I listened, pouring more and more sake into our cups. The insanely high quality of the snacks helped lend even more momentum to our drinking.

Ah, this sake is delicious, I thought.

Naturally, it wouldn't take long to get drunk. I knew Ms. Futarishizuka was a heavyweight from our trip to the *izakaya*. As I pushed myself to match her pace, emptying my cup again and again, I quickly grew tipsy. At this rate, I was definitely going to be the one falling over first. I was sure of it.

But I had faith that Peeps would be coming back soon; his conversation with Lady Elsa shouldn't take that much time.

So for now, in order to keep Ms. Futarishizuka in a good mood, I reached for my cup.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Giving up already?"

"No, no," I replied. "I'll keep going until they return."

"My, how dependable. Why don't we have this bottle next?"

She poured from the 1.8-liter bottle directly into my cup. As I watched, I idly thought that maybe I would take Peeps up on his offer after all and have a little nap.



Feeling something bright against my eyelids, I slowly opened my eyes.

Sunlight was shining in through the window, illuminating my vision.

I wondered if Peeps was still having that conversation. A moment later, my eyes finally drifted to the blue sky outside, which told me the bird's promise didn't matter much anymore. Immediately, I snatched up my phone and checked the time. It was past nine AM.

"...Are you serious?" I muttered.

I was in the dining room, on the floor next to the table. The carpet was so fluffy that, apparently, I'd just decided to lie down and fall asleep on it. The perfectly adjusted air-conditioning had doubtless contributed to my pleasant slumber.

Ms. Futarishizuka was right next to me on the dining room floor, facing up. She was sleeping quite soundly. Her clothing was crooked, the edges of the fabric parting to give a bold view of her thighs and even the upper half of her chest.

Between us was a 1.8-liter bottle of sake—half empty—and two cups. Several serving plates littered the floor nearby with various sashimi and other tidbits on them. The chairs had been moved out of the way into the corner.

I began to remember the events leading up to my loss of consciousness.

“.....”

I recalled giving Ms. Futarishizuka a whole lot to drink. At some point, we'd sat down on the floor to continue drinking. And then, since the carpeting underneath us was so comfy, we couldn't help but flop down on it. I figured I could rest a little since Peeps would wake me up. In fact, he'd been the one to propose it.

But now I was staring through the window at a gorgeous blue sky.

Panicking, I got up and looked around the dining room. No sign of the sparrow in here—nor of Lady Elsa. Leaving Ms. Futarishizuka where she was, I headed into the living area of the suite.

They were both there. The princess was reclining on the sofa, sleeping peacefully. On the low table in front of her were the still-open laptop and Peeps's carefully made golem, the latter of which was sitting unmoving like a puppet with its strings cut.

As for Peeps, he was lying on the table next to his perching tree. Right on his side, as if he'd been shot out of the air and fallen down dead. Alarm bells rang in my head, and my body moved on its own, running toward him.

“Peeps!”

Had we come under attack? I doubted it, but it was possible. I didn't remember hearing anything, at least. And who could have taken on the Starsage himself?

“*Ngh... Mm...*”

“Peeps, are you okay?!” I exclaimed again.

This time, I got a response. He groaned and opened his adorable round

eyes. A moment later, his legs started flailing around. What a cute reaction. But it only lasted a moment before he deftly used his beak to get himself upright. Apparently, he'd been sleeping.

He quirked his head to the side questioningly. "*Mgh? Why does my head hurt...?*"

"Are you okay, Peeps?"



“...*What’s the matter? You look shocked.*”

“Peeps, did you actually get so drunk last night that you passed out?”

“.....”

He’d said he had a headache—which made the reason for his little nap pretty obvious.

Upon hearing my reply, the sparrow froze—it actually made me a little afraid his batteries had run out or something.

Just like in the dining room, the sunlight was shining in through the living room window, its morning rays falling on one side of the low table, where I could see a sake bottle and two cups. Lady Elsa must have brought them in here. She *had* found the Japanese sake quite to her liking, after all.

“Peeps?” I repeated.

I’d learned on the internet that sparrows had a much wider field of vision than humans; while they couldn’t see directly behind them, they could see basically everywhere else. I didn’t doubt he was looking at the morning scenery out the window, just like I had. Since we were so high up, I’d left the curtains open through the night.

“*I... I’m sorry,*” he said eventually. “*It is as you say. It seems we drank too much.*”

“Er, well, we did the same thing. So don’t worry about it.”

“*I hadn’t expected to lose consciousness. I planned to wait for a chance to use healing magic to recover. But the next thing I knew... Well, here we are. I am truly, truly sorry. I have wasted our precious night hours with my blunder.*”

The distinguished Java sparrow was unsteady from his hangover, but penitent. The way he hung his head in sorrow was super adorable. He was always perfect at everything he did, so seeing a more human side of him warmed my heart. Despite its relatively high alcohol content, Japanese sake was easy to keep knocking back—and with all those carbohydrates, it made you drunk faster than beer.

In other words, everyone got drunk and passed out. Now I feel bad for recommending the sake.

It had been a long time since I last drank like a college kid in a dorm room. Falling asleep on a dining room floor just before my fortieth birthday was not something I’d ever expected. *If I ever drink with Ms. Futarishizuka again, I’ll need to be more careful.*

On the other hand, this tragic morning scene also spoke to how much everyone had enjoyed themselves the night before. That wasn't such a bad thing really, so I decided to leave the past behind me and turn toward the future.

"Again, I am truly sorry," repeated Peeps.

"Don't be," I replied. "I'm sorry for always leaving everything up to you."

Then my personal phone started vibrating. I took it out and checked the screen—and saw Miss Hoshizaki's name. Calling to yell at us to get to the bureau, no doubt.

If I picked up, she'd have our location data. Lady Elsa would be staying in this high-class hotel for a while, so we couldn't afford to have anyone from the bureau find out where we were. As the phone continued to buzz in my hands, I returned my attention to Peeps.

"Peeps, sorry to ask this so soon after you woke up, but could you bring me back to the apartment?"

"Y-yes! I shall do it at once."

Our next little stay in the otherworld would have to wait until evening. I needed to make my report to Section Chief Akutsu, so I had to focus on my job at the bureau in the meantime.



Using Peeps's teleportation magic to get back to my apartment, I got myself ready to head into work. As for my hangover, it was completely gone with a single healing spell; I wouldn't be plagued by half a day of headaches and nausea. I took a shower to wash off the sweat from sleeping, then pulled on my suit.

In the meantime, I asked Peeps to go back and wake Ms. Futarishizuka—she was still snoozing in the dining room. We wouldn't be able to take our time meeting up today, so I asked him to tell her I'd be using public transportation to get to work.

A short, jam-packed train ride later, I arrived at the bureau, this time without running into any trouble. Passing through the entrance, I headed to my desk and put my bag down. No sooner had I done so than Miss Hoshizaki called for me.

“Sasaki, I’ve got something to talk to you about. Have a minute?”

“Good morning, Miss Hoshizaki,” I replied.

“...Good morning,” she said.

She looked completely different than she had the day before, when she was in high school—girl mode—now she was done up in a suit and thick makeup. She stared at me with a hand on her hip, looking downright intimidating. She might as well have been a different person than the one I’d been watching at her school.

This, to me, was who Miss Hoshizaki really was. I even felt a little relieved. But that was exactly why her coming to me first thing in the morning had me on guard.

“I checked your phone’s location data and found out where you were yesterday.”

Huh? I thought. *Why did she bother looking at that? Wasn’t she off duty yesterday?*

I never got the sense she’d caught on to me during the previous day’s mission. And if she had, she would have simply come up and said something. Since she hadn’t, I’d been convinced the plan went off without a hitch.

“You were hanging around near my school, weren’t you?”

“Yes, well, I do remember being lost...”

Could there be some sort of urgent task we needed to do that morning? I’d just finished one job, and now there was another? This was really getting to me. Maybe working conditions were worsening because of our personnel decrease. At this point, maybe my best move *was* to focus on canvassing for new members. I planned on sticking around this place for a while, after all.

“But why did you check my location history?” I asked.

She was taken aback. “...N-no reason! It’s nothing.”

“That doesn’t exactly answer my question...”

Anyone who had the same position or higher could easily look into the location data of members who were out and about. Miss Hoshizaki had contacted me after checking it several times in the past, so this wasn’t particularly surprising.

What made me curious was her reason. If it had to do with some kind of job, I wanted to know as soon as possible. After all, this high school girl was a workaholic who would gladly do overtime late into the night for more pay. If I left things up to her, we’d be working so late I might miss the last train.

“You aren’t, um... You know...”

“I was actually about to give a report on the matter to the section chief.”

“...A report?”

“Do you want to sit in? You’d need his permission, of course.”

“.....”

We frequently worked as a pair. If I explained the situation to her now, it would make things easier later. Personally, I wanted to maintain a healthy distance between the two of us, but that wasn’t how things worked in the bureau. Sooner or later, I’d have to tell her anyway.

In that case, I wanted to take the lead in giving the chief the rundown. Letting Miss Hoshizaki do it would just make more work for both of us, and I doubted he’d object.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. “I won’t force you.”

“I... I’ll come! Obviously!” she exclaimed with a nod, heading off toward the section chief’s desk before I even started to move. Her pumps clacked across the floor as she took large strides, intimidating everyone around her.

I was almost certain Chief Akutsu had heard our whole exchange anyway—his desk was right nearby. I followed Miss Hoshizaki to my first task of the day, which would apparently be a meeting.



Thankfully, the chief’s schedule was open at the moment. We went to the conference room right away to discuss what had happened the day before—just me, Miss Hoshizaki, and the chief. We took up our positions in the tiny room.

I gave Ms. Futarishizuka a call, but she said it would take her a bit longer to reach the bureau, so I made the decision to move things forward without her. I’d already brainstormed with her the night before, so nothing one of us said would contradict the other.

“...A psychic power that can produce a specific sort of space?” murmured the section chief.

“That is how Ms. Futarishizuka saw it, at least,” I said.

“And what do you think, Sasaki?”

“I have no reason to object to her theory.” The investigation of this

fictional psychic was already ongoing, so he'd probably continue to push the job onto us. "She said a psychic with a similar power has appeared in the past, and she suggested they would easily merit A rank. Are you aware of what she's talking about? If possible, I'd like you to reevaluate the level of caution warranted."

"If the results of your investigation are true, then yes, it would call for significant countermeasures."

"As I think you'll understand by looking at my location history, I was trapped in the same space again yesterday by this psychic power. I was able to return in the end, but I believe we'll need to be very careful going forward."

I was trying to use reason to tell him I didn't want any more dangerous assignments. Any other bureau member would have done the same, and being too calm about this would only make me look suspicious.

"Were you the only one caught in the phenomenon?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Weren't Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki nearby at the time?"

"I have questions about that myself."

If he'd checked Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki's location data, that would mean he already knew I was the only one who had suddenly changed locations. The fact that he asked me the question verbally anyway said a lot about his opinion of us. The incident with Lady Elsa was still causing problems.

"I'd like information on what happened inside the space."

"Like last time, I encountered someone with wings on their back. They attacked me as soon as they saw me. I tried to flee, and eventually the phenomenon came to an end. After that, I met up with Ms. Futarishizuka, and we withdrew for the day."

I wasn't lying—just abridging. I'd made sure the middle school's campus surveillance cameras hadn't spotted me exiting the isolated space. Between then and when we entered Futarishizuka's car, which had been waiting right next to the lot, nobody had seen my neighbor or the Abaddon boy. There was zero chance Section Chief Akutsu knew anything about those two. If all of that had taken place close to the front gate, it would've been a total mess. *It sure is a rough life for employees whose bosses like to spy...*

"That must have been difficult for you," replied the section chief. "I'm glad

to have you back here safely.”

“Thank you for your concern,” I answered.

“Sasaki, I’m really curious about that psychic with the wings!”

And there was Miss Hoshizaki with another unnecessary remark.

It was only natural a member of the bureau who worked on-site would have this reaction, but I really wanted to avoid explaining anything verbally in front of the section chief. He was *extremely* sharp-witted, having graduated from an elite academic institution. If I could, I’d prefer to write down everything I said to him and submit it only after several revisions. *I bet he’s been keeping track of every little word and gesture that doesn’t add up.*

“We still don’t know whether the winged person was a psychic or if they were the product of a psychic power,” I explained. “I don’t really have any more information I can give you on them, Miss Hoshizaki.”

“...Yeah, I guess there are a lot of different possibilities, huh?”

“There are, indeed.”

Despite being a meathead, Miss Hoshizaki caught on quickly. The sight of her being bullied the day before sprang to mind. I wondered if those rumors among the students about her failing an exam were actually true.

“I want more details on this winged person as soon as possible,” said the chief.

“If you want, sir, I can write up a report.”

“All right. Can you get it to me by the end of the day?”

“Certainly.”

“Also, about future plans. You’ve been out on the job for several days now, so I think I’ll put a different person on the active investigation. Go ahead and focus on that report for today. Starting tomorrow, I want you to shift to your other assignment until otherwise instructed.”

“In that case, Chief, I’d rather head to the scene today,” interrupted Miss Hoshizaki.

“I’m taking command on this matter. I’d like to change how we go about investigating it.”

“...I see.” *Great*, I thought. *That should take care of the whole angel-demon proxy war thing.* Soon he’d probably get reports of people wielding strange and fantastic powers unlike those of psychics. But when that happened, I could simply say “Wow, that’s amazing.”

“Oh, and about that other matter. Did you make any progress?”

The other matter he was referring to was the mess with the reptilian who had fallen out of the sky. I couldn't report anything I had on that, so I'd just left the whole thing alone. "Nothing yet, sir," I said.

"That's a pity."

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet your expectations."

"Well, you *have* been keeping an eye on Ms. Futarishizuka—and doing a fine job of it as well. Keep up the good work. We're getting more and more reports from the related agencies I mentioned before; I'll send them to your phone later."

"Thank you, sir."

And with that, the day's meeting drew to a close. Miss Hoshizaki had looked unhappy throughout. Personally, though, I was grateful for the section chief's decision.

Leaving the conference room, I headed back to my own seat before suddenly realizing something and turning to Miss Hoshizaki. "By the way, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, what is it?" she said.

"It's about our discussion from right before the meeting."

"Right before...?"

"It seemed like you were about to say something, but I interrupted because I wanted to meet with the section chief first. We have time now, so... If you want, we can grab the conference room again."

"....." Miss Hoshizaki seemed to fall into thought at my question. She was probably trying to remember what, exactly, we'd talked about.

She thought about it for several seconds. Eventually, she appeared to remember and began speaking very quickly. "I-it was nothing! Nothing at all! Forget about it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! It was just a misunderstanding. Don't mind me!"

"All right, then."

That was pretty weird, but then again, Miss Hoshizaki was always weird. Not wanting to pry and run the risk of worsening her mood, I left her alone.

After that, I spent the day writing my report and doing some clerical work that had piled up.

Though I would have loved to have hopped into the otherworld, even for just an hour, I didn't have any excuse to leave the building, and eventually

the work day came to an end before I could seize an opportunity to contact Peeps.



After work at the bureau was done, as always, it was time for a little trip to the otherworld. I used public transportation to get back to my apartment, then got in touch with Peeps before meeting up with Ms. Futarishizuka at the high-class hotel. We then went to the warehouse we were using as a base of operations and did a check of all the goods we'd need for the trip.

I'd decided to bring in three times as much product as before in order make up for the previous night. Despite the shrinking time difference between the two worlds, about a month would still have passed at this point. Our new job as Lady Elsa's caretakers added yet another layer of tension.



Possibly the most crucial item we were bringing—and this was no exaggeration—was her video letter to Count Müller.

“Let’s be off, then,” said Peeps.

“Thanks again, Peeps,” I replied.

“Can I look forward to my next payment?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“...You have no need to worry. We will bring extra, even, to thank you for your help.”

“Oh! So generous of you,” she said. “I suppose sometimes you just have to complain.”

Leaving Lady Elsa in her care, the two of us set off. Peeps’s spell warped us from the warehouse to the otherworld.

Our general method of bringing over goods was to first get confirmation in the otherworld and then move them into the storehouse provided by the Kepler Trading Company. Before that, we would be visiting the count, getting a rundown of what had occurred in our absence, and informing him of Lady Elsa’s condition.

And so we ended up at Count Müller’s estate in the town of Baytrium. The familiar guard posted outside showed us to the reception room. The count was already there, perhaps having heard tell of our arrival at the estate.

“I’m terribly sorry for our long absence,” I began.

“Our apologies for putting you ill at ease,” continued Peeps. *“If you would blame anyone, blame me.”*

“No, no, don’t mention it,” replied the count. “I thank you for coming despite how busy you must be.”

It was just the three of us in the room. We could have brought lady Elsa along, but the people here were the only ones who knew the truth behind her death. We didn’t want to run the risk, however small, of someone at the estate spotting her, so we had asked her to stay cooped up in the hotel room for a little while longer. Right about now, she was probably enjoying her dinner with Ms. Futarishizuka.

To be honest, I was a little jealous. Even Peeps had been drooling over that hotel’s delicious food—and that was saying something.

“We come bearing a video letter from Lady Elsa,” I explained. “I don’t mean to rush you, but perhaps you should first confirm your daughter’s safety. Then we can record your reply to her as well.”

“You show more consideration than I deserve,” replied the count. “I’d like

that very much.”

I stuck a USB drive into the laptop I’d bought to use in this world and played the video on it. We’d taken it during yesterday’s welcome party. I set the computer down on the low table in front of the sofa and let Count Müller watch the whole thing. As he saw the images and heard the sounds, his expression melted into a smile. He hadn’t shown it, but he’d definitely been anxious.

At one point, he said, “The implements of your world are incredible. I’d say I’m impressed, but it would be an understatement.”

“To me, this world’s magic seems like the work of the gods,” I replied.

“Now *that* must be an exaggeration.”

“No—I promise you it isn’t, my lord.”

“*I, too, have learned that preconceived notions are a force to be reckoned with,*” added Peeps.

“...To think, even the great Lord Starsage feels the same,” replied the count.

Neither Peeps nor I was in the video, but you could hear us both from off camera. Lady Elsa’s energetic voice resounded comfortably throughout the reception room.

“My daughter is stubborn—she takes after me—so I truly apologize if she’s made any trouble for you. If you have any concerns, just tell me. A... ‘video letter,’ you called this? I’d like to have a chance to caution her.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, my lord,” I assured him. “She’s been getting along very well with the other member of our group as well.”

“Is that so? But when I think about her causing trouble for you, I just...”

“As you can see from the video Pee—er, the Lord Starsage and I took, we’re all getting along great. Oh, and the black-haired woman shown here is looking after her needs over there,” I explained, pointing to Ms. Futarishizuka, who could be seen in the corner of the screen. Maybe it would be best to at least give the count her name—even though they’d never be meeting each other.

“*It makes me uncomfortable hearing you call me that,*” muttered Peeps.

“I know, I know. It’s only for formal occasions.”

“Might I ask the woman’s name?” said the count.

“Her name is Futarishizuka. We have her taking care of all of Lady Elsa’s needs.”

“Oh! I’m very grateful. Would I be able to send her a gift as thanks? From what I can see, she’s prepared some very expensive lodgings and clothing.”

“Of course. I know she’ll be delighted.”

We continued talking for a little while about Lady Elsa’s life in modern Japan. Though he didn’t complain, the count was very concerned about her. As he gazed at the display, I could read some of the emotions on his face. It made me feel awful, as though I had personally put him through all this. Seeing as it had been some time since our last visit, we made sure he got a full report.

The video lasted for another few minutes before coming to an end. I would have liked to give him the laptop if I could have, but the count declined—being seen in possession of such an object would cause problems. He had such self-control! I felt my respect for him growing. Peeps was amazing of course, but Count Müller was practically superhuman himself.

Once we’d finished talking about Lady Elsa, the count straightened up again and said, “I had something urgent to tell you, by the way.”

“What is it?” I asked, feeling myself tense. Every time we came to this world, there was some sort of problem. And we hadn’t been here for two days in Japan time. My heart pounded as I waited for his report.

“It regards your territory. How should I put this...?” he trailed off.

“Is it difficult to talk about?” I asked. “You don’t need to force yourself.”

“No, it’s nothing like that, I assure you.”

“*Then what is it, Julius?*” prompted Peeps. “*This is unlike you.*”

“I... I apologize,” replied the count.

I didn’t want to believe it, but could that dragon Peeps summoned into the hole in the Rectan Plains be wreaking havoc or something? The count *did* tend to hesitate when it came to the Lord Starsage. Or maybe the Ohgen Empire had attacked. I could think of a number of other potential dicey situations as well. We’d left this place alone for an entire month—a scary prospect.

Eventually, the count said, “It might be faster to show you directly.”

“*Then let us head there forthwith.*”

“I am terribly sorry to ask this of you two, but I very much appreciate it.”

And so we ended up putting off our business trip to the Kepler Trading company to head to the domain of Baron Sasaki. I would probably be discussing the local situation with Mr. Joseph and Mr. Marc anyway, so I was

grateful for the chance to check things ahead of time.

With Peeps's magic, we could get there and back in the blink of an eye, so we immediately hopped from Count Müller's estate to the Rectan Plains.



Leaving the reception room, we arrived in midair over the plains, a few hundred meters above the ground. Peeps had told me to use flight magic first so that I would be floating, and then he'd brought us here with his teleportation magic. The sparrow was using more of his magic to hold Count Müller in place. Meanwhile, I used my own spell—one he'd taught me—to keep floating.

The view of the domain was completely different from the last time we'd seen it. Before, it had just been a big, empty plain.

But now, right in the center of that emptiness, stone walls were being built up like a city-state's fortress. They were far from complete, but enough were there to suggest the general layout of the entire structure. We could see rows upon rows of foundations and partially constructed walls. The ground had been dug up in a very large circle, and workers had pounded stakes and piled stones around the ring.

An absurd number of people were hard at work on the site—you'd need four digits to properly count them all. Many large tents had been set up within the planned walls, doubtless temporary lodgings for the builders. They formed a little settlement unto themselves. I could also see a road leading toward the Kingdom of Herz, with people and horse-drawn carts already traveling on it.

"May I ask you something, my lord?" I said to the count.

"Anything you wish," he replied.

"How long, exactly, were we away?"

"One month, I would guess? It certainly hasn't been two."

It had been two days in my world since our last visit, which meant about one month had passed here. And we hadn't contacted the parties responsible for construction since the day before that, which meant it had probably been around a month and a half since we'd last spoke with them. In other words, my calculations weren't much different from the count's.

“For so little time,” I continued, “things look to be progressing extremely quickly.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I note even more progress than the last time I checked.”

Even major construction companies would balk at this pace. Personally, I would have been pleased if they’d only gotten as far as collecting personnel and materials. I never dreamed that they would not only have commenced construction, but that I would even be able to see the final product starting to take shape. Another ten days back in Japan, and it seemed like things would be basically finished.

Count Müller had estimated it took about two weeks to ship materials from Baytrium to this spot near the national border. At the time, the route had been perilous and filled with hidden Ohgen Empire soldiers, forcing them to take detours and such. But even without all that, it still took several days.

“*Large golems are being employed in major numbers,*” commented Peeps.

“It seems a very talented spellcaster is helping with the construction,” the count replied.

“*Someone of yours?*”

“I know of nobody this skilled with magic—neither individuals nor groups. If I did, we wouldn’t have struggled so much to supply our troops during the dispute with the Ohgen Empire. I doubt Prince Adonis would have ever been in danger, either.”

As Peeps had pointed out, humanoid shapes that looked like golems were visible on the site. Their sizes varied, with the biggest equivalent to a large construction vehicle from modern times. And they seemed to be very versatile. They picked up large boulders, assembled foundations, and pulled carts in place of horses. I was sure their presence was helping the work along by leaps and bounds. Being able to do the same things as a person but at a much larger scale must have been extremely useful. For heavy construction equipment to emulate even simple human actions, you’d probably need several working in tandem. According to the count, these golems could also efficiently ship supplies.

How convenient can this world’s magic get? I thought. It seemed to me that the flower of scientific civilization wouldn’t bloom in this world for a long time.

“Have you been taking the lead on all this, my lord?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” he replied. “I haven’t helped them very much.”

“Then is Mr. Marc the one in command on the ground?”

During my last visit with Mr. Joseph, he’d explained that Mr. Marc was visiting the Kingdom of Herz in order to found a branch of the Marc Trading Company in Baytrium. I wouldn’t be surprised if that had led him here to the Rectan Plains. In that case, I felt sorry for Mr. Joseph.

But when I asked the count about it, he gave me a surprising answer. “Actually, the one leading all this is French.”

“Wait... Mr. French is in charge?” I repeated in spite of myself. That was unexpected. *I mean, he’s a cook! An experienced chef who produces incredible meals that even Peeps would beg for. What is he doing on the border with the Empire on a public works project?*

“I heard you explained the circumstances around your new title to him.”

“I did, just to make sure I was covering all my bases.”

I’d wanted to tell the Hermann Trading Company about it, too, since I was leaving the work under Mr. Marc’s control. They were well acquainted with Mr. French, so I figured I’d explain it myself, rather than have word trickle down through the grapevine. I never thought it would turn into this.

“After hearing about it, he apparently couldn’t sit still. He talked it over with Lord Marc and is now working on the construction. I was quite surprised myself when I ran into him on-site.”

“His skills as a chef may be unparalleled, but as a builder...?”

“I also hear the regulars at his restaurant are helping out.”

“You can just *do* that? Ask your customers for help with things?” Wasn’t this the Kingdom of Herz, famous for its corruption and decline? And they were helping *me*—some new baron they probably had never even heard of. I’d never so much as met any of his regulars.

“Many of his customers are nobles and wealthy merchants who live in or near Baytrium. Our antagonistic relations with the Ohgen Empire certainly play a part as well. The attack has made a lot of people very sensitive to the issue. And since they favor the restaurant’s owner, they found a convenient way to link the two things.”

“...I see.” That solved the matter of where the golems had come from—Mr. French had probably asked for help from someone he knew. You could earn a surprising number of connections through a restaurant; it seemed the same was true in this world.

“And because of your ample donation, they felt sure your feelings toward

your territory were true and earnest. Even I was surprised by your consideration when I heard about it from Lord Marc.”

I didn’t remember working all that hard for the money. The economic gap between this kingdom and the Republic of Lunge had basically done the job for me. Thinking about it that way made me feel bad for the Herzian economy. I’d assumed I’d be investing half of my profits from my next deal into the construction as well. *But maybe I should hold off. At this point, our plans are going to fail completely—I thought this building effort was going to take years!*

“What about the dragons living in the hole?” I asked.

“There haven’t been any reports of them causing damage,” the count replied.

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“I’ve dispatched knights from my own estate just to be sure, but they tell me the job has been mostly peacekeeping. None of them have drawn their sword at the dragons, at least, though a few knights probably couldn’t do much to stop them.”

“You’ve even dispatched your own people? I can’t thank you enough.”

“I should be the one thanking you, Lord Sasaki. I am extremely grateful to you for building this bulwark. And I’d like to continue helping with the construction in whatever ways I can. If you need anything, please feel free to discuss it with me.”

“Thank you so much for all the kindness you’ve shown me.”

If I could, I’d have asked him to slow down the pace a little. But this was a product of the kindness of a lot of other organizations—I couldn’t exactly stand up and reject their efforts. Doing so would not only damage my relationship with Baytrium, it would threaten my friendships with Mr. French, Mr. Marc, and Count Müller. They’d wonder what in the world I was even talking about.

“I expect there will be excitement in the court before long...,” murmured Peeps, verbalizing my own fears.

The only future I could envision involved Duke Whats-his-face picking a fight with me. *What was his name again?* I wondered. *I’ve been so busy back in Japan, I’m really starting to lose track.*

“...It is as you say,” replied the count.

“Then, despite the remote location, they’re already talking about what has

been transpiring here?”

“I heard the border troops sent a swift messenger horse to the royal castle,” Count Müller replied.

“I suppose a display of this level would warrant at least a message...”

“Someone may poke their nose into all this in the future.”

“We’ll cross that bridge if and when we come to it. Worrying about every little thing serves only to tie our hands.”

Peeps’s remark really made him seem like a former titan of the court. He sounded so cool—even though he was now an adorable Java sparrow.

Meanwhile, we spotted a dragon rising in the distance. It ascended straight up out of the giant hole, looking like a monster in some fantasy film. Its golden scales caught the sunlight, sending glittering rays all around it and giving it the air of a king. *I wouldn’t want to pick a fight with a terrifying creature like that, even as a joke.*

“The dragons I’ve summoned to the hole seem to be faring well,” noted Peeps.

“Huge as usual,” I remarked. “Just looking at it makes my knees start to buckle.”

“Really? It seems to me that in the near future, you will become strong enough to hunt one alone.”

“Wh-why, Lord Sasaki—you have that much power at your disposal?” stammered the count. “How many in this kingdom could claim to have the strength to slay a golden dragon on their own? I heard you were quite skilled, but this is...”

“At the moment, his barrier could not withstand the dragon’s breath. Challenging one to a fair fight would be dangerous. But if he shores up his defenses enough, the spell he just learned recently would cover his offense.”

I’d already told Peeps all about what had happened in the isolated space—including how I’d learned and used that one spell. He wasted no time in warning me, in an uncharacteristically harsh way, not to use it frivolously. *It must really be a mega-powerful spell.*

“Peeps, I wasn’t planning on fighting them anyway,” I insisted. “More importantly, I want to go say hello to Mr. French. Would you like to come with me to the surface?”

“I would.”

“Lord Sasaki, might I prevail upon you to let me join?” asked the count.

“Certainly, Count Müller.”

I looked down on an area filled with tents probably housing the on-site builders. Using my flight spell, I began to slowly lower my altitude. *I hope they're all doing well*, I thought. *This seems like a tough environment for construction work.*



Thanks to Count Müller, I secured a face-to-face meeting at the construction site right away. There might have been a little more chaos if I had come alone.

We were in an area with a lot of tents set up near the edge of the site—specifically, a slightly larger tent in the center. I sat down at an improvised table set, probably made from leftover materials, and had my reunion with Mr. French.

“I’m so sorry it took me so long to pay you a visit,” I said.

“N-no, please, don’t be!” he insisted. “I didn’t even consult you.”

In work clothes, the tall, muscular man looked the part of a contractor. He was impressive, covered in dust and dirt. The sight of his long red hair boldly bunched up into a bandana wrapped around his head was overflowing with masculine charm.

Apart from the two of us, Peeps and Count Müller were present as well. This tent was apparently serving as a reception room for the site. A mat had been placed on the ground and a few pieces of furniture set around the tent—all of it neat and clean enough for entertaining people of significant repute. Maybe Mr. French had put it together for the count’s previous visit.

“I hadn’t expected the work to be this far along,” I said to Mr. French. “I heard from Count Müller that you’ve been putting in a lot of effort. Thank you for your work and for finding the time to see us.”

“I can’t possibly take all the credit!” he insisted. “It’s been a group effort.”

“I heard your influence has been vital, Mr. French.”

“Oh, but everyone here has been so kind to me...”

I’d gone over the finer details with Count Müller before we arrived, so we were able to spend some time exchanging greetings and small talk. At this rate, there was absolutely no way I could ask him to take it easy.

Then the tent's front entrance flew open. Several men appeared, all wearing the same work clothes as Mr. French. They all had harsh, rough faces. We hadn't expected anyone, so we were very surprised. Did the workers use this tent for breaks?

"Hey, French!" one of them said. "Heard Baron Sasaki was gonna be here."

"Lord of the realm, and all that," said another. "Gotta show our faces, say hi, y'know?"

"Is that lanky guy the one?" asked a third man.

"Mind introducing us, or what?" chimed in a fourth.

They boldly strode into the tent, making a ruckus. Combined with their uncivilized appearances, their behavior made them seem almost like outlaws.

Mr. French was the first one to panic upon seeing them. "J-just hang on!" he pleaded. "These two are nobles. You could at least be a little more..."

The men didn't seem to be registering his words, though. Instead, they ignored him and continued speaking, one after another.

"Pretty good work site, huh? Got loads of real talented craftsmen."

"All of us here are pretty tight, so no need to worry about a thing, Your Lordship."

"Bunch of Ohgen Empire folks came bumbling in earlier, Baron Sasaki. But we sent 'em packing."

"Man, was that a good time or what? Real refreshing, you know what I'm saying?"

"Can't get in here without an introduction from a friend, after all."

"And if anyone invites some flake, we kick him out *and* the guy who invited him."

"The pay's good, so there's people lining up to get an invitation."

"We're even getting merchants and whores coming in these days."

As for me—Baron Sasaki—the only thing I could do was answer straightforwardly. After all, they were here out of the kindness of their own hearts. Plus, they were pretty scary looking, so I didn't want to pick any fights.

"Thank you. I am Sasaki," I told them, leading with a bow. Count Müller was here with me, so I hoped we could keep things peaceful. "I've heard about you all from Mr. French. I take heart in knowing you have expended the time and effort to come all the way to this remote area, and I hope you'll

continue to support the project.”

“H-hey—hey! That’s all you have to say?” asked one of them without skipping a beat—he was standing in front of the rest, with a shaved head and the scariest face of them all.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, we haven’t paid you any respect, and Count Müller’s right there. I heard you used to be a merchant who did business in Baytrium. Are you fine with us treating you like this right in front your superior?”

“As you can see, I’m a foreigner,” I explained. “This territory originally belonged to the citizens of Herz. The royal family gave it to me as part of my baronship, but I am merely borrowing it from you temporarily.”

“I... Are you being serious?”

To be honest, I didn’t really feel like I was governing this place. In fact, I was passing off all the work to other people. I felt like I should apologize. “Mr. French is also a good friend of mine,” I continued. “If he thinks highly of you, then I must welcome you as guests. As this isn’t a public place, I don’t think there’s much need to stand on ceremony.”

Also, I’d be embarrassed acting all high-and-mighty in front of Peeps. He was essentially the reason I received the title and land to begin with. I couldn’t allow Count Müller to be insulted, but I didn’t mind if they thought lowly of me. In fact, maybe if they didn’t take me seriously, their work would slow down—and that would only benefit us.

“For real?” roared the man with the shaved head. He seemed shocked. “You don’t seem like a noble from Herz, that’s for sure.”

“I... I already told you how magnanimous he is!” cut in Mr. French.

The men in the back shared their leader’s reaction. Was it that surprising? *And thanks for the backup, Mr. French.*

I decided to turn my own praise toward the count. “Count Müller, too, well understands your goodwill.”

“Indeed,” replied the count. “Baron Sasaki is correct.”

“...!”

At his remark, the men broke out in smiles. But even when happy, scary people were scary. For a moment, I almost thought they were threatening us.

But their surprise only lasted a second or two before they began to get rowdy again.

“Yeah, Mr. French was tellin’ the truth!”

“No kidding. I didn’t think nobles like this even existed.”

“And it’s someone our count trusts, too.”

“Who the hell was it who said he was trying to bring down the count?!”

“I’m ready for another shift!”

“Yeah, I’m pumped!”

The quiet tent was suddenly blazing with energy. *How on earth did Mr. French describe us to them?* I wondered.

As this band of outlaw look-alikes got more and more excited, I only grew more anxious. Logically, considering my magic powers, they wouldn’t be able to lay a finger on me—but they looked so scary that my fear was instinctual. I felt like I was downtown, being accosted by a band of hooligans.

“Excuse me, everyone, but—,” I began.

“Baron Sasaki, I am truly sorry for our rude behavior,” interrupted the man with the shaved head.

“...Huh?”

“We shouldn’t have tested you. Please, accept our apologies.”

His attitude had done a one-eighty. No sooner had he righted his posture than he offered us a dramatic bow. The men crowded in behind him started lowering their heads one after another, too.

“We were worried you’d deceived Mr. French,” he explained. “But it seems we were wrong. You really are the person he described. Now we can stop worrying and get back to work.”

“...Might I inquire into the details of your relationship with Mr. French?” I ventured.

“I run a construction company in Baytrium, and I’ve been visiting his restaurant regularly for a while,” explained the leader of the men respectfully. “Not as much recently, what with all the nobles showing up, but that’s how we know each other. And that’s why I’m helping out.”

He must be one of the regulars of Mr. French’s Count Müller mentioned, I realized. From how he spoke, he seemed to be a master builder; maybe he was actually a wealthy man, in contrast to his thuggish looks. And if he was, he probably met with nobles on a daily basis. *I guess that’s why he wanted to test me.* I was sincerely grateful that they cared so much about Mr. French.

“Do all the golems belong to you, then?” I asked.

“No, they’re from the Adventurers Guild.”

“Does the Adventurers Guild also have connections with the restaurant?”

“The guild leader absolutely loves Mr. French’s restaurant, and so adventurers have a leg up getting work here. Real weirdo, that one—loves soup curry beyond belief, always eats the same exact meal, you know,” added the builders’ leader with something of an amused gleam in his eye. He was probably on good terms with said guild leader, whoever they were. Maybe that was why everything on the site seemed so coordinated.

“Ah, I see,” I said. “Thank you for the explanation.”

“If there’s anything we can clear up for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Each of the stern-faced men looked at me with passionate sincerity in their eyes. I found myself unprepared for this; I had no experience being in a position of authority over others. It felt like during homeroom at school or a meeting at work, when I’d be trying to lay low and keep quiet, and then suddenly I’d be called on to contribute. Plus, these people all looked like they could be with the yakuza. I couldn’t help but get nervous.

I went for something safe and inoffensive. “Anyway, it’s amazing this many people were willing to gather so close to a dragon’s nest.”

The man with the shaved head had an immediate reply. “Actually, we were pretty hesitant at first.”

After that, a bunch of the men standing behind him chimed in.

“We were scared out of our minds when we first heard!”

“Working right next to a golden dragon’s nest? Figured the people in charge were insane.”

“But then Mr. French suddenly says he’ll start the work alone if he has to and rushes in.”

“He said the dragons were safe. We thought he’d hit his head or something. We weren’t sure what to do.”

“In the end, we all decided to go rescue him.”

“And when we arrived, amazingly, the dragons didn’t seem to care one bit that we were here.”

“Yeah, so more and more people started believing Mr. French.”

“And now, as you can see, there’s a whole bunch of us!”

Apparently, Mr. French was where it had all begun—he’d taken the lead. *I know he said he’d do his best to help when we saw each other last time, but this is something else. I want to apologize to him.* I thought we were just exchanging small talk. I never dreamed it would turn out like *this*.

“You’ve worked yourself to the bone, haven’t you, Mr. French?” I said to the chef. “I’m sincerely grateful.”

“I-it wasn’t all me,” he insisted. “Mr. Marc helped out, too.”

Maybe it’d be better if *he* had my title instead. Actually, maybe it wasn’t too late. I’d have to start pushing him to the forefront from now on.

I shot a glance at Peeps and made out a tiny nod in response.

“Where *is* Mr. Marc, by the way?” I asked.

“He headed for the Republic of Lunge not long ago,” came the answer.

“I see...” I had initially hoped to be lucky enough to see him here, but I should have guessed he wouldn’t have time to stick around.

As this world was seriously lacking in communications infrastructure, my only choice was to send him a message through Mr. Joseph. It was then I remembered a certain handy item that existed in modern times. Perhaps the day would soon come when I brought high-powered radio equipment to this world. There were no restrictions here—you could send out waves as strong as you wanted. You wouldn’t even have to encode anything; you could just blast out confidential information as is!

We spoke about the current situation for a little under an hour. Figuring we’d be obstructing their work if we stayed any longer, I suggested we head out. Count Müller couldn’t tag along forever, either—he had plenty of his own business to attend to.

“I’m sorry, but we should probably leave soon...” I said.

“We’ll do our best to have something to show you the next time we meet!” exclaimed Mr. French enthusiastically.

“No, no, feel free to take it easy. Safety first—I insist. If you need any more funds, I’m sure you can ask Mr. Marc or Count Müller, and you’ll have them in a heartbeat. Take your time if you need to and do a good job with it,” I replied as politely as I could. If he tried to take on too much, it might provoke opposition. *I would rather they take their time than burn out.*

“Did you hear that, everyone?” called out the master builder. “Baron Sasaki is a valorous man, indeed!” In response, the other men began to cheer loudly enough to shake the tent.

If I stayed any longer, I was afraid they might form a parade, so I left things in Mr. French’s hands and exited the work site.



After our exchange in the Rectan Plains, Peeps and I brought Count Müller back home, then headed for the Republic of Lunge for our now-customary business with Mr. Joseph. To reach the Kepler Trading Company, I prevailed upon the bird's teleportation magic.

In consideration of the time difference between the two worlds, we brought our goods to the Kepler-provided storehouse in Lunge before the meeting. With Ms. Futarishizuka preparing all the goods in modern Japan, all we had to do was move them from one place to the other.

Finally, we arrived in the company's reception room for our discussion with Mr. Joseph.

"Oh? Why, if it isn't Mr. Marc."

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

Mr. Marc was in the room we had been shown to, seated right next to Mr. Joseph. Just like the last time we'd seen him, he was wearing finer clothing than back when he'd been doing business in Baytrium. His clothes weren't as gaudy as those worn by the Herzian nobility, but judging by the fabric and tailoring, they must have been expensive.

"I heard you were on your way," I said. "I hadn't realized you'd returned already."

"Yes, I just got back today. I'm glad I arrived in time to meet with you."

This made things convenient—I could speak to them both at once. I quickly launched into an explanation of the products I'd brought. They weren't much different from last time—sugar and modern manufactured goods. But since it had been two days in the modern world since our last deal, we'd brought double our usual amount and a little extra.

Essentially, we'd tripled our stock. In response, Mr. Joseph offered about the same price per unit as last time. This was what I had expected, so I agreed and sold my whole stock. I then put half of the profits toward the construction project in my domain. I'd leave that part with Count Müller or the Hermann Trading Company, then discuss with Mr. French how much he'd need. That would lessen the burden on Mr. Marc, too.

"Mr. Joseph," I said, "for our next deal, would you mind if I increased the amount of product?"

“Would that happen to include sugar?”

“Yes, that’s the idea.”

“Then, please do. I’d be happy to oblige.”

And so my exchange with the representative of the Kepler Trading Company came to a close. Afterward, Peeps and I stayed overnight at an inn Mr. Joseph introduced us to. As always, we received excellent service. The lodgings were of a higher quality than last time, too, which I wanted to believe was an expression of his anticipation for our future business deals.

The next day, we returned to the town of Baytrium and headed straight for the Hermann Trading Company. There, we deposited the funds for Mr. French. I asked them to notify him when they had the chance, and they immediately responded that they would. Mr. Marc may have been absent, but those at the company were working as hard as ever, and I felt comfortable trusting them with large sums of money.

As we were preparing to leave, we were informed that Count Müller wanted to see us. Apparently, he’d been searching everywhere and had asked the company to relay the message if they saw me.

What could it be? I wondered. *We just saw him yesterday.*

As instructed, we headed over to the count’s estate, eventually ending up in the reception room.

“Yellow skin, black hair, dark eyes—he does appear to be the one you described.”

“Count Müller, who might this be?”

“This is Viscount Ohm. He’s come here on an errand for Duke Einhart.”

“I am indeed Viscount Ohm.”

Together in the room with Count Müller was someone I’d never met before. He was about my age and looked to be about 180 centimeters tall. His dull-brown hair reached his shoulders, parted in the middle to expose most of his forehead. His facial hair was a bit long as well, surrounding his mouth. His ostentatious clothing made it very clear that *he* was the image of a Herzian noble. What caught my eye the most was his collar, which looked like one of those topless caps kids wore to keep shampoo out of their eyes—a ruffled collar, essentially. His outfit used a lot of lace; he looked like gaudiness personified.

Now that I thought about it, even in my world, lace had been a luxury item before the Industrial Revolution had made lace machines commonplace.

Handwoven items were very expensive because of the labor required. If I brought them to this world in large quantities, they might prove another effective product for the Marc Trading Company.

But now wasn't the time to be thinking about that. The person in front of me was the reason the count had been searching for us.

"My name is Sasaki. I appreciate you coming all the way here, my lord."

"I've come with a message from Duke Einhart for Baron Sasaki," announced the viscount, getting up off the sofa before I'd even had a chance to get comfortable. Across the low table from me, Count Müller's face took on a troubled expression as he watched the other noble.

Without much of a choice, I waited for what the man was about to say. As a baron, I was the lowest-ranking noble in the room.

The words that came next touched on a recent hot topic of ours.

"Regarding Baron Sasaki's bulwark under construction at the border with the Ohgen Empire, Duke Einhart has acknowledged your efforts. It has been decided that, in his compassion, and as the original proposer, he will be supporting the baron in his endeavors."

"....."

"As a comrade who believes Prince Adonis worthy of the Herzian throne, Duke Einhart hopes that his support will encourage Baron Sasaki to continue working for the prosperity of our homeland. In addition, I plan on taking direct but temporary control over the site for the time being."

This was a roundabout way of saying "Hey, we support the second prince, too, so let us have a piece of the pie building the bulwark." Also, "I came up with the idea first, so make sure everyone knows that." Actually, since someone close to him was taking over the work site, it might have been more accurate to call it a confiscation.

I'd met people like this at my old job. They would hand all the work from their superior off to their subordinates, and when those subordinates did a good job, they'd talk like they deserved all the credit themselves. And when the boss was of a much higher rank—like in this case—it was particularly unbearable to watch.

How did people handle this in Herz? If I disobeyed, things would probably turn sour.

"...What is it, Baron Sasaki?"

Viscount Ohm probably didn't think for a moment that I'd refuse. He was

all set to take over.

But I couldn't betray Mr. French's goodwill. I'd have to decline, even if it meant enduring some harassment.

"I'm terribly sorry, my lord," I said, "but I must refuse your kind offer."

"Wh-what?!" As expected, the viscount nearly blew his top. His face twisted in anger, and he raised his voice.

I went on to explain myself. "My lord, this matter involves a very insignificant bulwark being built on the border with the Ohgen Empire. It is not so difficult a job that we require support from Duke Einhart. In fact, I was essentially told as much by the duke himself during our audience with His Majesty."

"You... You intend to go against the duke's wishes?" Red crept into the viscount's face. *And he was so composed before, I thought. Now he's furious.* Probably because a noble of lower rank had defied him.

"Or does the duke mean to say that his support would outstrip that of the Kepler Trading Company, my lord?"

"Well, I..."

It was actually Peeps's and my pocket money, but Mr. Joseph's name was a good one to use in this situation. Herzian nobles were generally weak to outside pressure. I felt like I was steadily beginning to understand how this world worked. Viscount Ohm was at a loss for words. He probably hadn't anticipated us turning him down like this.

However, not only had these people tried to assassinate Peeps, they'd expelled him from his own world. I couldn't afford to be careless around them. I'd prefer not to interact with them at all—and Peeps agreed with me on that.

"As promised, I will not set foot in the capital until the defensive structures are complete," I said to reassure him. "My lord, could you possibly plead with Duke Einhart on my behalf for him to take a long-term view of our work?"

Even after it was done, I didn't want to go anywhere near the capital for a while. If we stayed cooped up in our own territory, the duke probably wouldn't complain. Ideally, the kingship would change hands during that time, and they'd eventually forget about me.

But no sooner did I look up at him than Viscount Ohm roared "Y-you'd better prepare yourself for the consequences of disobeying Duke Einhart!"

before storming out of the reception room, leaving the door wide open. The quick *clat-clat-clat* of his boots down the hallway steadily grew distant.

Once the sound faded, Count Müller said, “Duke Einhart must be serious to send Viscount Ohm all the way out here. There are competing factions even among those supporting the second prince. I suspect the duke has grown impatient after hearing of your vigorous efforts here, Lord Sasaki.”

“I am so sorry to be causing trouble for you, my lord,” I apologized.

“Oh, there’s no need for that. I much prefer your decision. Our relations with Duke Einhart are vital, yes, but that bulwark is just as crucial to the town of Baytrium. I’d like to avoid anything getting in the way.”

“I’m very pleased to hear you say that.”

Had Viscount Ohm taken over at the site, the master builder and his group would have flown into a fury right away. Human relations at the site would be in turmoil—and the project itself would naturally fail. The only response to such a situation I could come up with was to have a dragon wipe the whole thing off the map. Nobody would benefit from that—including the kingdom itself.

The count, who seemed to share my understanding, immediately made a suggestion. “I believe I shall increase the site’s complement of knights for the time being.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Maybe it would be best to tell those working at the site, Mr. French in particular, about what had just transpired. I really hoped everything would proceed as smoothly as possible.

“By the way,” added the count, “there was something else I wanted to tell you...”

“What is it?”

“May I borrow him for a moment, Lord Starsage?”

“*Very well.*”

It wasn’t every day Count Müller wanted to talk to me alone. Correctly guessing the man’s intent, Peeps hopped off my shoulder right away, fluttering through the air and out the door Viscount Ohm had left open, before disappearing into the estate’s halls.

After watching him go, the count turned back to me. “As I watched the—what did you call it? Vi-dee-oh letter? Something sparked my curiosity.”

“What is it, my lord?” I asked. “You can speak your mind in front of me.”

Was he worried about Lady Elsa? I was in charge of her care. I felt myself tense up under the weight of my responsibility.

However, his next words went in a very different direction. “Well, how should I put this...? The Lord Starsage does not hold his liquor very well.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Instead of Lady Elsa, the count was commenting on Peeps’s drinking habits. He’d probably noticed the cups and the bottle of sake in the background of the video somewhere. The sparrow *had* imbibed with Lady Elsa in the living room.

“His behavior changes little even with much drink,” explained the count, “but there are times when he gets very drunk. I’ve even witnessed him forgetting some of what happened, which has led to certain situations in the past.”

“.....”

“I’m sorry to ask this of you, but please keep this information in mind.”

“I understand fully, my lord.”

Now it made sense why Peeps had been passed out in the living room. It was worth remembering that everyone had a weakness or two. But since Peeps was always such a perfect super sparrow, I found this weak point of his especially adorable.

<The Leak>

After dealing with Viscount Ohm, I finally had some time to practice magic in the otherworld. We returned to our high-class lodgings and passed the next few days there.

I spent most of my time practicing the beam-like spell I'd fired off in the isolated space. I was able to activate it without issue, but considering the potential danger, Peeps had to educate me on how to handle it. As it turned out, the spell was pretty versatile—it was possible to restrict its power and broaden its scope. It was just as convenient as the magical girl's Magical Beam.

As a result, however, I had to put off learning any new spells. I thought it was about time I started seeing some progress with the going-to-work spell, but unfortunately, no matter how many times I chanted it, I couldn't get the magic circle to appear or my body to light up, much less activate it. I'd have to try it again next time.

After our short stay in the otherworld, we returned to modern Japan. When we arrived back at my apartment, I checked the time. It was just past six in the morning—a little less than an hour off from the return time we'd predicted.

Peeps, who had figured that out within moments, went to the computer on my desk and began using his golem to type away at the keyboard. On the display was a text editor and a black screen. I could tell he was messing with some kind of script, but I had no idea about anything beyond that. As the golem typed, the pure-black screen scrolled upward, text flowing at a shocking speed, like Peeps was some kind of super hacker.

It hadn't taken him much time at all to overtake me in IT skills. It left me with a strange feeling—I was happy but also a little lonely. *What is that app anyway?* I wondered. *I don't remember installing that one.* Was this how it

felt to be a parent watching their child grow?

The golem's movements were smooth and quick as it worked the mouse and keyboard. The puppet's design also looked different than before. Peeps had probably been making small, incremental updates to it. That's Peeps, always striving for self-improvement!

"*Hmm,*" he said. "*As I expected, this model is more precise than the last.*"

"Figure anything out?" I asked.

"*Unfortunately, I still can't say. The root cause is uncertain, as well. But there is an unpredictability in how much time passes that will cause us trouble. I've determined several factors worthy of investigation and plan to run test calculations in the near future.*"

"Uh... Oh. Well, thanks for doing all the brainwork."

"*No need to worry. I find it rather fun.*"

"....." Whatever he was doing, it sounded difficult. Poking my nose into it any further would just get in his way.

Instead, I checked my bureau phone. Just one night had passed in modern Japan, so I doubted any real problems had cropped up. I flicked on the power and checked the screen, not expecting anything.

But then I saw missed-call notifications from the section chief. Two, in fact—one from a bit after five AM and the other just a few minutes ago. He hadn't bothered to leave me a voicemail, either.

"...I wonder what he wants."

The timing made me think it was urgent. The chief was a hard worker on par with Miss Hoshizaki, but even he had to sleep every night. That meant he'd most likely received an unexpected alert and was responding to it.

Frankly, I was hesitant to call him back. I wanted to ignore it, go into the office, and hear what he had to say there.

As I vacillated, my private phone started vibrating. Placing the one from the bureau on my desk for now, I picked up the other. Ms. Futarishizuka's name was on the screen—she appeared to be the one calling me. I couldn't very well ignore her, so I decided to pick up.

"...Hello? This is Sasaki."

"*That damn sparrow of yours! What has he done?!*"

She wasted no time snapping at me. Her usual playful attitude was gone—she was serious. I couldn't see her, but I got the feeling she was genuinely angry about something. Even over the phone, I felt the same tension as when

I'd first encountered her. And naturally, I had no idea why she was mad.

"Um, what's going on?" I asked.

"*You mean to tell me you don't know?!*" she yelled back.

"I don't believe I do."

"*Ahh, for the love of...! Fuck! Seriously, fuck!*" she replied, repeating a rather coarse word twice over the phone. A moment later, she hung up.

Just as I started to wonder what on earth was going on, my phone—still at my ear—began to vibrate again. I looked at the screen. A notification had popped up, saying I'd received a text message from the very person I'd just been talking to.

The only content of the message was a URL for a social media site. I had an account there, and I used to post occasionally before starting work at the bureau. Lately, I'd been avoiding it like the plague to prevent leaking any personal information.

"....."

After verifying the domain, I tapped the link to see what it was. My browser opened up to a certain user's submission to the site. Apparently, the submission was a video, which began to play as soon as the tab opened. I glanced at the information just below—it had been uploaded the night before last, with both "likes" and "quotes" in the tens of thousands.

Whatever it was, it was viral.

I looked at the account name, curious. It was ☆SageSummer. Recently created, with a humble number of followers a little under three digits. The profile picture was still set to the default. All the likes and quotes had probably been from someone more famous quoting it.

In the video were two familiar faces: a Java sparrow and a blond-haired girl.

They were both peering into a laptop's front camera, having an excited conversation. The words they exchanged seemed to be in the otherworld's language, so the comments were not only about the talking bird but also what language they were speaking.

"That's amazing! We're inside the square!" "*This is called a video. Everyone in this world uses them in place of a journal.*" "You mean to say even commoners use something this handy?!" "*That's correct.*" "I... I can't believe it!" "*One can also exchange videos with people in distant places to share information.*" "This is part of that internet thing you were explaining

before, right, birdie?” *“That it is.”* “Is it okay for us to be on it?” *“If we don’t make it public, nobody will be able to see us.”*

That was the gist of their conversation. In the background, I could see the very familiar living room of a high-class hotel.

“.....” *Oh yeah, this is bad, isn’t it? You’ve really done it now, Peeps.*

“Is that the girl’s voice and mine I hear?” asked Peeps from his spot on the desk, catching the video’s sound coming out of the phone speaker and turning around to look at me. The golem stopped moving as well. The clacking of keys fell silent—causing the sound from the video to grow all the more vivid.

“Um, Peeps, about this...”

“Why the troubled expression?”

The sparrow fluttered gently into the air and landed on my shoulder. I held up the phone for him to see. The video was only a few minutes long, and so it looped with perfect timing, giving Peeps the opportunity to see it again from the start. We both watched together.

“That’s amazing! We’re inside this square!” *“This is called a video. Everyone in this world uses them in place of a journal.”* “You mean to say even commoners use something this handy?!” *“That’s correct.”* “I... I can’t believe it!” *“One can also exchange videos with people in distant places to share information.”* “This is part of that internet thing you were explaining before, right, birdie?” *“That it is.”* “Is it okay for us to be on it?” *“If we don’t make it public, nobody will be able to see us.”*

The phone’s screen showed the distinguished sparrow talking happily with Lady Elsa. I was struck by how cute Peeps was, acting all smug. He spoke of the internet with pride, as though it were his own.

“.....”

“.....”

After watching it all the way through again, I glanced at the bird on my shoulder.

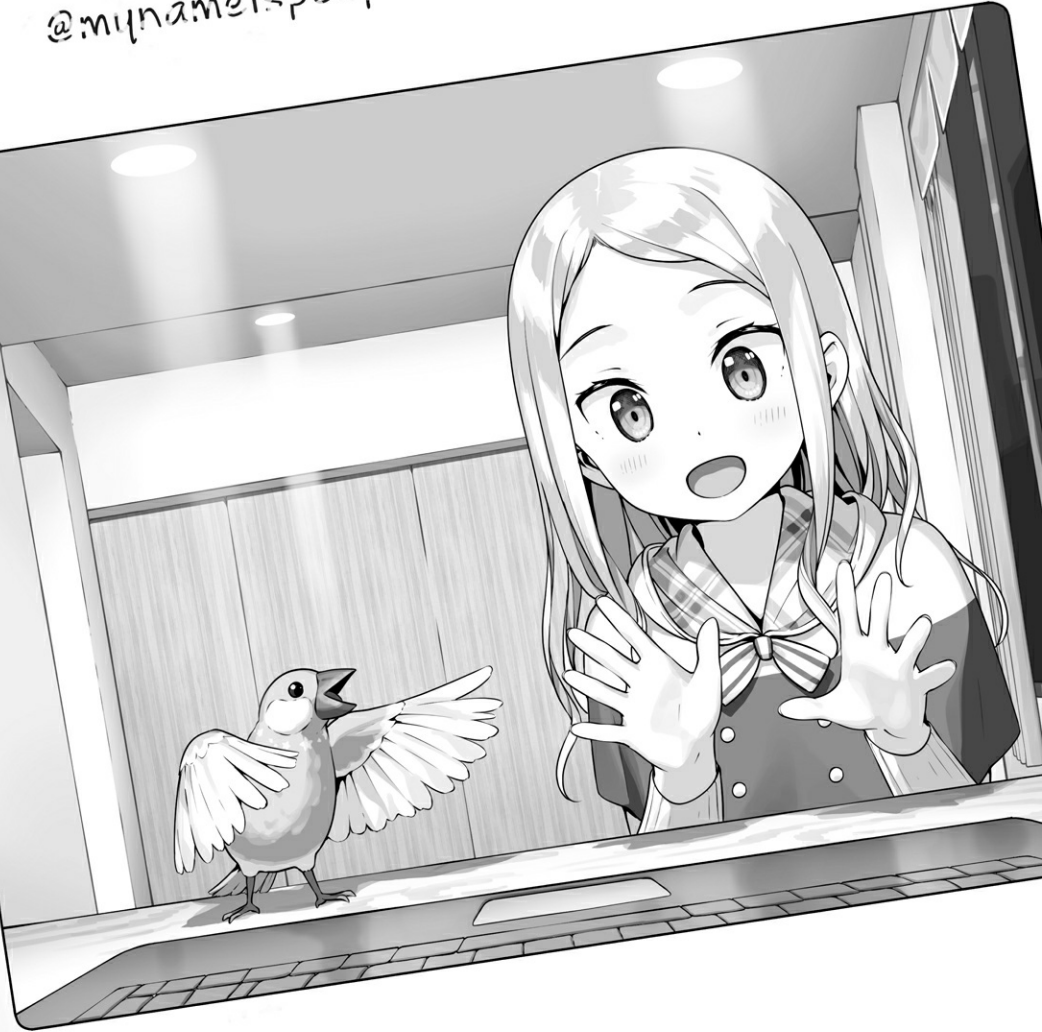
He was clearly petrified.

It hadn’t been long since his introduction to the internet, but he seemed to understand the sort of impact what he was seeing would have on the rest of the world. He kept staring for a little while, not reacting.

And that was what made the existence of this video so puzzling. There would have been no problem as long as he hadn’t made it public—but it was definitely public now. Why was that? I thought about it for a moment, then

looked down at the line directly below the number of views. The text showed that the video had been live streamed.

☆ SageSummer
@mynameispeeps



124K views

23:03 . 2020/04/06 . Twitter for iPad

21K ↻

54K ♥



I had a sinking feeling that Peeps had made a mistake using the website. He must have mixed up the RECORD and LIVE STREAM buttons. I'd always thought it would be an easy mistake to make, since the buttons are right next to each other. One of my former coworkers had done the same, hitting the wrong button while drunk and going live with a dumb video.

“.....”

Ah yes, that coworker had been drunk. And so had Peeps. I understood now. I recalled Count Müller's words to me as we parted ways in the otherworld.

“Peeps,” I said, “do you remember any of this?”

“.....”

It seemed safe to assume that his silence meant no.

The presence of a bird speaking a mysterious language and a beautiful foreign girl standing next to him were probably what had sent the viewer count skyrocketing in such a short period of time. I found comments about the talking bird, suggesting it had probably been dubbed over or something similar, but many people had enjoyed the video purely for its entertainment value. As for the language they were speaking, a bunch of viewers seemed pretty serious about figuring it out, and I could easily imagine that helping to expand the video's reach. There were a lot of people in this world with a lot of time on their hands.

A few moments later, I got another call notification. The screen showed the name FUTARISHIZUKA. With Peeps still frozen on my shoulder, I pressed the call button and picked up. She started speaking immediately.

“So?” she asked. “*Do you understand the situation we're in now?*”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I got a notification from the section chief telling me to come in, so if you hadn't contacted me, I would have gone in blind. You may have just barely saved us.”

That was the worst possible situation I could think of. Getting called into the conference room and being shown the video, followed by the chief sitting me down and calmly asking me what it was. It was easy to imagine. And with Lady Elsa present, Ms. Futarishizuka—whom I'd used to explain her presence last time—would be just as caught up in this as I was. There was little doubt we'd both be dismissed. Depending on what happened, I could even see myself losing my home in Japan.

“*You should go to him right away,*” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “*There's*

nothing I can do about this.”

“My sincerest apologies. I feel like I do nothing but cause you trouble.”

“You can say that again. It certainly feels like I’ve drawn the short straw this time.”

“We will do our best to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“...I’ll be hoping for good news.”

She immediately ended the call. Usually, she waited for me to hang up, and her action made it clear just how furious she was. She’d been doing so much for us, too. *I feel awful about this.*

“Peeps, did you mix up the RECORD and LIVE STREAM buttons?” I asked the bird on my shoulder as I slipped the phone back into my pocket.

His tiny body gave a lurch when he heard that. *“I...am sorry. Oh, what have I done?!”*

Peeps fluttered into the air and landed on the desk, then he turned to me and gave a bow of apology. Seeing a sparrow lower its head that far was simply adorable. How could I do anything but unconditionally forgive him?

“I apologize! I know this situation won’t be resolved by apologizing, but I sincerely apologize!”

“Seriously, don’t worry about it that much. What’s done is done.”

“But I may have just stolen your home in this world...!”

“Well, in that case, we can just stay in the otherworld for a while.”

“Ahh, what have I done?! I cannot apologize enough!”

He’s so cute, constantly apologizing like that. Especially the way he keeps bowing his little head.

“I cannot believe I got so intoxicated that I made a mistake on the internet...”

“It’s not that unusual, actually. It happens to the best of us.”

Celebrities messing up live streams and ending up on the news was a fairly common occurrence. Apparently, there were plenty of people who made video-editing mistakes when uploading videos, too. For the most part, the creator would take it down as soon as they noticed it, but Peeps had fallen asleep before realizing what had happened.

I recalled the sight of him sleeping on the low table the previous morning—though perhaps “lying there” was a better descriptor than “sleeping.”

“This would have gotten out sooner or later. It just happened sooner,” I said, soothing him.

“I have been reckless. I am truly sorry!”

At this rate, it felt like he was never going to stop apologizing. I figured it was especially hard for him to forgive himself for getting drunk and screwing up since he always had a sense of relaxed confidence about him. *If only Count Müller had given me that advice a little sooner*, I thought, filled with regret.

Perhaps the count had experienced something similar in the past, I thought. The perfect and flawless Starsage seemed just a little bit more human now, and I felt closer to him as I listened to his earnest apologies.

Whatever the case, I needed to buy some time.

“Peeps, I’m going to go talk to my boss for now,” I explained.

“I’m sorry. I am an utterly foolish being. An imbecile who grew full of himself after being called the Starsage and fell to delusions of grandeur. To think I would trample on all the goodwill you’ve shown me! I am hopeless.” Peeps was sliding into a desperate pit of self-loathing, nothing but apologies flowing from his cute little beak. *“I shall refrain from using the internet for the time being.”*

The distinguished sparrow must have been hurting quite a lot to suggest voluntarily staying away from the internet. His drooping, sad visage was lovely in its own right, so as his owner, I hesitated to voice any disapproval.

Instead, I decided to do my best to support him. “Well, I appreciate it. I’ll just pop over to the bureau.”

“Mm. Please be careful.”

“I’ll smooth things over with the boss, so don’t worry—just wait for me. In return, can I ask you to go keep Lady Elsa company? I’m sure she’s feeling anxious all alone with Ms. Futarishizuka right now.”

“Understood. I vow to never commit another blunder like this again!”

It was a little early to be going into the office, but there was no way I could laze around the apartment in my current state. Plus, leaving early would let me avoid the packed trains.

I wonder, I thought suddenly. *When Peeps was assassinated in the otherworld, could alcohol have been involved? It seemed unlikely*, and yet I wasn’t sure how else a normal human could hope to take on the Starsage.



Somewhat earlier than usual, I transferred trains and headed for the bureau. I didn't bother to contact the section chief. He could easily tell when his subordinates were on their way to the office by checking their location data. In fact, he didn't bother calling me again, either. That gave me all the time I needed to worry about how I was going to get out of this.

My commute had never felt shorter. I arrived at the bureau in what felt like seconds. Going through the main entrance, I headed up to my department.

Naturally, Section Chief Akutsu was waiting for me. He looked as slick as he did every day, wearing an expensive-looking suit and perfectly shiny leather shoes. For the price of the watch gleaming on his wrist, you could buy a brand-new car, complete with every available option.

"Sasaki," he said, "see me in the conference room."

"All right," I replied.

I followed him through the office, where employees were still sparse. We ended up in the small conference room, about ten meters square. He walked around the table to face me. It was just us in the room, of course.

"I think you know what's going on," he began.

"I do."

I had assumed he'd show the video in question on the conference room screen, but he launched straight into discussing it as soon as he sat down, as though it would be a waste to even pull it up. He must have been certain I had something to do with it.

"I'll ask you plainly. Who is she?" he said, calm and collected as always, his tone forceful. "She" definitely referred to Lady Elsa.

For now, I'd try playing innocent. "I believe I gave an explanation regarding her before."

"We found the hotel based on the background of the video and checked the camera footage of the entrance. Two people who looked like you and Ms. Futarishizuka were seen going in. I hope you're not going to try to claim this is unrelated to you."

The section chief really likes his surveillance cameras, I thought. At this point, he couldn't claim it was just for work—it was definitely his hobby. But what a pain for all his employees.

Initially, we had informed him that Lady Elsa was a psychic from another country. I'd also said I had nothing to do with her. But now it was clear to him that she was still in Japan—and that I still had contact with her. It would

be weirder if he wasn't suspicious. And that's precisely why I had such a hard time answering him.

"I hear she's staying in Japan for the time being," I said.

"People are saying the voice was dubbed over, but personally, I have quite an interest in that sparrow that speaks the same language she does. If it isn't fake, could the sparrow be from the same place as that lizard-man that fell from the sky?"

"Have you already analyzed that recording as well?"

"Come to think of it, I believe you have a pet sparrow at home, Sasaki."

"....." He was really hitting me where it hurt. *Bull's-eye, Chief*. There was no way to get out of it this time.

He continued. "Users on the internet have already determined the location of the hotel in the video. Quite an expensive place, isn't it? I assume it was obtained through Futarishizuka's influence. Have you heard *nothing* about her relationship to the girl?"

"Apparently, she doesn't understand the language in the video, either."

"Is that right?"

"That's what she told me, at least." For the moment, I decided not to lie. I was hoping to avoid aggravating the situation any further with minor inconsistencies. My plan was to acknowledge the truth for what it was but still claim I didn't know anything about it.

"I'd like to speak with Futarishizuka as well, if possible," remarked the chief. "But I can't seem to get in touch with her. Would you mind trying to reach her for me? Though, I'm sure she'll come into the office at some point today if we wait."

"You're probably right..."

I got the feeling she'd be able to give a good answer to any questions he might ask. She hadn't been alive since before World War II for nothing. The older, the wiser, as the saying went. But I felt like the chief might be able to outfox even her.

So what am I supposed to do now? I wondered, trying to think as quickly as possible.

But taking that time worked against me. "That said," continued the chief, "I'd prefer to wrap things up quickly."

"Has something urgent come up?" I asked.

"You want to continue living here as a Japanese citizen, right?"

“.....”

Ah, I thought. *This is my boss giving me an ultimatum.* He stared at me. His tone had been as detached as always, but I knew my life would change drastically depending on how I responded.

And if he was going to push me that far, then I'd just have to do the same.

“Yes,” I answered. “I would like to continue working for the benefit of Japan.”

“Then do what you need to do—as a member of this bureau.”

“Then, Chief, I believe I'll do so right away.”

“I'm glad to hear it.”

I rose from my chair and moved to the whiteboard beside the conference table. I made out a slight twitch in the chief's eyebrow—he must have been wondering what I was doing. But he didn't say anything.

As he watched, I picked up a black marker. “Mr. Akutsu, do you recall the incident at the bowling alley?” I asked.

“...Why this, all of a sudden?”

“A lot of bureau employees died in that incident,” I continued.

On the whiteboard, I drew an equilateral triangle. At each of its corners I drew equally sized circles. In one circle, I wrote the chief's name. I was about to write the nerd's name in the second, but then I remembered I didn't know it, so I put the word *suspects* instead. In the last, I wrote the name of the bureau's vice director, who was the chief's boss as well.

“It would seem the vice director was fed false information by the suspect group,” I explained, drawing an arrow from the suspects to the vice director. The chief didn't respond to this. I continued to explain, the marker in one hand. “But at the scene, as bureau members were dying left and right, you were the only one taken alive, for some reason—though, I suppose it's possible you're worth that much to them.”

I drew an arrow from the chief to the suspects. As I did, the marker started to run out of ink. What a sad time for that to happen. I picked a different pen off the tray below the whiteboard. I couldn't find the same black color, though, so I was forced to grab the blue instead. It kind of put a damper on the coolness factor of my presentation, but it seemed like the kind of thing that would happen to me.

“Actually, a direct line might not be appropriate here.”

I added a smaller circle in the middle of the other three. In it, I wrote *Mr. X*.

I didn't know the details for this player, since Ms. Futarishizuka had been hesitant to explain further. Then I drew a line from the chief through Mr. X to the suspects.

"The suspects were probably thrilled at the prospect of eliminating so many bureau members."

I added an arrowhead to the other side of that line, pointing back to the chief. Personally, I really wanted to know the identity of Mr. X. Maybe Futarishizuka would tell me someday if I got to know her better.

"When you look at it like this, I feel bad for the vice director—he had no idea. I hear he'll be taking responsibility for the whole incident and leaving his post in the near future. As for who will take up his position... Well, I know I'm curious. Aren't you?"

"....."

I stared fixedly at the whiteboard. If I'd simply told the section chief I knew he'd set up the incident at the bowling alley, I wouldn't have needed to go through this song and dance. I did it anyway, because I wanted to give off the impression I knew even more—all sorts of things.

It wasn't clear whether my efforts had borne fruit, but I did finally get a response from the chief. "Sasaki, would you happen to be connected to the Public Safety Commission?"

Yes! I thought. *He took the bait. All thanks to Ms. Futarishizuka's intel. She really has been nothing but helpful lately.* "No, I'm not," I said.

"Then why are you here right now?"

"Please don't misunderstand me. You were the one who started this, Chief."

"....."

During this entire exchange, Mr. Akutsu's gaze had never once drifted away from me. I was sure he carried a concealed gun, so I was paying just as much attention to his actions as he was mine. There was a chance he would label me a spy and shoot me. Dead men tell no tales, after all. With his position, he could kill me and sweep it under the rug in any number of ways.

"I'd like to keep our relationship cordial, Mr. Akutsu," I said.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I very much hope you will. Do you think I would have bothered to tell you about all this if I harbored any ill will toward you? All I ask in return is my status as an ordinary bureau employee."

“Is the title that attractive to you?”

“It is like heaven compared to my previous job.”

“...I see.”

Hesitation was evident in the chief’s normally confident manner of speaking. He was probably busy trying to guess what I was playing at. The idea that I might be content remaining in my current position was beyond his imagination. In that light, his disbelief actually made me feel pretty good.

“I’ll say it again—I have no intention of opposing you, Chief. Were it not for this incident, we wouldn’t have needed to have this conversation. So will you allow me to continue contributing to the nation as a member of this bureau?”

“Who *are* you, Sasaki?”

I couldn’t answer that question—nor could I remain silent. This was a good chance to use one of Peeps’s lines. “Our world is much richer in versatility than you think it is, Chief.”

“.....”

When an average Joe like me says it, it just doesn’t have the same punch. These sorts of quotes needed to come from the Starsage’s beak. The chief had fallen silent, and I began to think this middle-aged man might have gotten a little carried away. How embarrassing.

Still, I felt like I’d managed to deal with him. I was confident my safety was ensured for the time being. I trusted the chief not to do anything careless now that we both knew each other’s weaknesses. There was nothing I could do if he decided to surprise me by shooting me in the back, but he’d have to at least consider the risks he’d run if he failed. In that light, this situation wasn’t all bad. It would also make it easier to do things related to the otherworld in the future.

“So I’d appreciate it if you didn’t pry any further. I won’t involve myself in anything you’re doing, either. I believe this would be a mutually beneficial arrangement. What do you say?”

Whatever the case, the one thing I didn’t want was to return to my life as a corporate drone. I’d also prefer not to have the government after me. The important things in life were eating and sleeping—Peeps was in agreement with me there. To that end, I wanted to maintain the status quo. I was an employee making a desperate appeal to my boss, insisting I hadn’t the slightest ambition to climb the ladder.

A few moments later, the chief said, “You’re correct, Sasaki.”

“Do you mean that?”

“You had better not be lying about this.”

“You can trust me, Chief.”

“...Very well. Then, I’ll respect your wishes on the matter.”

I did it, Peeps! I’d successfully gotten a compromise out of the section chief. It sounded like he wouldn’t be prying into our affairs in the future. Perhaps that would quell Futarishizuka’s ire, too. I was confident that if I added a little bonus to all my future payments, everything would be all right. And it seemed likely my distinguished sparrow would be more than willing to help out this time.

“Thank you. I’m glad we’ve come to an agreement.”

Even so, that had been some dangerous business. Making deals like this with the chief was going to give me a heart attack.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

At the moment, I’m in my apartment with my mother before heading off to school. We have a little TV in the corner of the room, and it plays the news—at length—every morning. My mother is watching it while doing her makeup. Keeping her in the corner of my vision, I start packing textbooks and notebooks into my designated schoolbag.

Around the same time, I hear a voice emanating from the TV that I recognize. I’m not sure what it’s saying—whatever language it is, I don’t know it. It has a very strange ring to it, though, and it doesn’t sound like English or Chinese. Figuring my imagination is getting the better of me, I turn my attention away from my bag and to the TV, just to check.

After all, it sounds a lot like a voice I heard from the room next door—like the voice of whoever was talking to my neighbor that one time.

“.....”

The TV shows a blond girl and a silver Java sparrow having a conversation. According to the newscaster, it’s a video trending on social media that was just uploaded yesterday. But the familiar voice isn’t coming from the girl—it’s coming from the sparrow.

It looks like they're using a computer or a smartphone camera to record a video. The newscaster goes on to explain that the video was streamed live on a social media site.

It sounds like viewers enjoyed the setup of a cute blond girl and a sparrow skillfully conversing in a mysterious, unknown language. The comments left on the video scroll by on the TV screen.

Personally, I'm more curious about the bird—it's the same species of sparrow the man next door keeps as a pet. And the pattern on its body looks similar.

“.....”

But behind the two speakers in the video is a pretty large living space, completely different from our humble apartments. It looks to me like an extremely luxurious home or maybe a royal suite in a high-class hotel. Obviously, it wasn't streamed from the apartment next to ours.

“*Oh. Haven't we seen that sparrow somewhere before?*” says Abaddon, noticing that my attention has shifted. His gaze is fixed on the TV as well.

“You think so, too, Abaddon?”

“*Do you honestly think a little bird could speak human language?*”

“That's nothing compared to all the stuff you've dragged me into.”

“*Hmm. You think?*”

The newscaster says the video was filmed in a hotel room in Tokyo. Apparently, people on the internet have already figured out exactly where it is. They then urge viewers to respect people's privacy. *But you put it on the news*, I think.

“Should I assume the voice sounds familiar to you, too?” I ask.

“*I think you're right. It might just be the same creature.*”

“I see. That's very reassuring.” If Abaddon thinks so, too, then there can be no doubt. I don't know how good a demon's senses are, but they must be better than a human's. If there's even the slightest chance it's true, that's good enough for me. Playing hooky for the day is nothing if it means getting a chance to be with *him*.

The thing I need to focus on above all is finding out the identity of the girl with the sparrow. What kind of relationship does she have with him? She can't possibly be his child. It seems unlikely she's a blood relative. But then, who is she? And why is some random girl with him?

“Hey! What the hell are you muttering about?!”

Abaddon is invisible to others at the moment, as usual. My mother can't see him or hear any voice but mine. She overhears my little chat and yells at me angrily, her gaze moving away from the TV to glare at me. She must be wondering if her daughter's finally lost it.

"Do anything creepy like that again and I'm kicking you out! Got it?!" she continues. As she speaks, I notice the smartphone in her hand.

If I could use that smartphone, I might be able to get more detailed information. Everything the newscaster is reporting seems to have been picked up from the internet. So if I do some investigation of my own, I might be able to get the details—including where the hotel was.

"....."

My next-door neighbor wiped out an entire group of angels in that isolated space. *He can't possibly be a normal person. He must have something special going on, just like I do. And if his pet sparrow can talk, that basically proves it.* That's how it seems to me anyway.

After all this, there's no way I can restrain myself. I immediately get up and touch a fingertip to my mother's head.

"Hey! What are you—?"

"....."

I feel something warm flow into my body from hers. It takes a few seconds before she collapses on the spot, unable to finish her complaint. At the same time, the fog in my brain clears up. Now that I think about it, I haven't had anything but water since yesterday afternoon. I probably have a minor case of malnutrition. But stealing some life force from my mother seems to have fixed the issue.

"Your decisiveness regarding him reassures me," comments Abaddon.

"It would be a waste not to use everything I can, wouldn't it?"

The phone falls out of my mother's hand, and I scoop it up. She was just using it, so it's already unlocked. I type the words *sparrow*, *blond*, and *conversation* into the search bar. A whole list of websites pop up, and they seem to have the information I'm looking for. I navigate to the one at the top and skim what it says. Most of it is the same as the news, but there's one piece of additional info. And it's exactly what I want most: the name and address of the hotel where people think the video was recorded.

"Abaddon, I'm going out now."

"Well then, why don't I join you?"

“I should have expected you’d want to come along.”

“Hey, if an isolated space appears while I’m not around, it’ll be the end of the line for you!”

“...All right, then.”

Even a vile demon like Abaddon comes in handy when I need to do something in secret. And if he’ll be joining me, I’ll use him however I want. *I can even ask him to get rid of that blond girl, depending on the situation, I think to myself. Wait, no, that won’t work. The rules say demons can’t do anything to humans in the real world. Last time, he told me all he could do was knock them unconscious.*

“Should we leave your mother there?”

“It’s not summer,” I reply. “It won’t matter if she lies around for a while. She’ll still get up and go to work without my help. In fact, she seems to think she’s just getting random bouts of light-headedness, so it’s actually better for us not to bother.”

“Have I ever told you how fitting it is that you’re a demon’s Disciple?”

“All humans are like this deep down, aren’t they?”

“Now there’s an opinion I can agree with.”

With Abaddon’s assistance, I should be able to sneak into the hotel room unnoticed.

I feel my chest warm up at the thought of the man I parted from only two days ago.



For a little while, I wasn’t sure how that conversation with the chief was going to go. But I’d managed to get through it by making use of some of the information Ms. Futarishizuka had given me beforehand. And it hadn’t been just me being driven against the wall the whole time—I’d gotten something out of it, too.

For a while, even if he saw us acting strangely, he probably wouldn’t openly point it out. In exchange, we would overlook whatever the section chief was up to. At least, that was the kind of relationship I was hoping for.

Afterward, I quickly left the office for the day and returned to our hotel. Whatever the case, I wanted to report the news to Ms. Futarishizuka. We’d

need to find a new place for Lady Elsa to stay. And besides, after my little act, I wasn't comfortable working in the same office as the section chief—I was sure it would be extremely awkward. I wanted to take some time, maybe the next several days, and wait for the storm to blow over.

Thank goodness for flexible office regulations. I'm sure the section chief will overlook a few days. My negotiations should have netted me at least that much.

A little while after leaving the bureau's building, I reached a point in my commute where I had to exit the train station to change lines.

“.....”

Compared to the suburbs, the city sky, only visible between high-rise buildings, felt so much more cramped. As I was looking at the clouds scattered across the blue expanse, I caught a glimpse of something odd.

Something was floating up there—it was angular, but it wasn't an airplane or a helicopter. One part narrowed to a point, while another was wider. Its distinct shape meant it had to be manufactured, but its movement speed distinguished it from a regular airplane. From my vantage point on the ground, it was maybe the size of my fingertip.

Others nearby started looking up at it as well. The next thing I knew, a whole crowd of people had taken their phones out and were holding them up at the sky. I felt the impulse to follow their lead and take mine out, too—but various theories about what it might be came to mind, stopping me in my tracks. Maybe there was something more important to be doing right now than taking a picture and uploading it to social media.

“I really, really hate to call the section chief after all that, but...” I muttered to myself, taking out my bureau phone. He'd probably still be at his desk.

Maybe he'd already gotten the information without me telling him about it. The thing was pretty big, by the looks of it, and given its location above urban Tokyo, it was more than likely that the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport—not to mention the Air Self-Defense Force—had picked it up on their radars. In which case, rather than the bureau, which liked to keep everything secret, it might be better for Japan's existing air power to do something about it.

I'd already seen everyone staring at it from the ground. At any rate, it seemed like the forces of modern civilization would need to go up there soon.

My hand came to a stop, hovering over the phone. I was starting to feel like I should prioritize my own matters and get back to the hotel.

Meanwhile, I heard the people watching the sky talking among themselves.

“Do you see that weird thing floating up there?”

“Huh? It’s not an airplane or something?”

“Hey, look! Is something floating in the sky?”

“Could it be a spaceship?”

“Of course not. That’s dumb.”

“Maybe it’s really just an airplane, then.”

“There was also that blimp thing floating around a while back, remember? It was big news.”

“You know, I wonder what happened to that.”

“Wait, is it really a UFO? Talk about exciting!”

The same ideas were going through my mind as well. The object was very far away, so I couldn’t make out any design details. Still, its inorganic form was clearly uneven and jagged—hence why the first thing I’d thought of was something manufactured, like an airplane.

A bunch of images flashed through my mind: mostly media containing space battleships, humanoid robots, and the like. Mysterious invaders from outside our galaxy and the earth being in grave danger—you saw stories like that all over the place these days.

But fiction was not reality. It’d be a huge mess if something like that were to actually happen. To begin with, eyewitness reports of strange flying objects like this had become the topic of conversation many times in the past. As those around me were saying, an object resembling a hot-air balloon had been sighted in the sky a few years back. Was this something similar?

If it was, then I’d only be wasting the bureau’s time reporting it. I put the phone I’d just taken out back into my pants pocket, then started walking again. I weaved through the rubberneckers, heading for the train.

“.....”

But then, something occurred to me.

At the very least, that otherworld was real, wasn’t it?

That wasn’t all, either. Lately, I’d not only been seeing all sorts of suspicious, questionable things—people with psychic powers, magical girls, angels, demons—but I’d been *communicating* with them. I’d even begun thinking of some of them as my friends and fellows.

Compared to that, unearthly life-forms that had evolved independently in the vast reaches of space finding our planet with its water and atmosphere and making the long journey over actually sounded *natural*.

“No, no. That’s ridiculous...”

Crazy ideas rushed through my mind—and I didn’t have a shred of evidence to disprove them.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

After leaving my apartment, I ride a train to my destination. I procured the money for the fare from my mother’s wallet. She might complain if she notices, but if she does, I can just take more of her life force to quiet her down again. If she keeps on fainting like that, maybe at some point she’ll get a clue. Investigating that blond-haired girl hanging around my neighbor is more important right now.

“*Whew! Talk about fancy entranceways,*” says Abaddon, looking at the front of the hotel building.

We’re standing behind another building nearby, looking over at it. The entrance has a uniformed security guard keeping watch. Since I’m wearing a school uniform, if I’m not careful, he might call me aside. And depending on how I answer him, he might bring me to the police. Because of these concerns, I’m currently trying to figure out how to get inside.

“Somehow or other, I need to get in without being noticed,” I explain.

“*Want to use your reward?*” he asks. “*You still have one from that last battle in the isolated space.*”

“Yes, please.”

“*I don’t know why, but I didn’t expect an immediate answer.*”

“Is there a problem?”

“*No, I just thought you’d think about it a little more.*”

“I hope you’re not about to tell me you can’t do it, even though you’re the one who offered,” I murmur to Abaddon as I check out the building. Nobody conspicuous is nearby. In fact, I’m probably the most conspicuous one around. It seems like I’m the only one crazy enough to visit the scene of that viral video to get more details.

The internet is on fire with people talking about it, but that's only because phones put everything at your fingertips. I suppose it's unusual for anyone to be bored enough to walk here this early in the morning—into an area of the city with a ton of office buildings and at a time when trains are so crowded.

If the scene had been a little more chaotic, I might have been able to sneak in with other people. Or if I was an adult wearing a suit, I could have just boldly strode in, pretending to be a guest at the hotel. It wouldn't have been impossible, at any rate.

"I don't think I've ever seen a Disciple use a wish on something like this," remarks Abaddon.

"This kind of situation is exactly the reason I'm cooperating with you."

"Personally, I'd be happier if you wished for something slightly more related to the proxy war."

"Then give me the ability to fly with you."

"Given the number of angels defeated, that would be an appropriate reward. But you weren't the one who actually took them down—it was that man you know, right? That makes me a little hesitant."

"Don't the actions of a Disciple's acquaintance count as points for the Disciple in this game? He clearly acted to save me. If I hadn't been there, those angels and their Disciples wouldn't be dead now."

"You sound so proud of it, too."

"Do I?"

"Well, fine. You're right, after all. It's thanks to him I was able to wipe out that many Disciples. I'll simply chalk it up to your own efforts this time. I'll give you the power to fly and help you handle this situation."

"All right. Quickly, please."

"Leave it to me!" says Abaddon as my vision suddenly twists.

But there's no sound or magic circle. Did that give me the ability to fly? It was a pretty plain reaction, compared to the things I've seen so far.

"...What was that?"

"I hid you from sight," he explains. *"Now you can go straight in through the front door. But people will notice if you touch them, so just be careful of that, I guess. They might also realize something's going on if they hear you make noise."*

"What about being able to fly?"

"That would definitely draw attention, so we can do it in the hotel"

bathroom or something. There are probably cameras all over a busy spot like this, right? You're better off not doing anything conspicuous."

"You're surprisingly knowledgeable about this time period."

"I'll learn whatever it takes in order to win this game. If we slip up, you might end up on the news just like that bird did. And if that happened, it would put us at a big disadvantage in the game, wouldn't it? Nothing wrong with keeping your identity a secret."

"Right," I say, a little impressed by how much thought Abaddon is putting into this.

In any case, I can now enter the building with ease. Just like he said, the security guard doesn't react to me at all. Thankful, I proceed.

The entrance is absolutely gorgeous. Looking back on my thirteen years of life experience, I think this is the most out of place I've ever felt. The same goes for the people walking around. Every single one of them is wearing very expensive-looking clothing as they confidently go about the interior. It almost feels like I've wandered into a different world.

For a little while, we move about the building. However, it's proving difficult to reach the room. I've barely even been outside my own neighborhood, so although this is just one building, it feels more like a labyrinth. If anyone had seen me, they'd definitely have called me aside.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop?"

"I'm looking for an elevator up to the guest rooms," I say. "As far as I can tell, the video was recorded on the top floor, probably in a room called a presidential suite."

"Isn't that one right there?"

"I can also see a staircase leading up on the other side."

"Well, why not pick one and give it a shot?" prompts Abaddon.

"All right," I reply, heading toward the elevator.

As I do, the elevator doors open, and someone who appears to be a guest steps inside. It's a young woman wearing a suit. She has neat, bobbed hair and a lot of makeup on, like one of those female office workers who really knows what she's doing. Or maybe she's the secretary of someone really powerful.

"I swear! What the hell has Sasaki gotten up to?!"

Just as I start to pay attention to her, a word spills from her mouth that I can't ignore.

It's the name of the person I love, after all.

The name of the person who loves me.

And yet, on any other occasion, I might not have cared. The last name Sasaki is extremely common in this country. In a hotel this big, at least one of the guests is bound to have it.

Recalling the video I saw in my apartment, however, I take a step forward.

"Abaddon, we're going with her," I say.

"Okay, okay."

Aware of the risks, I decide to follow the woman in the suit. I walk into the elevator behind her, then tuck myself away in a corner, careful not to touch her. My eyes naturally drift over to the buttons on the wall used to travel to other floors.

She presses the one with the highest number of all.

"Well, would you look at that?" says Abaddon playfully, his voice reverberating through the elevator. *"Your gut instinct might have been right on the mark."*

"....."

Ignoring him, I take a closer look at the woman in the suit. And then I realize something.

I know her.

She came to the apartment building to pick up my neighbor in the past. He told me she was a colleague from work.

"Oh? That's a lot of tension in your face. What'd you notice?"

"....." Obviously, I can't let the woman know we're here. Swallowing the complaint I would otherwise have directed at the demon beside me, I wait for the elevator to arrive at the top floor. Every second of every minute feels like an eternity. I stifle the urge to tap the woman's shoulder and demand to know what's going on.

In the meantime, she speaks to herself again. "I really need him to stay with me until retirement age..."

What is she talking about? I wonder incredulously. Stay with you until retirement age? Does she plan on marrying him, sucking him dry, then divorcing him when he hits retirement? I'd heard such behavior was getting more and more common. I remember reading an article about it in a magazine in the library. Even a neglected child like me is aware of these things.

No, wait a second, I think. He's single. He's not married. He told me he's

never even been divorced. That makes sense, since we haven't gotten married yet. We'll marry and become one in both name and substance.

"...Wow, if only you could see the look on your face right now," remarks Abaddon.

"....." But the only one currently at my side is a vile demon.

The woman can't have already secured her place beside him, right? *Ahh, if that's true, I can't just stand here quietly!* It occurs to me that this situation, where nobody else is around, is the perfect opportunity to speak to her.

"I really think you're better off calming down, personally!"

I don't need you to tell me that, I think. I am calm. I'm perfectly fine. All I have to do is give her a little touch to make her pass out anyway.

"....." I stare at the woman for a little while, agonizing over it in my mind.

Then I hear a *ding* as the elevator reaches the top floor.

The woman, done up in all that makeup, immediately gets out and begins walking confidently down the hallway. Since this is the top floor, it only has a few rooms. I don't see any other guests aside from us walking around—it's practically deserted up here.

Normally, I'd need to check the map to see where I'm going, but now I'm more interested in where this woman is headed. I start down the passage behind her.

"Where are you going? You just passed the map."

"I'm following her," I murmur under my breath. There's a little bit of distance between us now, so it should be fine.

"Considering your options, that's probably the easiest choice, but..." Abaddon looks at me and sighs.

Say what you want, I think. I won't be able to sleep at night until I find out what she's up to.

"....."

I trot along after the woman, who is taking big, intimidating strides. The rug on the floor is very fluffy. Its pile stands up straight, and it has a sheen to it. It would be far more comfortable to sleep on than my usual blanket. I feel guilty just walking on it with my dirty sneakers. I can't understand what goes on in the minds of rich people. Why would they do something so wasteful?

The dimness—probably a result of the indirect lighting—gives the place a high-class feeling, which is only underscored by the furnishings dotting the hallway. A lot of them are beyond my comprehension, but I'm sure someone

with a sense for such things would feel they had value. A child from a poor family like me could never understand.

“Oh, looks like we’ve arrived.”

“.....” My silent pursuit of the woman with the makeup ends as she stops in front of a door. She knocks on it—hard. The sound reverberates all the way down the hallway. Nobody inside the room responds, so she tries a few more times. Abaddon and I are just a few meters away, watching.

“This is the police! Open up!” she shouts after a few tries, the intimidation in her voice carrying all through the hall.

She’s a police officer? If that’s true, that means my neighbor is a police officer, too. But he told me himself he works in an office at a midsize company. Naturally, the first explanation I can think of is that he was lying—a white lie in order to protect someone close to him.

“.....”

“It really shows on your face whenever you’re thinking about him.”

Abaddon is speaking, but I don’t have the patience to listen. My mind goes blank. Is he actually dating this woman? An office romance? Why would he lie to me, then? Does he have feelings for me, too, and is that why he lied? That wouldn’t be so bad.

Still, I want him all to myself.

“.....”

As I’m panicking, the woman in front of the door moves. She takes a card out of her inside pocket and uses it to unlock the door. Apparently, she wasn’t lying when she said she was with the police. Otherwise, she couldn’t have gotten the key to the room.

Is my neighbor a police officer? Is she his colleague? Whatever the case, it’s clear he lied to me. That makes me very sad.

He just risked his life to save me, too. What was that all about, then?

Does this woman have charms I lack?

Now’s not the time to be thinking about this, I chide myself. *I’ll just have to be even bolder with my advances. I’m the one who’s supposed to be at his side—and nobody else.*

“Looks like it’s open. What will you do?” asks Abaddon.

“I’ll follow her inside and have a look,” I reply.

I step into the room after the woman. On the other side of the door is a small space that seems to be an entranceway. This place is supposed to be

some kind of impressive suite, so of course it's very spacious. I wonder if anyone inside could even hear the knocking.

The woman doesn't hesitate as she strides through the entranceway. There's another door beyond, leading into an expansive living space.

And that's where I finally find the person I've been looking for.

"It looks like your intuition was right on the money."

"....."

Here is the blond girl from the video on the news. She stands up from the couch and faces the woman in a defensive posture. She looks pretty tense. Age-wise, we're probably pretty close, but the cautious way she carries herself reminds me of a stray cat unaccustomed to humans.

And on the low table in front of the couch is the bird—a silver Java sparrow, the same as in the video. It's perched on a little tree, staring hard in our direction. I can feel a humanlike intelligence from it, like it's genuinely wary of the sudden intruders. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I can't dismiss the idea.

"You're Futarishizuka's psychic acquaintance, right?" demands the policewoman. "The one who visited the bureau before?"

"Wh-who are you? The door should have been locked!"

The blond girl and the woman are speaking two totally different languages. I understand the former, though I'm not sure what she means by *psychic* and *Futarishizuka*. But I know from context what she's after. She has probably come here as part of a police investigation. Considering the timing, it must be about that video on the news. But what would the police have to do with a video like that?

The blond girl, on the other hand, is completely incomprehensible to me. Her words sound like a foreign language, just like in the video.

"Yeah, I still can't understand a word you're saying," remarks the woman.

"Birdie, I still have a hard time understanding this world's language..."

I mentally prepare myself not to cry out just in case the bird starts talking.

This is the perfect chance to figure out how all these people are related to my neighbor. But as I watch, waiting for the right time to intervene, something else happens. A new person appears from another doorway and enters the living room.

"I've secured a different location, little one. We should move there at once

—”

The newcomer is a girl who can't be more than nine, wearing a red-and-purple kimono tinged with black. Her glossy black hair is very striking and reaches down to her waist. In one hand she grips a smartphone, and she wears *geta* on her feet—I'd heard them clap across the floor when she entered.

As soon as she steps into the room, she sees the woman in makeup and stops.

Then, looking disappointed, she continues. “Or not. We're already too late.”

Oh, that's right, I think. She was with him the day before yesterday. What on earth is going on here? Until just last month, there were never any women anywhere near him.

Or had he actually been hopping from one woman to the next, and I just never knew about it? If so, then the situation is dire. I need to join with him as soon as I can. After all, I'm the one who loves him the most. *I'll never let another woman steal him away.*

They might love him, but do they *understand* him? I'll accept him for who he is, no matter how wretched. In fact, the more wretched he is, the more I'll love him.

We're made for each other. I want to depend on him, and for him to depend on me, and for us to melt and mix into one another.

“Futarishizuka,” says the woman in makeup, “I know you've been working with Sasaki.”

“That makes things easy,” replies the little girl. “Leave this to me and go back to the bureau.”

“That blond girl—she's the psychic you're friends with, right?”

“And what would you do if I said yes?”

The kimono girl's attention is on the woman in makeup. She looks exactly like a Japanese doll in those old-fashioned clothes. Her hair is gorgeous, smoothly swaying this way and that at every casual movement.

I'd have long, straight hair if I undid my ponytail, too. But I certainly can't take care of my hair the way she does hers—you can tell by the color and sheen that our hair is completely different. I haven't even touched conditioner or any other hair product in several years. I wash myself, including my hair, with blocks of soap I steal from school, because if I used the stuff my mother buys, she'd be furious. In addition to my theft of leftover lunches, soap runs

are another of my regular procurement missions.

“I have some things I’d like to ask you about,” says the woman in makeup, “including the matter of the lizard falling from the sky,”

“Is that an order from the boss?” responds the kimono girl.

“No, but he will certainly order me to do so in the near future.”

“Then why don’t you sit quietly and wait for that to actually happen, hmm?”

The conversation keeps going—apparently, the two of them know each other. The blond girl maintains her defensive posture, silently watching them talk. She’s very clearly foreign, judging from her skin and eye color, so she probably can’t understand Japanese. She isn’t able to communicate with the woman in makeup at all.

In the meantime, a light flashes outside the window. *What was that?*

The answer comes an instant later when the living room’s window glass loudly shatters.

At first, the light blinds me—it reminds me of when the group of angels fired that strange laser.

“N-now what?!” exclaims the kimono girl.

“Urgh...,” grunts the woman in makeup.

“B-birdie!”

Immediately, I see the sparrow leap off his tree out of the corner of my eye.

I crouch down right away, wanting to pat myself on the back for not screaming. A moment later, I feel the glass shards spraying everywhere. Then a series of sounds, like large furniture falling over, make it very clear that I’m in danger. Fortunately, though, I don’t feel anything hit me.

Abaddon speaks from right beside me, his voice calm and collected. *“That child is floating in midair. Do you know who she is?”*

“...What are you talking about?” I ask, incredulously looking up and outside the window.

And there she is—a child floating in the air. She’s dressed strangely, too. She looks like a transforming heroine in a little girls’ anime. She must be one of those so-called magical girls who have proliferated in the last half century. But her clothing is torn in places and covered in dirt. She looks filthy as she floats there, just beyond the broken window. Considering where she is, it seems safe to assume she was the one who broke the glass.

“I will kill all psychics.”

As I watch her, she raises something that looks like a wand, before making her bloodthirsty declaration. She's only just appeared, and she's already saying some pretty scary stuff. *This girl must be crazy. Is she the Disciple of an angel or a demon?*

But that doesn't make sense. If she's a Disciple, an isolated space should have appeared. Which means she isn't a Disciple—she must be the angel or demon herself. But considering Abaddon's question, that doesn't make sense, either. Would he have asked me who it was if it was an angel or a demon?

While I puzzle over everything, the others begin talking again.

"H-how did you find out about this place?" stammers the kimono girl.

"I saw it on TV," the floating girl answers. "One of the big ones on the side of a building."

"Ah. I wasn't aware it had spread that far..."

The kimono girl seems to know this other kid dressed like a magical girl.

Like me, the floating girl has apparently seen the video on the news and come directly here. She seems to have caught wind of it from one of the giant moving displays affixed to the outer walls of city buildings, though I'm not certain why she's interested in the first place.

The kimono girl, however, looks over at the blond girl standing on the sofa and says, "You've really done it, haven't you?"

"....."

Wait, no, I think. She's not looking at the girl—she's looking at the bird on her shoulder. And why did yet another woman suddenly show up?

As far as I can tell, every single person here aside from the woman in the makeup is either in elementary or middle school. Was the man next door into that? Thinking back, I'd first met him when I was their age or a little younger.

That was a serious problem. After all, my body had suddenly begun to mature recently. Was he losing interest in me as a result?

No, that can't be, I think.

He should belong to me. And I should belong to him.

I can't stand by and take this.

"Abaddon," I say, "please make me visible."

"Don't blame me for whatever happens, okay?"

"I won't," I say with a nod.

My vision twists for a moment, giving me the same sensation as when he

made me invisible in front of the hotel building. And that seems to be the exact instant I appear, because every single person in the room, without exception, reacts to me.

The kimono girl's response is the most striking. "Wh-what could it possibly be now?!" she cries out, her voice carrying through the living room.

After that, the others all react in turn.

The woman in makeup takes a gun from her inside pocket and begins pointing it at everyone. The blond girl suddenly has what looks like a conductor's baton in her hand, and she waves it at us. The magical girl has been pointing her own wand into the room ever since making her violent declaration.

And I, unarmed, lower my center of gravity, ready to fight.

"I'm finished with this!" shouts the kimono girl. "I am *finished!* I care not what the rest of you do—just leave me out of it!" She heads out of the room, apparently fed up with the whole situation. The way she walks makes her seem like someone much older, and her antiquated style of speaking gives the same impression.

As soon as her back disappears from view, everyone in the room starts shouting at each other.

"Fine, then! I'll just have to drag every one of you back to the bureau with me!"

"I won't let any psychics escape. I *will* kill you."

"You know, you're all being awfully rude, barging in here like this!"

"He belongs to me, and I won't let anyone else have him."

We're all trying to speak at the same time, our various opinions and arguments reverberating through the suite. And I can't even understand one of them, so I don't know what she's saying. Plus, with everyone talking at once, I doubt anyone is listening to anyone else. I, for one, am annoyed at having to hear them at all.



“It looks like none of you are on the same page,” remarks Abaddon, though it’s unlikely anyone hears him.

Whether we are on the same page or not, my only wish is to be at *his* side.

Extra Story: <Welcome Party>

Ms. Futarishizuka had not only reserved a suite in a gorgeous luxury hotel for Lady Elsa, but she had organized a welcome party for our otherworldly guest in the separate dining room. Thanks in part to her considerable efforts, the party lacked for nothing.

Every one of the dishes lined up on the table was elaborate. Even Lady Elsa, who had lived a life of luxury as a noble in the otherworld, was smacking her lips over the food, smiling widely.

“I’d grown curious about this world’s cuisine from our previous walk through the city,” she said, “and it seems just as advanced as everything else here. I haven’t touched a single morsel that wasn’t incredibly tasty! And they all look gorgeous, too. I don’t think I’ve ever eaten such splendid dishes in all my life.”

“Please, please, what is the girl saying?” asked Futarishizuka.

“She’s in awe of all the food you prepared,” I responded.

“Oh? Well, isn’t that a delight! Please, eat until you drop. No need to hold back, now.”

Her repeated compliments were by no means empty flattery. The food was a huge perk for those of us joining in with her. This meal was the kind that, as an office worker, I’d only eaten a few times in my life. French’s cooking in the otherworld was delicious, but in terms of luxury, all the dishes here had it beat—just as Lady Elsa said.

Peeps is on the table in front of the meat, too, eating his little heart out. As his owner, I was a little worried about how it was possible for him to cram all that food into his small body. He had the power of magic on his side, though. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had some way of processing whatever he packed in.

“There are so many foods I’ve never seen before,” remarked Lady Elsa.

“But I know some of these.”

“Which ones might you happen to know, Lady Elsa?” I asked.

“This alcoholic beverage, for example. It looks just like the beer my father drinks!”

Her gaze went to the mug in her hands. It had beer in it. We’d gotten it for her as a substitute chaser to follow her Japanese sake. “You’re right,” I said. “Beer is the same over here.”

“It’s just that—well, I drank a little of it before, and... How should I put it? It tastes somehow...smoother than the kind my father drinks. They look almost exactly the same, but this one is more refreshing.”

“The beer Count Müller drinks is actually ale.”

“Ale?”

“That’s right. The kind you’re drinking today, however, is a lager.”

“There are so many varieties of beer...”

When I drank beer in the otherworld, it had also been ale. The beer itself was the same, but the manufacturing method was different. In this world, ale had a longer history, while lager was newer. That didn’t mean the latter was better, though—it very much depended on individual preference.

Ale was simpler to manufacture, so it was probably all over the place in the otherworld. In our world, though, lager was much more widespread. The reason had to do with the history of its major producers. Recently, however, ale was becoming more and more common thanks to a boom in popularity of local breweries.

“I quite like this sake,” continued Lady Elsa. “It’s so sweet!”

“I heard Futarishizuka wanted to pick out a brand that would be easy for you to drink,” I explained.

“Really? You’re so considerate. Thank you so much.”

“Please, please, what is the girl saying?” repeated Futarishizuka.

“She seems to be enjoying the sake you picked out.”

“Oh? Well, isn’t that a delight! Please, drink until you drop. No need to hold back, now.”

Judging by the label on the bottle, this sake was of the highest grade—pure rice, very special brew—from a brewery that was famous with those in the know. It wasn’t extremely expensive, but it was the type you couldn’t buy unless you reserved some well in advance. And you had to go to the shop in person—that sort of thing. Ever since the recent proliferation of flea-market

apps, they always sold for more than three times the original price on the internet.

Since I was here anyway, I had a cup of it myself. I might never get the chance to drink something like this again.

“It also feels strange to eat raw fish like this. I was scared at first, but now that I’ve tried it, I realize how good it is. Your world must have a roaring seafood industry!”

“Please, please, what is the girl saying?” repeated Futarishizuka.

“She seems to be enjoying the sashimi. She’s very impressed.”

“Oh? Well, isn’t that a delight! If there isn’t enough, I can always order more.”

Sashimi was amazing when paired with sake, and we had a veritable rainbow of high-quality ingredients here. It wasn’t only the basics like sea urchin and salmon roe—there was even scallop liver. That was a very rare treat, indeed. Given the generally off-putting appearance of shellfish, however, Lady Elsa kept her distance from them. But that only meant there was more for me. Peeps seemed pretty busy pecking at his meat, after all.

“Please, please, do you have a moment?” insisted Futarishizuka.

“What is it?”

“I’ve been feeling like a villager in a role-playing game for a while now,” she explained. “With you as the intermediary, the conversation has no variety—it’s painfully dull. Isn’t there anything you could do about it?”

“Well, I’m not sure...”

This seemed like one thing I couldn’t do anything about. And even if I could, I wouldn’t want to. The two of them not being able to speak to each other was beneficial to us. Knowledge of the otherworld—and particularly its magic—gave us a major advantage in modern Japan. I wanted to keep as tight a lid on that information as I could, and Peeps agreed.

“*If you ask for too much, the curse may progress,*” said Peeps, looking up from the plate at his feet. He had a little bit of sauce on his cheek—just adorable. I was overwhelmed by the urge to pat it dry with a napkin.

“And this bird of yours is always so cruel to me in particular...,” murmured Futarishizuka.

“*Of course I am. You would do well to reflect on your past actions.*”

“That means a lot coming from a little bird with sauce on his face.”

Peeps grunted, then quickly rubbed his face on a napkin. *Oh, crap,* I

thought. *That's even cuter. It's so birdlike! Futarishizuka, that was a really good move!*

"Little bird, come over here. I'll clean you off," offered Lady Elsa.

"No, I can't bother someone else with such a thing." Peeps ignored her beckoning and smeared his head against the napkin.

As I watched the two of them, a thought occurred to me. A thought about products for our business in the otherworld, that is.

"Peeps, I've got a question for you," I said.

"*What is it?*" he asked, lifting his head from the napkin and turning to me. The sauce was all gone.

"In your world, is there any sugar that you can eat a lot of without getting fat?"

"*What nonsense are you talking about? Are you drunk on the wine?*"

"I guess that means no."

"*When you eat sweets, you get fat. That is the way of things, is it not?*"

Something Lady Elsa said had made me think of it. She'd been quite casual in saying how sweet the sake was. No matter the world, people loved anything sweet. There seemed to be a lot of people in the upper echelons over there who would brew tea and eat sweets as a snack.

But recently, we'd been bringing a lot of sugar into the otherworld. According to Mr. Joseph, it was all being consumed by those of the upper class. Most of it ended up in sweet candy or bread before being delivered to the customers.

Naturally, this caused a problem: obesity.

We earthlings, at least, were in a pretty rough situation when it came to our bellies—starting around the age of thirty. If you ate and drank the same way you did when you were twenty, you'd get fat almost immediately. A few years of that would really start making your doctor angry.

When I was young, adults would talk about how you got fat right after hitting thirty. At the time, I'd laughed it off, thinking they were just overeating, but when I got there myself, it was a pretty big shock. I wished they'd told me more about *why*.

I would assume the same was true for the otherworld. The upper class especially would probably be struggling, since they didn't want for food on a daily basis. Wouldn't they start to view their plumper bellies as a problem?

Some, like Count Müller, were very fit even after passing thirty, probably

because they swung swords around every day. Not all nobles would be into that, though. I figured there were plenty of homebodies like me in their ranks.

I explained all that to Peeps and got a disinterested response. *“Eating makes you put on weight,”* he said. *“That is simply the way of things, yes?”*

“But isn’t it especially easy to get fat when you use sugar?”

“Indeed—of that there is no doubt.”

“This world has a kind of sugar you can eat without getting fat.”

“...Is this true?” My foodie sparrow gave a visible ruffle of his feathers. This had caught his interest.

It would be better to show him an example than to simply explain it. However, in this case, providing evidence presented a problem—changes in the human body came slowly. I could at least show him the real thing, though.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity, I asked Futarishizuka if we could get some artificial sweetener from a nearby supermarket. She then proceeded to contact someone working at the hotel, who bought it for us immediately. Apparently, that kind of service came with the room. If you had the money, you could get almost anything you wanted, it seemed. A person wearing an expensive-looking suit who appeared to be a butler came along and took care of everything we needed. I had to hand it to this high-class hotel.

Because of that, we got the white powder delivered to us within the hour. I sprinkled some on an empty serving dish, creating a little pile. I then placed the torn-open packet to the side, the words on its surface boldly announcing that it had zero calories.

Peeps courageously plunged his little beak right into the middle of the pile I’d made. He probably figured a little poison could be easily cured with healing magic anyway.

A moment later, he raised his voice in surprise. *“You can truly eat something this sweet as much as you want and not grow fat?”*

“Your stomach won’t absorb this type of sugar, so yes—you can eat however much you’d like and not put on weight,” I explained.

Peeps looked at me, his beak now snowy white with powder—yet another lovely sight.

After seeing the sparrow brave it, Lady Elsa reached in for some as well. She poked her index finger into it, then licked it off. Immediately, she cried, “This is so sweet!” Her enthusiastic voice echoed through the room.

“If what you say is true, then I believe this would be in high demand among noble women. The youth may be fine, but older people put on weight more easily. Many refrain from eating very much because of it.”

“Oh? I guess that’s the same as this world, too.”

“Sugar you can add to tea without limit would be a delight for them, to be sure.”

“Then maybe I’ll propose it to Mr. Joseph the next time we see him.”

“It will likely not sell as well as sugar, though. I believe you should limit the supply and sell it at a high price to richer nobles. Oh, and we’ll want to avoid imitations entering the market. Perhaps, if we are raising the price, we should spend more money on its packaging.”

“Yeah. I was just thinking the same thing, Peeps.”

He was so reliable, immediately sharing his perspective. I was sure he was already calculating all sorts of ways to develop a business around artificial sweeteners. Maybe there would come a time when he’d be concerned over his own weight, even if only a little.

“What’s this? Considering yet another wily business scheme, are we?” chimed in Futarishizuka after listening to us. An indecent grin spread across her face.

“No, no. Don’t make it sound so scandalous,” I insisted.

“Sugar substitutes don’t seem like such a big deal to me,” she replied.

“They would probably be a valuable commodity over there.”

“You know, I might just let slip what you’re doing to that girl.”

“Even if you tried, you two can’t understand each other’s language.”

“I have ways of conveying the value of an item to her, at least.”

“If it sells well over there, we’ll be adding even more onto your payments. Could you possibly procure about one potato sack’s worth of sweetener for us?”

“Oh, will you, now? Well, only if you promise to pay up.”

“Of course. I promise.”

“Very well, then.”

“Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka.”

And with that, I’d managed to get our collaborator’s agreement. Thinking about what kinds of products might sell for a high price in the otherworld’s marketplace was fun in and of itself, regardless of the actual results. I’d gotten into the habit lately of thinking about such things whenever I went out

to buy something for myself.

And for the sake of my pet Java sparrow, I'd work even harder to succeed.

Afterword

And with that, *Sasaki and Peeps* has reached its third volume. It's only been four months since Volume 1 went on sale, and I can't begin to express my gratitude to everyone who has followed so much story in such a short time. I'll keep on working my hardest to meet your expectations in the future.

Thanks to all of you, there are now plans for Volume 4 to go on sale. I'm actually working on it right now. I'm hoping to include even bigger story developments in the future. The tale of Sasaki and Peeps will continue to accelerate, so I hope you'll stick with the series until the end.

Sasaki and Peeps has also been made into a manga drawn by Preji Osho, currently being serialized in *Shonen Ace Plus*. The sheer level of artistic talent combined with excellent composition has made reading it incredibly enjoyable, even for me. My gratitude toward Preji Osho is unending. I mean it, thank you so much.

It's well worth a close read to experience the vivid character expressions that don't come across in novel form, as well as the original comedic elements scattered throughout, and the gorgeous backgrounds filled with little references. I believe even those of you who have read the novels will be able to enjoy a fresh take on the story.

The first compiled volume of the manga is scheduled to go on sale on June 25. I would be very happy if you picked it up, even if you don't read the novel.

While I'm at it, I'd also like to thank Kantoku, who once again provided the spectacular illustrations for this volume, suggesting elaborate scenes despite being so busy. I can't thank you enough—seeing your illustrations of the story has been one of my greatest joys as this series continues.

As those of you who have read the novels likely already know, Volume 3 is full of illustrations of the beautiful girls we've already met in previous books. All of them are brilliant and lively, and I was on the edge of my seat from the

time I received the rough drafts. I couldn't wait to see how they turned out.

I'd like to sincerely thank O, my editor, and everyone else in the MF Bunko J editorial department, including everyone who worked on sales promotions. As I'm writing this afterword, I'm incredibly excited, because they're creating an extra promotional video for the series—though I haven't seen it just yet.

I'd also like to extend a heartfelt thanks to the sales teams, proofreaders, designers, bookstores throughout Japan, digital distributors, and everyone else who has given their time to this project, supporting me in incredible ways ever since Volume 1.

I very much hope that you'll all continue to support *Sasaki and Peeps*, a story originating from Kakuyomu and brought to you now by MF Bunko J.

(Buncololi)



The neighbor, Lady Elsa,
Miss Hoshizaki, and
the magical girl... These
heroines of various worlds
are about to take the story
in a new direction.

—And
then,
a giant
monster
attacks!

It's time for yet another
crazy request from
Section Chief Akutsu.

“Sasaki,
can't
you do
something
about
that?”

Can this corporate
drone and his pet
sparrow resolve
the situation
without exposing
their identities?!

Sasaki and Peeps 4

scheduled for release
in summer 2023!!!!!!

Goldenagave.jp/m4d/racts.com

Abaddon

*"I'm a demon. And from now on,
you will be fighting angelic Disciples
in my stead."*



Faction Death Game

A high-ranking demon who teamed up with the neighbor when she joined the death game. Usually appears as a little boy who would look perfect in a pair of shorts, but his true form is a gross, wet mass of flesh. Tends to get preachy and is treated coldly by the neighbor.

Abaddon

The Nerd

“Wait, Shizu, don’t tell me you let
Daddy live.”



Faction Modern Psychics

The leader of the anti-government organization Ms. Futarishizuka previously belonged to. One of only a handful of rank-A psychics. Although he comes across as a typical nerd, his powers have brought him repeated success and made him pushy and aggressive. He takes care to appear low-key, but occasionally, one can glimpse his inner party animal.

Prince Lewis

“How curious, that you would go so far.”

Faction Otherworld

The first prince of the Kingdom of Herz. Herz has split into two factions over royal succession, one supporting Prince Lewis, the other, Prince Adonis. Until a few years ago, he was viewed as an unwanted child and his existence kept secret.

Lewis

Sasaki and Peeps 3

*This material was originally included below the dust jacket in the Japanese version

Psychic Battles, Magical Girls, and Death Games Can't Contend with Otherworldly Fantasy

~Or So I Thought, but Now a Storm Is Brewing~

Buncoli

Illustration by Kantoku



Time flies, doesn't it? Volume 3 is already out.



Not even half a year has passed since the first, however.



Now that you mention it, it's only been four months, huh?



Is this common in your world?



For a light novel, it's apparently exceptionally fast.



Ah, I see.



Occasionally, you'll see a couple of volumes two months apart, but I don't know if I've ever seen three volumes come out within four months.



Then we should strive to continue at this pace.



I'll put every fiber of my being into it. I hope you will continue to support me.



As for our look behind the scenes, this one's about Peeps.



What about me?



Apparently, the author considered other animals for you to be reincarnated into.



Oh? This is the first I'm hearing of it. What else was considered?



A hamster, a ferret, a parakeet...



You mentioned a hamster in the book. Why not a ferret or a parakeet?



Ferrets are pretty expensive, and certain parakeets are really, really noisy.



Ah, yes. You mentioned your lack of funds at the beginning. I assume the thickness of your walls was similarly lacking...



So that was the thought process that led the author to settle on a Java sparrow.



There was more consideration involved in the decision than I had thought.

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