



The Psychics and the Magical Girl Drag the
Death Game Crew into the Fight

~Alert! Giant Sea Monster Approaching Japan~

4



Buncololi
Illustration by
Kantoku

Sasaki Peeps

Sasaki and Peeps

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An Unexpected After-Party with the Section Chief

A young man and woman are standing on a beach at sunset. The man is in the foreground, seen from the back, wearing a dark suit. The woman is to his left, also in a dark suit, looking towards him. The background shows the ocean and a bright sunset with large, colorful clouds.

"It's been years since I looked out at the ocean like this."

"You never go to the beach with friends or family?"

"I think the last time was when I was in elementary school."

"It would have made for a nice change of pace if it were a little quieter."

"Then how about coming here sometime in the future for a break?"

"Oh, are you inviting me on a date?"

"No, I'd never..."

An After-Work Reward

〈Futarishizuka〉

She looked comfortably warm with the towel around her neck, and compared to the sailor uniform I'd seen her in for the past few months, it made her seem quite a bit more mature.

“You’re back, mister.”

〈The Neighbor〉



Futarishizuka's recent posts



08/08/20xx

Gacha King @shizuchan_mk2

That time I maxed out the new char in 10 days



1



DAI-SUKE @daisuke0924

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

No way, that must be fake lol



Gacha King @shizuchan_mk2

Replying to @daisuke0924

Mad I beat you to it? lol.

Bet you are lol



DAI-SUKE @daisuke0924

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

God otakus are so gross



Gacha King @shizuchan_mk2

Replying to @daisuke0924

Oh, but I'm a beautiful girl, you know



DAI-SUKE @daisuke0924

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

Yeah ok



DAI-SUKE @daisuke0924

Replying to @shizuchan_mk2

Where u live?

Sasaki and Peeps

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Buncololi

Illustration by Kantoku


New York

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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, Futarishizuka, 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.”

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

But then a new force rose to block their path—they learned that a death game had begun in modern Japan.

Sasaki ended up embroiled in a proxy war between angels and demons, where he found his next-door neighbor in quite the situation. Stuck without Peeps's help, Sasaki risked his life to rescue her. And that's when he learned about a fourth faction—unaffiliated with psychics or magical girls.

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

Of course, Sasaki's boss wanted to know all about it. With Section Chief Akutsu suspicious of his subordinate's true identity, Sasaki leveraged his knowledge of the chief's backroom deals—information he received from Futarishizuka—to level the playing field.

But that comfort wouldn't last.

Looking for Sasaki, his various acquaintances gathered at the hotel he was using as a base. His neighbor, Lady Elsa, Miss Hoshizaki, and the magical girl—four young women with vastly different backgrounds—have finally come face-to-face with one another.

<Crossover>

(The Neighbor's POV)

I've known the man living in the apartment next door for a few years or so, ever since I was in elementary school. During that time, I'd never sensed so much as a hint of the opposite sex around him. In fact, he hardly even hung out with other men; his days were spent simply commuting between home and work.

It was a dull lifestyle, but I appreciated it. It gave me a sense of camaraderie with him, like we were two of a kind.

Recently, though, I've been seeing a whole lot of women in his vicinity.

Hunting them down led me here—an expensive hotel in the city. In one of its guest rooms, I encountered a police officer wearing an awful lot of makeup, an adolescent blond girl about my age who speaks a strange language, and a child dressed up in a magical girl costume like a character from a children's anime.

I've never seen any of them before, so naturally, I don't know their names. That lack of knowledge poses a problem since I have to communicate with Abaddon. I quickly decide to call them Makeup, Blondie, and Magical Girl.

The four of us are currently staring one another down in the hotel room.

Our surroundings basically resemble a living room, but the glass window facing outside is shattered, and wind is howling in through it. Given how high up we are, it provides us an extensive view of the clear blue sky and the city below.

It seems safe to assume that Magical Girl is to blame for this disaster, since she's floating just outside the new ventilation source with her wand at the ready. She must have been behind the blinding light a few moments ago, too.

The rest of us stand inside the room, ready to fight. Makeup has a gun in her hands, and Blondie is holding what looks like a conductor's baton. Meanwhile, I confront the others unarmed. I'm feeling a bit underprepared, to be honest.

Another young girl, this one in a kimono, is nervously peeking out from around the corner at the end of the hallway. She's the only one I've had contact with before; the man next door introduced her as a work colleague. He added

that she's actually an adult, despite looking for all the world like a little kid.

Geez, does every last one of them have to be female?

"Personally, I recommend we get ourselves the hell outta here," says Abaddon.

"Unfortunately, I don't agree," I reply.

"If that attack just now had hit you, it would have been game over, you know."

From his place next to me, Abaddon is looking at Magical Girl with a troubled expression. Apparently that burst of light and the shattered window really *were* her fault.

But in that case, why are all of us unharmed? I don't remember doing anything in particular. And based on what Abaddon said, he probably didn't intervene, either. Besides, he said himself he couldn't do much outside an isolated space.

Had Magical Girl purposely aimed away from us? Or had someone else made it so only the window suffered any damage?

"Please, at least let me verify their relationship to him," I say to Abaddon.

"I agree that would benefit us both, but..."

Nobody except me can hear Abaddon talking. To everyone else, it probably looks like I'm muttering to myself. In fact, it seems my strange words have prompted all three of them to turn their gazes—and their weapons—toward me.

A moment after I notice this, Makeup reacts. Her pistol is trained on me.

"Relationship to him?" she says.

I'd be lying if I'd said I wasn't scared. But even more than the firearm, I'm terrified of my neighbor being taken away from me. Compared to all the crises I've been through in the death game, this situation doesn't yet warrant panic. I need to focus on gathering information. *Depending on what I find out, I might be able to help him*, I think. This idea fills me with energy, and my chest swells with a sense of purpose.

"Who do you mean by 'him'?" Makeup continues. "You wouldn't happen to be one of Sasaki's acquaintances, would you?"

"You know his name?" I answer. "Then what's *your* relationship with him?"

"I'm his coworker," she replies. "So which group of psychics did you come from?"

I cringe a little when I hear Makeup say the word *psychic*. Isn't she a little old for silly fantasies? Isn't she embarrassed talking like that? These questions only make me even more curious about what's going on with her.

But for the moment, it's more important to pry into her relationship with *him*. "He told me he worked for a private company."

“Sasaki recently transferred,” Makeup explains. “Did he not tell you?”

“.....”

I’m irritated at this complete and total stranger acting like she knows everything about my neighbor when *I’m* the one who understands him best. And it frustrates me to hear her casually use his name without so much as a “mister.” But I’m happy to have an answer to one of the mysteries, at least.

I now know my neighbor didn’t lie. He probably only met Makeup and became her coworker after starting his new job. That meant everything he told me had been true—he was an office worker before.

“I answered your question, so now it’s your turn,” Makeup continues. “I’ll ask again. Where are you from, psychic? I *know* you’re not with the bureau. Are you from Futarishizuka’s old group?”

“I’ve met her before,” I say, glancing over at the kimono-clad girl near the entrance to the living room, “but I don’t remember hearing anything about a bureau. Or psychics, for that matter.”

The girl is still watching us from her hiding spot behind the wall. Thanks to her youthful appearance, she gives off the impression of an overwhelmed child. But when I listen a little more closely, I can hear her muttering things like “Give me a break, already” and “Oh, fuck!” Her voice is a little creaky and drawn out, like an old lady’s.

“Then are you a stray psychic?” asks Makeup. “Did she and Sasaki scout you?”

“I don’t think it’s very polite to call someone a stray on your first meeting.”

“Oh well, I’m sorry. I guess it would be faster to ask *her* instead.”

“.....”

Calling someone rude while they’re pointing a gun at my face should have been out of the question. But I *still* haven’t figured out Makeup’s relationship with my neighbor, and that’s making me rebellious. *I think I hate this person*, I muse.

But as Makeup and I exchange words, something else happens—Magical Girl, who was still floating outside the window, moves.

“I will kill all psychics.”

As these unsettling words leave her mouth, she thrusts out the cute-looking wand in her hand. Like before, I see a light glimmer at its tip.

At the same time, Abaddon leaps out in front of me. The next moment, my vision fills up with white light, and a huge roaring noise starts up and continues for several seconds. It sounds like a train or a big truck passing right in front of

my nose.

Eventually, as the glow begins to dim, the room comes back into view.

I look around hastily, but nothing seems to have changed. Last time, the attack shattered the windowpane and messed up the room, but this time, it appears to have done nothing.

Magical Girl herself seems confused by it. “Blocked again,” she murmurs. “It’s just like what happened with the magical middle-aged man...”

She glances around the room just as I did, probably looking for whoever blocked the attack. Abaddon used some kind of invisible barrier against a bunch of angels before—maybe it was something like that. According to him, however, he was essentially powerless outside isolated spaces, so it was probably someone else.

“Birdie, um, just now, w-was that...?”

“.....”

Blondie stammers something. I still have no idea what she’s saying, though her gaze appears to be focused on the sparrow perched on her shoulder.

Considering her and Makeup’s surprised expressions, I doubt either of them is responsible. That leaves the phony little girl, Futarishizuka. Or maybe someone else is hiding just out of sight. Either way, it’s all speculation for now.

“Nobody move!” yells Makeup suddenly. A series of high-pitched cracks pierce the air. Her gun is aimed at Magical Girl, and its bullets zoom at the girl’s legs. The only reason I know where the bullets are headed, however, is because they stop dead in midair ten or twenty centimeters away from the girl in the frills.

The metal objects are frozen in place, like bugs caught in a spiderweb. Was that what stopped the beam attack moments ago? But just as I’m considering this, Makeup provides the answer.

“Ugh. There’s that Magical Barrier again...”

What kind of name is that? I think, before a sudden thought strikes me. With Abaddon’s help, I think I could take on Makeup.

“*Oh, so you’re going after her, then?*” interrupts my partner teasingly, noticing my gaze.

“.....”

This woman must be crazy and out for blood if she’s willing to pull the trigger on a child with no hesitation. It would be best to take her out of the equation sooner rather than later, since there’s no guarantee she won’t point her gun at me next. And that mystery barrier won’t necessarily protect me again.

I gesture with my chin—my only instruction to Abaddon. He rolls his eyes and sighs, then drifts through the air toward Makeup.

Killing may be forbidden, but the demon already used his powers once before to knock someone unconscious for a short period. Compared to his ability to massacre angels and Disciples left and right inside an isolated space, on the outside he is, at best, a stun gun. Abaddon once told me that half of this proxy war consisted of the Disciples' fights with one another on the outside—and I'm really starting to feel that now.

Unfortunately, Blondie quickly shatters my plans.

“Hey! What’s the big idea, destroying someone else’s house like this?!” she yells, shaking with anger. As always, I can’t understand what she’s saying. But as she speaks, she waves the conductor’s baton in her hand.

Immediately, there is a change in the room. Something emerges just above the floor between the other two women and me. It looks like some kind of magical circle. And then, abruptly, a humongous icicle shoots up from it, high enough to reach the ceiling and thick enough that an adult wouldn’t be able to put their arms all the way around it.

“Whoa?!”

The first victim is Abaddon, who’d just passed that point on the floor. Had the magic circle not appeared first, that icicle might have skewered him, but he immediately twists and just barely avoids such a fate. Unfortunately, he can’t evade it completely, and it tears a shallow cut in his leg.

As this happens, everyone focuses in on him. Apparently, now that he’s taken damage, he is no longer invisible.

“Huh?! Why’s there another one...?” Blondie sounds confused; evidently, she wasn’t aiming for him. I can’t tell what she’s saying, but from the panicked way she’s looking at Abaddon, her attack was only meant as a distraction.

Makeup and Magical Girl sound baffled as well, just as they were when I appeared.

“An invisibility power?” wonders Makeup aloud. “Is he with the girl in the uniform?”

“Another psychic. I must kill him,” says Magical Girl.

A white mist begins to emanate from the surface of the ice pillar; it must be just as chilly as it looks. If Blondie can produce several of these in succession, it will pose a big problem for us. She’d be even more of a threat than Makeup’s gun.

At this point, our plan is ruined.

“My, my, coincidences are a bitch,” says Abaddon.

“Coincidence?” I reply. “You don’t think this is a result of hubris?”

“In that case, you must be careful not to make the same mistake again.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Abaddon lifts into the air, floating away from the pillar and back to my side, I assume to keep me safe from Blondie’s ice. Compared to Makeup, the foreign girl looks much calmer. Her strength, however, is fiendish. Maybe that conductor’s baton in her hand serves a similar purpose to the Magical Girl’s staff.

A terrible grin spreads across Makeup’s face. “How nice of you to provide me with a weapon!” she declares. Abaddon only has a moment to shudder before she launches into a run. Her hand reaches toward the icicle growing out of the floor.

What is she trying to do? I wonder, baffled.

A moment later, all becomes clear. The tree trunk–size pillar collapses, melting away in an instant. All that water does not, however, fall to the floor in a puddle. For some reason, it stays floating in midair, as though in zero gravity.

“My reputation’s on the line here. I need to bring at least one of you in!” she shouts as the water begins to twist and writhe like a living creature, extending snakelike to launch at Blondie, Magical Girl, and Abaddon and me. The watery whips are *fast*. Before I know it, one is almost upon me.

I try to jump to the side to avoid it, but the water follows me. *How annoying*, I think as the water comes right up to my nose. *Oh no*.

But Abaddon acts in the nick of time, shoving me away. I fall backward toward the floor, but a moment later, his arms are around my waist, and he’s scooped me up to lie across his arms, like a princess.

The water shoots by just overhead. Abaddon kicks off the ground, and I wind up in the air with him. Naturally, my eyes dart to the other two to see how they’ve handled the situation. Magical Girl has blocked the water using some sort of invisible shield, while Blondie has created a wall of fire in front of her to vaporize it.

Meanwhile, I’m hurtling around in Abaddon’s arms.

“They don’t look nearly as silly as we do,” I comment.

“You were the one who used her reward on something stupid. We don’t have many cards to play here.”

“.....”

When he puts it like that, there isn’t much I can say.

The water is still chasing us—and there’s more of it now, since the liquid originally aimed at Abaddon has combined with that coming after me. Even the water previously stuck to Magical Girl’s barrier is now heading for us—apparently Makeup decided she couldn’t hit Magical Girl and redirected her efforts.

Plus, Makeup is standing directly in front of the shattered window, deviously blocking our exit.

“Whoa, there! Time for my grand entrance! What a perfect opportunity to earn some favors!”

Mere moments after Abaddon and I start flying around the living room, we hear an energetic voice from the corner. I look over to see the phony little girl. She has burst out from the passage leading farther into the suite and is now charging for the water-manipulating Makeup. I’ve met this woman once before. Can I assume her remark means she’s taking our side?

“Wait a minute, Futarishizuka!” exclaims Makeup. “Why are you siding with *them*?! You’re a member of the bureau, aren’t you?!”

“Oh, but I’m not siding with them,” she explains. “I’m just doing my best to resolve the situation.”

As she moves toward Makeup, the water following us veers off course, shooting between Makeup and the phony little girl as the latter’s wooden geta clap against the floor. All the liquid combines as Makeup braces for an attack.

Why is she so afraid of that tiny girl? I wonder—but not for long. The girl in question covers several meters instantly to come within striking distance of her target. With a swing of her arm, she scatters the water between them. Some of it freezes right after to block her, only to shatter under the force of her fist.

Finally, she leaps up and lands right next to Makeup. Apparently, her physical abilities are well beyond what her appearance would suggest.

“It’d be nice if *you* could pull off something like that,” I remark.

“*Come on. Don’t you remember how cool I am in isolated spaces?*”

This “Futarishizuka”—I think that’s the name of some kind of plant—was with my neighbor before, too. Maybe it’d be best to ask *him* who all these people are, including her. I don’t want to annoy him with a bunch of questions, but at the very least, I need him to explain this Makeup woman calling herself his colleague.

“Checkmate.”

“Urgh...”

In a flash, Futarishizuka is right before Makeup’s eyes, thrusting her fingers

toward the other woman's nose. Makeup tries to aim her gun, but with Futarishizuka already so close, she's having a hard time. The gun's barrel ends up awkwardly jabbing into her opponent's side.

But judging by their positions, Makeup should have the advantage. And yet her expression is bitter, while the phony little girl's is relaxed and full of confidence, despite the gun barrel pressing against her.

"I'm so cool, right?" she says lazily, her gaze flicking over to Blondie for some reason.

Was her previous remark directed not at me, but the blond girl? Come to think of it, Futarishizuka was here even before Makeup arrived. And I'm pretty sure I remember her saying something to Blondie about moving to a different base. Personally, the bird on the girl's shoulder also bothers me. Despite everything going down in this room, it has stubbornly stayed put.

"I suppose the question now is: If they're not demons or Disciples, why do they have such power?"

"Are you sure you haven't just forgotten what the other demons look like?"

"My, my. Could it be you're doubting the words of your neighbor?"

"...That isn't what I meant."

No longer under threat from the water, Abaddon and I return to the floor. Unfortunately, the lull in the action lasts only a second—this time, it's Magical Girl's turn.

A beam of light shoots out from the tip of her staff. Compared to the attack that broke the window, this one is a lot smaller. It fires straight ahead, thick as a telephone pole, toward Futarishizuka and Makeup.

The former shoves the latter in the chest to get her out of the way, and both of them fall backward in opposite directions. The beam blazes through the space left behind. Makeup is unscathed, but one sleeve of the other girl's kimono is scorched.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" she demands, raising her voice.

"I will kill all psychics," responds Magical Girl flatly.

"I seem to recall us fighting on the same side not long ago!"

Makeup doesn't waste a second. "Futarishizuka?" she cuts in. "Are you working with the magical girl? But you're a bureau member!"

"W-wait, hold on. It's not what you think! It was just a temporary—"

After so boldly bursting onto the scene, the phony little girl is taking criticism from all sides. Still, considering her actions, it seems like she'd meant what she said about trying to resolve the situation. She *had* saved Makeup just now.

Their little exchange also informs me that the two of them know each other, and that means my neighbor was being honest when he referred to them as colleagues. The last two unknowns are Magical Girl and Blondie. And it seems the phony little girl knows both of them as well.

If I want to figure out what's going on, the kimono girl is the key. *Maybe I should try to get on her good side.*

"She saved you; shouldn't you at least thank her?" I say to Makeup. "As a guardian of law and order and an elder, you should be setting a good example."

"A-an elder?!" Makeup exclaims, turning to me with a shocked expression.

Apparently, that comment really bothered her. Come to think of it, whenever the male students call our female teachers old at school, they blow their top no matter how nice they usually are. Women of her age must be pretty fussy about that stuff. Will I react the same way when I get older?

"Well, now. Someone's got the right idea," says Futarishizuka.

"Could you be any more shameless?" Makeup retorts. "You clearly just used me to save yourself."

"It doesn't matter, ma'am," I say. "Her actions still saved you."

"Uh, could you not call me *ma'am*?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm not that old yet."

"Well, you're the oldest one here."

One of us might be a "little girl" of unknown age, but everyone aside from Makeup is clearly a minor. She, meanwhile, is not only wearing a suit but also toting a gun and calling herself a police officer. I can tell from how sharp her movements are that she isn't a new recruit, either. Even if she skipped university, she'd be at least twenty. If she didn't, she'd be well on her way to thirty. The thick makeup must be an attempt to look younger. In other words, she's definitely a *ma'am*.

She doesn't seem to agree, though.

"I'm still in high school!" she insists.

"...You might wish you were, but that doesn't change reality," I say. Her remark is so pathetic that even a weirdo like me can't help but cringe.

This must be what they call *chuunibyō*—the second year of middle school disease. Every grade has at least one kid who starts spouting nonsense with a straight face. But a grown woman doing it feels downright dangerous. I start to wonder if she has a screw loose somewhere.

Plus, she still has a gun in her hands. I guess even she managed to pass the

civil service exam. Adult society can be completely incomprehensible sometimes.

“Wh-why are you looking at me like that?” she asks.

“I understand that, from the viewpoint of society, I’m not exactly normal,” I explain. “But I’ve never felt a need to change myself to fit in. I thought it was pointless. But after talking to you, I’m starting to rethink things.”

“I’m telling you: I’m really in high school! I’m still a student!”

“*Aha. So secondhand embarrassment is the best way to make you self-reflect,*” Abaddon interjects.

Makeup is getting desperate. *I’d rather not put any more weird thoughts in Abaddon’s head, though.*

“Stop talking already,” says Magical Girl, raising her staff for a third time. “I will kill all psy—”

“Don’t you know how to say anything else, little girl?” the girl in the kimono scolds her.

“.....”

Magical Girl stops what she’s doing and glares at the one who interrupted her. Futarishizuka has done an excellent job of postponing the next beam, but it could go off at any time by accident, so the threat remains.

Blondie stands by not far away, with that sparrow still on her shoulder.

Magical Girl and Makeup are facing off, neither making any progress as I begin to hear police and ambulance sirens in the distance. At this rate, we’ll all be surrounded by Makeup’s friends and captured. Because of how much destruction Magical Girl has wrought, we’ll never be able to talk our way out of it.

If I’m taken to the police station, will my mother come to pick me up? I might have to cause a police officer to faint in order to escape. *Ah, a wanted girl with a criminal record at my age? That would spell the end of my life with him.*

“Abaddon,” I say, “it pains me to say this, but I’ve changed my mind. I think we should withdraw.”

“*I agree. I just wish you’d made the decision earlier.*”

“Would you mind bringing me out through that window?”

“*Just leave it to me!*”

Following my instruction, he once again puts his arm around me. I’m not very happy to be held by a man other than my neighbor—but you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

Just then, Magical Girl makes a move as if by instinct.

“I will not let any psychics escape.”

She’s updated her wording, perhaps a result of the kimono girl’s reprimand. But just like before, she fires a beam from her staff.

“Abaddon!”

“*We’re fine. I saw it coming.*”

He nimbly flips through the air to shake off the telephone pole–size beam, avoiding a direct hit. But as he does, some kind of invisible shield appears between Magical Girl and the rest of us. Whatever it is, it causes the beam to suddenly disperse.

It has to be the same phenomenon we’ve seen several times before. But who on earth is causing it? I wonder if it’s even necessary to dodge the beams at all.

As I turn to watch, I feel a sharp pain in my toe. It seems I stubbed it against the wall.

“Ow...”

“*Whoops, sorry.*”

“.....”

I almost criticize Abaddon for not being more careful. But I was the one who decided to stay here even after he advised me to withdraw. *I’ve already asked enough of him.* I shut my mouth and endure the pain. *That must be why his apology was so casual,* I think.

But just then, I hear a voice.

“Uh, would everyone mind pausing what they’re doing for a moment?”

And there, in that raucous living room, I catch sight of the face I’m always longing to see.



After my quarrel with Mr. Akutsu, I fled the bureau. Whatever happened now, I needed to report the situation to Peeps and Ms. Futarishizuka, so I went straight to the hotel where Lady Elsa was staying. For now, I decided not to worry about the strange flying object I’d witnessed while changing trains.

I hurried through the crowd of other patrons toward the entrance, but just before I could step into the building, something fell from above me.

I took a closer look. *Is that shattered glass?*

“Huh...?”

Small glass shards were tumbling down, making a pattering sound as they hit the ground. Nearby hotel guests noticed, too, and stopped what they were doing.

Soon everyone was moving away and looking up. I followed suit, first backing several meters out from the entrance, then turning my gaze to the building's upper floors.

And that's when I saw something floating in the sky.

It was pretty far away—almost at the roof of the high-rise hotel. From the ground, it appeared no bigger than a fingernail. But I could almost make out the shape of a person—hovering there with nothing to stand on.

If memory serves, that's right about where our room is.

A closer look revealed a whole lot of...pink?

“.....”

Great, yeah. Okay. I should probably report this to the section chief. It's gonna be really awkward calling him so soon after leaving like that. Just as I thought this, the phone in my pocket started to vibrate—the one from the bureau, not my private phone. The world already knew Lady Elsa's whereabouts, so I'd brought it along this time instead of leaving it at home. I figured there wasn't any additional info the chief could pry out of me at the moment, so I took the call.

“Yes, this is Sasaki.”

“It's Akutsu. You may already be aware, but we've confirmed the magical girl's appearance nearby. I need you to get there immediately. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people in the area, so I've already dispatched additional personnel. I want you to cover this up, posthaste.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Also, Hoshizaki is already there.”

“Wait, she is?”

“Don't misunderstand me—it wasn't my decision. She acted alone.”

“I see...”

She'd probably gathered the specifics from news footage and the internet and gallantly marched right onto the scene. The bureau provided extra pay for work done outside normal hours, both day and night. Rushing in on her own early in the morning sounded very like Miss Hoshizaki, so I believed the chief right away.

“If possible, try to secure her unharmed.”

“Understood, sir.”

Incidentally, this conversation did not betray a hint of our earlier discussion. The chief's usual, flat way of talking almost made me doubt he was the same person I argued with before. *Talk about being quick to change gears.* Thanks to

his professionalism, though, I could simply listen and give short answers.

The call ended, and I returned the phone to my pocket and dashed for the hotel building. The staff had already been informed—I flashed my police badge at the front desk to try to get inside, and the clerk immediately gave me a key to the room I was after. With it in hand, I took the elevator up.

Once I reached the correct floor, I proceeded down the hallway to the room. Using the key I'd been given, I bypassed the door's auto-lock. And as soon as it opened, I heard people shouting.

“But I'm still in high school!”

“...You might wish you were, but that doesn't change reality.”

I knew those voices—it was Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor.

Wait. What's going on here? Peeps was with them, so I doubted things had gotten too out of hand. Since I introduced Lady Elsa as a psychic, it should be possible for the sparrow to use magic. And I already made her promise not to use magic herself.

“Wh-why are you looking at me like that?”

“I understand that, from the viewpoint of society, I'm not exactly normal. But I've never felt a need to change myself to fit in. I thought it was pointless. But after talking to you, I'm starting to rethink things.”

“I'm telling you: I'm really in high school! I'm still a student!”

As Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor quibbled, I carefully stepped inside. The voices were definitely coming from the living room. I passed through the entranceway and peeked into the room in question.

There I found all the people I'd figured would be present.

Floating outside the window was the magical girl, staff in hand. Lady Elsa was in the room with Peeps on her shoulder. My neighbor was there with that Abaddon boy next to her. And glaring at them was Miss Hoshizaki, still trying to prove her high school credentials.

The window glass was broken, and the interior was a total mess. I could easily guess that the magical girl had fired her Magical Beam into the room. I saw water soaking into several areas, too; probably Miss Hoshizaki letting loose. Personally, I was very interested in where the water had come from—there was quite a lot of it.

“Would you mind bringing me out through that window?”

“*Just leave it to me!*”

“I will not let any psychics escape.”

I watched as the scene in the living room unfolded. Abaddon picked up my

neighbor, then floated into the air. The magical girl readied a Magical Beam. That was bad. I was sure Peeps could handle it, but nevertheless, I hurried into the room.

That very moment, a beam shot before my eyes. Abaddon, still carrying my neighbor, dodged out of the way. At the same time, some kind of barrier appeared beside them. It canceled out the Magical Beam with plenty of room to spare. The two floating in the air were unharmed.

Or so I thought.

“Ow...”

I heard a light *thunk*, and my neighbor yelped. Her foot seemed to have hit the wall during their evasive maneuvers.

The magical girl readied her staff again, about to attempt a second shot.

“Uh, would everyone mind pausing what they’re doing for a moment?” I called out, raising my voice and striding farther into the room.

Everyone turned to look at me.

The first ones to speak were my neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki.

“Mister!”

“Sasaki!”

The latter had her gun at the ready and looked quite scary. She was glaring at me, too, as if demanding to know what was going on here. I was extremely curious what the others had said to her to elicit such a reaction, but it was more important to deal with the magical girl right now.

“Please excuse my sudden interruption, but there’s something I need to tell you, Magical Girl.”

“...What?” she asked.

“That girl over there is not a psychic. She’s actually something more like you, I believe. So would you mind lowering your staff? That goes for the person carrying her as well.”

“More like...me?”

“I promise that she’s only here because of an unfortunate coincidence.”



“.....”

Seeming curious about my claim, the magical girl began to settle down.

I wasn't sure how my neighbor had gotten mixed up in that death game of hers. But considering how Abaddon had suggested things might be different if I'd *“just gotten a little bit closer,”* I could easily assume she'd joined the game reluctantly.

On the other side, the messenger from the fairy world—who was now just fur—had lured the magical girl into all this, leading to the loss of her loved ones. The two girls' positions seemed very similar to me. They were even close in age.

“It's about time you arrived.”

As the magical girl lowered her staff, Abaddon landed back on the ground, and my neighbor climbed out of his arms to stand on her own two feet.

“Mgh...”

A moment later, her whole body shook, and she squatted down. Her stubbed toe was probably in a lot of pain, but this time she bravely refused to cry out.

“You hit it pretty hard. Wouldn't be surprised if you had a fracture or two.”

“For someone whose Disciple is suffering right next to him, you don't sound too upset,” she retorted.

“You reap what you sow. Besides, you have to screw up to learn your lesson, don't you?”

“Did you slam me into the wall on purpose?”

“I wouldn't go that far. But I'd appreciate it if you used this chance to get your head on straight.”

“.....”

Still squatting, my neighbor glared up at the demon hatefully. As someone more than twice her age, I couldn't tell by this exchange whether they were friends or enemies—my neighbor spoke much more openly with him than with me. But I didn't have friends like that anymore, so it was beyond me.

“Sasaki! That blond girl, and that bird—”

“Magical middle-aged man, what do you mean she isn't a psychic?”

Miss Hoshizaki was midsentence, her mouth open wide, but the magical girl ignored her and spoke up, taking a step forward over thin air. Miss Hoshizaki shut her mouth, perhaps wary of another Magical Beam. An average psychic like her wouldn't be able to stand up to a magical girl. She knew that firsthand and seemed frustrated by it.

Taking this chance to evade my veteran colleague's suspicions, I continued my question and answer session with the magical girl. “I mean exactly what I

said. There are all kinds of mysterious people out there besides psychics. From my perspective, you're one of them, too."

"....."

"We may all look the same to you. But I promise I'm telling the truth. Will you believe me? If not, it will only make everyone—including yourself—unhappy."

The magical girl now knew my neighbor's face, and I did *not* want her getting hit from behind while walking down the street at night or something. As a result, I wound up getting a little preachy. I'd done the same thing with the section chief. It seemed to be happening a lot more often these days.

"Are there a lot of people like this who aren't psychics?"

"I don't know how many there are, but it's definitely more than a few."

Depending on the scope of the death game my neighbor was part of—the proxy war between angels and demons—there could be even more of them than psychics. *I'll have to ask Abaddon about that later.*

As I continued my lecture, my mind was racing with questions about what to do next.

After appearing to consider for few moments, the magical girl responded. "I understand what you're saying."

"Really?"

"From now on, I'll check first."

"...Oh. Yeah. That would be great," I replied. That wasn't exactly what I'd been hoping for. How was she planning to check?

Still, if magical girl-related injuries decreased as a result, I'd count that as progress for the bureau. It was pretty rough dodging those Magical Beams without warning, after all.

Seeing me nod, she turned and called out, "You two." This time, her gaze was on my neighbor and Abaddon, who were now back in the living room. Their expressions tensed under her attention. Abaddon stepped in front of my still-squatting neighbor to serve as a shield. *Looking good, Abaddon, I thought. He's got a good face, too.*

"*Did we offend you somehow?*" he asked.

"...I'm sorry."

Still floating, the magical girl bowed to my neighbor, who seemed caught off guard by the gesture. She stared at the whorl in the other girl's pink hair with an expression that said *What the heck?* That alone told me how fierce an attack she and Abaddon had suffered at her hands.

“.....”

“.....”

The magical girl was probably a good kid, deep down. She just had no tolerance for psychics. A moment later, she spun around in midair to face the blue skies outside, turning her back to the rest of us in the room.

“I’m going home for today,” she said.

“Huh?” I was so surprised by her sudden declaration that my voice came out funny. *Come to think of it, she does this a lot*, I thought. *I can’t ever tell what’s going on in her head.*

“I hurt someone who isn’t a psychic. I did something bad. So I’m going home.”

“O-oh...”

With a creaking, cracking noise, a big black stain appeared next to the magical girl and began to expand—her Magical Field. My personal theory was that she’d seen herself in my neighbor and regretted her actions. This time *she* had acted like one of the psychics who killed her friends and family, while my neighbor and Abaddon had been mere victims of a misunderstanding.

“Good-bye.”

With that, she disappeared into the stain. Once it had completely swallowed her up, the Magical Field vanished. The magical girl was totally gone now. We waited for a little while, but there were no signs of her returning. She must have been telling the truth—she’d withdrawn for the day.

“I really wish that magical little girl would stop showing up,” complained Futarishizuka from a corner of the living room after watching her go. “Now the room is a mess.”

“Sorry for causing you all this trouble,” I apologized.

“Are you *really*? Things like this have been happening a lot lately, don’t you think?”

“I am really sorry...”

Ms. Futarishizuka had been on the butt end of a lot of disasters lately, ever since that video of Peeps and Lady Elsa got out. I didn’t even want to think about how expensive repairs to the building were going to be. I figured it would come out of insurance or something, but for the time being, I should probably pay her extra.

Soon I heard Miss Hoshizaki start scolding me. “What’s all this about, Sasaki?” she demanded, marching up and fixing me with a glare. “Would you mind giving me an explanation?”

“Right, yes.” I’d been keeping my relationship to Lady Elsa a secret from Miss Hoshizaki, just as I was keeping it from the section chief. But at this point, continuing the charade would be difficult. She was probably also skeptical about my neighbor and Abaddon.

I couldn’t give her an honest explanation.

So what should I do, then?

Just as I was really starting to panic, I heard a phone vibrating in her inside pocket. Miss Hoshizaki ignored it and continued to press me for answers. But no matter how much time passed, the phone just kept going and going. It would break off, then start vibrating again right away. Reluctantly, she reached for it. When she saw the name on the screen, her face twisted into a scowl.

“...Yes, this is Hoshizaki.”

It was her work phone, and judging by the fact that she’d ultimately picked it up, the caller must have been the section chief.

Everyone present was watching her as she began speaking into the mouthpiece.

“I encountered the magical girl, but she escaped. I’m now in combat with psychics of unknown affiliation... Yes, that’s right... We’re at the hotel in the city, the one from the news... Yes, that’s right, Sasaki is here with me, but...”

The living room had calmed down now that the magical girl was gone. Nobody interrupted the call. The only other sounds were the distant sirens of ambulances. With the room quiet, my senior’s voice rang especially clear.

“B-but why?! There are psychics in front of me, and I have no idea where they’re from. Why would I come back without doing anything? And what about Sasaki, huh?! What? Leave everything to him? What’s that supposed to mean?!”

It didn’t take me long to guess what was being said on the other end. Miss Hoshizaki’s personality made her easy to read, which worked out great for me.

“Wait just a second, sir. You can’t possibly— Chief? Chief?!”

The call was brief. It looked like the chief had hung up on her despite her request for an explanation. Miss Hoshizaki glared dangerously at the phone in her hand, making me *very* anxious about the gun she held in the other.

Eventually, she called out to me again.

“Sasaki!”

“What is it, Miss Hoshizaki?”

“Orders from the chief. I’m putting you in charge here!”

“What will you do?”

“...He told me to return to the bureau at once.”

“I see.”

I had a pretty good feeling Mr. Akutsu had just done me a favor. And after I’d gotten on my high horse and criticized him like that. Now I felt even worse about the whole thing. *How am I going to repay him? Load him up with some extra ingots like I do with Ms. Futarishizuka?* I was a little afraid he’d find some way to use that against me.

“Sasaki, is there something between you and the chief?” Miss Hoshizaki asked me.

“I’m sorry. What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean? This is all really suspicious!”

“If you’re asking about my relationship with him, I’m not homosexual.”

“Th-that isn’t what I meant!”

My random deflection caused her to go red and panic.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t reverse the damage already done. Miss Hoshizaki disappeared down the hallway, calling out “When you get back to the bureau, I expect an explanation” over and over like some TV villain promising revenge.

That left Peeps, Lady Elsa, my neighbor, Abaddon, Ms. Futarishizuka, and me, the latecomer, making six of us in all. Now that the more boisterous characters were out of the picture, quiet returned to the hotel suite.

The noise outside, on the other hand, was getting louder and louder. I popped my head out of the broken window and looked down to see a whole bunch of people gathering below. The ambulance sirens that had once sounded so distant were suddenly directly beneath us.

“Um, Sasaki,” said Lady Elsa, “would this, well, happen to be my fault?”

“No, you didn’t do anything, Lady Elsa. No need to worry.”

“.....”

The bird on her shoulder lowered his head in an adorable display of apology.

Maybe it wouldn’t be *terrible* for incidents like this to happen every once in a while, if it meant I got to see Peeps being so cute. That said, as his owner, I hoped he’d strive to tone down the scale of his blunders just a smidge. The Lord Starsage had even started cleaning his portable cage all by himself lately.

“In any event,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “we should change locations, yes?”

“Unfortunately, the boss ordered me to handle the cleanup here,” I replied. “Would you mind going somewhere else with the others first? Once everything’s squared away, we can meet up as usual, if that’s all right with you.”

“Ah yes, the boss. I’d like to hear how things went with him as well, and sooner rather than later.”

“I understand. But I can’t just leave the scene like this.”

“Fine, fine.”

The timing of the chief’s call to Miss Hoshizaki and his instructions to leave the scene in my hands probably meant we could do whatever we wanted here. And if that was the case, I couldn’t just drop it in someone else’s lap. Ambulances had already begun to assemble on the ground; it would only be a matter of time before the police and firefighters got up here.

“I suppose it’s high time we made ourselves scarce,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Lady Elsa, I’m sorry to keep pestering you, but will you follow her instructions?” I asked. “The people entrusted with this nation’s safety will soon come rolling in like an avalanche, and we can’t have anyone else seeing you.”

“Yes, I understand,” she replied.

“Thank you.” Fortunately, I’d obtained our guest’s approval. I shifted my gaze to her shoulder, and Peeps offered me a little nod. His eyes were several times sharper than usual, as though he was burning with a sense of responsibility—he must have wanted to make up for this failure.

After watching our exchange, my neighbor and Abaddon spoke up.

“*We should probably get going, too,*” suggested the demon.

“...Okay,” replied my neighbor.

“*Oh? You’re being more agreeable than usual.*”

“In exchange, as soon as we get back, please fix my foot.”

“*Fine by me!*”

With that decided, everyone quickly left the suite. The other four, plus the bird, used the elevator to head straight down to the basement parking garage. They’d be getting into Ms. Futarishizuka’s car and leaving the hotel that way.

After seeing them off, I got to work. The chief had already informed the other agencies, and I was able to take control over the scene without issue. As I handled my tasks for the bureau, I also cleaned up after myself and my compatriots so nothing would appear unnatural, just as I had when I was caught up in the death game.



By the time things settled down at the hotel, the sun was already setting. There was still a lot of work to be done repairing the building, and some of it, like the huge hole in the window glass, wasn’t going to be easy. But none of that would require bureau personnel. For the time being, at least, I had managed to cover up

the existence of magical girls and psychics.

I wrapped everything up with a neat bow by blaming the mess in the suite on an unidentified gas explosion.

Wow, gas explosions sure are convenient. I have the feeling I'll be relying on them even more in the future.

Once my work was finished, I made a perfunctory report to my boss. The thought of going back there and seeing him face-to-face made me uncomfortable, so I simply called and made the excuse that there were still things left for me to do on-site. He accepted my report and didn't press me any further. I really owed him this time—and I was hoping to repay the debt as soon as possible.

With that out of the way, I went back home to the apartment and called Ms. Futarishizuka on my personal phone. Peeps quickly came to pick me up using his specialty—the instant going-to-work spell. The others had already moved to another base, and Peeps would be taking me there.

The teleportation was instant. My vision flashed black, and when it returned, I was somewhere completely different.

My apartment was a cramped single room of only about ten square meters, but now a vast space stretched out before me. It looked like a living room, except it had to be over *fifty* square meters. The ceiling, too, was about twice as high as the one in my apartment. It looked very expensive.

But while both were no doubt pricey, the new place had a different feel from the hotel we'd been staying at before. Where the other was posh and extravagant, this one was refined and elegant. The furniture was simpler as well, starting with the sofa set in the center of the room. The heavy use of wood materials in the place's design probably aided that impression. *It's like a modern Western mansion with a few Japanese elements blended in*, I thought. There was even a crackling fireplace burning real wood.

The multipurpose dining room and kitchen was just as expansive as the living room—and at a glance, looked to be replete with all the fixtures one could want. This room, too, could easily contain my whole apartment; it must have been meant for hosting grand parties.

Apparently, we were on the ground floor this time.

Outside the large windows, I could see a wonderful garden that was clearly meticulously maintained. Even from inside, I could tell it was a pretty large plot of land. Past the garden was an endless stretch of trees, no neighbors in sight.

“Well, it's about time,” droned Ms. Futarishizuka. “I'd grown tired of

waiting.”

“Is this some kind of villa?” I asked. “Where are we?”

“Indeed it is. We’re in Karuizawa.”

“I’m humbled once again. You always choose such wonderful places.”

Now that Peeps and I had arrived, Ms. Futarishizuka lifted herself off the sofa. I saw Lady Elsa as well—and for some reason, my neighbor and Abaddon. They were all sitting on the sofas, surrounding the low table. I was pretty sure I’d instructed their driver to take them straight to school when we parted ways at the hotel.

The distinguished Java sparrow on my shoulder provided an answer.

“If you’re wondering about those two, I brought them here.”

“You did?” I replied.

“The girl very much wanted to see you.”

“I think you’ll recall that *I* asked you to do it,” pointed out Ms. Futarishizuka.

“.....”

Ah, I thought. *So she’s making the most of the situation.* I got the feeling it’d take Peeps a while to pay her back for that leaked video.

With the death game still in its initial stages, she probably wanted to build some connections with these angels, demons, and Disciples. And since Abaddon had already requested our assistance in the past, the two of them were probably on the same page. Peeps was likely helping her out because he felt obligated to agree.

Now the bird was silent, looking like he had nothing to do and nowhere to go. *How adorable.* I felt bad, but I was overcome with the desire to pat his head.

“How was work, mister?” asked my neighbor, getting up from the sofa and hurrying over to me. She was still in her school uniform, just like she’d been this morning when I’d seen them off.

“Huh? Oh, uh, fine...,” I said. “It feels a little weird for me to ask this, but how was school?”

“Once classes ended, I had that bird bring me here,” she explained.

“Ah. So that’s what happened.” That meant I needed to explain Peeps’s magic. *But wait, if he’s already speaking normally in front of the two of them, maybe he’s already given them the rundown.*

Just as I began to consider this, a voice at my shoulder filled me in.

“I explained, and she promised to keep it a secret. I’m sorry for not asking you first.”

“No, I agree that’s the best decision.” Quick-witted, as usual. I preferred it this

way as well; it was better than waiting for her to get suspicious and start poking around. Besides, I'd already had to reveal a bunch of things during our fight with the angels. I'd even expressed my intention to cooperate with the two of them.

"Is everything decided, then?" I asked.

"No, we were just about to discuss what to do next."

"And you waited for me? Thanks, Peeps."

"Don't thank me. I should be apologizing for this mess."

Now that Peeps had caught me up, our attention shifted to the sofas where my neighbor's partner was sitting. He, too, looked the same as he had this morning, complete with cape and crown.

I have to say, Abaddon sure has style. He looks so refined sipping his tea. He fit in well with the chic living room, like a character in a television drama. He comes off more like an angel than a demon, if you ask me.

A moment later, he noticed us watching. Looking up from his cup, he said, "Oh? Are we having this conversation now, then?"

The casual way he carried himself was flawless. *Wish I had some of that.* Despite looking younger than my neighbor, his crossed legs seemed even longer than mine—something I prayed was just a trick of the light.

"Well, we're all here now, aren't we?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Just let this old lady put on some more tea first."

"I'll help you," I offered.

"You will? Well, come along, then."

I followed Ms. Futarishizuka into the kitchen. As I moved to the sink, she said, "Oh yes. There was something I wanted to say right up front."

"What is it?"

"I quite like this place. If something was to happen to it, I do think I would cry. Very loudly—and without a care for who might hear. So loudly, in fact, that our boss may even find out you were the one responsible."

"...Understood. I will practice utmost caution." I hadn't exactly wrecked the last place on purpose, so I'd have to be even more diligent going forward—especially when it came to the magical girl.

"I have something to report to you, as well," I continued. "I talked to Mr. Akutsu. For the time being, I doubt he will interfere with anything we do. Yet another thing I have to thank you for, I suppose. The intel you provided came in handy."

"So that's why he left you to deal with the ruckus today."

"Yes, something like that."

“I think we would’ve ended up in this situation sooner or later regardless.”

“I agree.”

“*I am terribly, terribly sorry about all this,*” repeated Peeps. “*I’ve caused so much trouble.*”

“Yes, you have,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “And if you think I’m giving you the Wi-Fi password, you can think again.”

“.....”

The large kitchen, which included an island, seemed incomparably easier to use than the one in my own apartment. Heck, there was enough room in here to put down a bed and sleep on it. I knew we were only making some tea, but even standing at the sink like this was kind of fun.

Once we’d prepared the tea and some snacks, we returned to the living room and each took a seat on one of the sofas. As steam billowed from the cups in our hands, we got down to business.

As for our positions, while my neighbor and Abaddon sat side by side, Ms. Futarishizuka sat by herself across from them over the low table. Lady Elsa and I sat at either end of the group, and Peeps was, as always, perched on my shoulder. He seemed a little down—maybe because Ms. Futarishizuka said she wouldn’t share her Wi-Fi password. In any case, he’d already promised to abstain from the internet for a while, so I figured I’d just give him some time.

“I’d like to say something first, if you don’t mind,” announced Ms. Futarishizuka. “Since we’re going to be talking about our future partnership and all.”

“What is it?” I replied. *Whoops, looks like she’s already grabbing the reins of this conversation.* She probably wanted to secure a promise or two now that she had leverage over Peeps. I felt him give a start on my shoulder, but he didn’t object.

“I’m confident I can guarantee your safety,” she began. “I would even be happy to shelter you until this proxy war or whatever has blown over. At the very least, I won’t be dying any time before the girl grows old and gray.”

“*Really?*” replied Abaddon, sounding interested. “*That’s a pretty attractive proposal.*”

“But even living quietly, our tea stores will run out and all our firewood will turn to ash. For that reason, I believe it would be in both our best interests to charge you rent. Will you agree?” Ms. Futarishizuka’s gaze shifted toward the fireplace set up in the room.

The irregular series of small pops produced as the firewood burned lent a

satisfying and somehow comforting atmosphere to the quiet room. I'd just finished a day of work, and I was overcome by the impulse to lie down on the sofa and take a nap.

"What do you think of her offer?" asked Abaddon.

"It depends on how much she's asking for, but otherwise I'm fine with it," answered my neighbor.

"Okay, I figured as much. Why don't start hammering out the details, then?"

My neighbor and Abaddon confronted Ms. Futarishizuka with serious expressions. It seemed to me the most I could do was listen carefully to this crafty old lady to make sure she didn't trick them somehow. I doubted she'd try anything with us in the room, but there was no harm in being cautious.

I glanced over at our otherworldly guest and caught her drifting off. Fireplaces made Lady Elsa just as drowsy as they did me, it seemed, and she was starting to fall asleep. I wished I could help her, but circumstances meant she would have nothing to do for a while.

"I'd like a portion of whatever rewards your Disciple reaps from her clashes with the angels," explained Ms. Futarishizuka. "I believe Disciples receive rewards from their demon, yes? Should she be fortunate enough to receive three such rewards, I was thinking one of them could go to me."

"I've got no problem with that, but it sounds like something you should be asking my Disciple."

"Abaddon, please don't give my rights away to someone else."

"Didn't I just defer to you?"

I was taken aback at how quickly Ms. Futarishizuka was making a pass at the death game competitors right after doing the same with our otherworld group. As I watched her face in profile with its confident expression, I found myself impressed by her vitality. This was probably how she'd always operated, firming up the ground around her, building a solid network. The fact that she'd shown us to her prized villa spoke to her level of enthusiasm.

"Personally, I think it's a pretty good deal," said my neighbor, nodding.

"Truly? I'm happy to hear it." Ms. Futarishizuka's smile deepened.

She looked pleased with herself, like she'd just scored a nice concession from an easy target. At first glance, she came off as an adorable little girl, but looks could be deceiving, as we learned from our early run-ins with her. If not for the cursed emblem on the back of her hand, I'd have been nervous just sitting down together like this.

"But my neighbor has been helping me, too," the schoolgirl pointed out.

“Yes, he did rescue us from a terrible bind yesterday,” agreed Abaddon.

“And if I keep bargaining like this,” continued my neighbor, “eventually I won’t have anything for myself. Like I said before, Abaddon’s rewards are essential for me to survive the proxy war.”

“Perhaps,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but you won’t get anything if you’re so reluctant to pay for room and board that you wind up murdered in your sleep.”

My neighbor fell silent. She seemed to think things over for a few seconds before responding. “I heard that you’ve both entered an isolated space in the past,” she commented.

“We have, but what about it?” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

“And that you’re strong enough to slay lower-ranked angels.”

“.....”

This time, the girl in the kimono had no response.

My neighbor, though, continued right along. “What if our end of the bargain was to give you the privilege of entering these isolated spaces?”

“You intend for me to slay any angels and Disciples that appear, I presume?”

“Yes. I think you would get more out of that than sharing my rewards.”

“Still, I cannot voluntarily enter these ‘isolated spaces,’ as you call them.”

“I think becoming a demon’s Disciple would clear up that problem.”

“...Go on.” Ms. Futarishizuka’s expression changed slightly. She maintained her smile, but I couldn’t help feeling that her gaze had grown sharper—though looking at her for too long gave me the chills.

“According to my partner, there are still demons who haven’t found Disciples.”

“Ah,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “While I appreciate the suggestion, unfortunately, I can’t give you an answer right away.”

I knew how grueling those battles were from personal experience. It was called a *death game*, after all—your life was on the line. Ms. Futarishizuka’s decision to put off her answer was definitely the right move. I would have simply refused outright. At most, I figured we would aid my neighbor as outsiders. There was a huge difference between coming in as a third party and actually having skin in the game, after all.

“Then for the time being,” said my neighbor, “I hope you’re willing to make do with one out of every five rewards instead of every three.”

“If I may ask, how many rewards have you received so far?”

“Two, since the game started.”

“...Hmm.” Ms. Futarishizuka put a hand to her chin in thought.

“Do you think we’d lie about how many times it’s been?” my neighbor shot back.

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“You’ve experienced it already—how everything in isolated spaces happens in a single instant for those outside. All I can do is ask you to trust me. If you can’t, then please reconsider becoming a Disciple,” my neighbor said, looking the other girl hard in the eyes.

Ms. Futarishizuka once again appeared to think things over. After a short time, she gave a little nod. “All right. That will work for now.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll arrange for a second villa near this one. Would that be amenable?”

“Yes. That sounds wonderful.”

My neighbor was applying herself to this death game brilliantly. She was still so young, and yet she’d gone toe to toe with Ms. Futarishizuka. She definitely wasn’t your average girl. Of course, not being familiar with her opponent’s immense psychic powers and villainous past probably helped immensely.

“What about you two, then?”

Now that their discussion with Ms. Futarishizuka was over, Abaddon turned to us. Lady Elsa, who was already dozing, snapped out of her reverie at his voice. As if to insist she wasn’t sleeping, she straightened up and fixed her posture. *Adorable*. Not that I would mind if she just flopped over and fell asleep. She still had a little drool on her chin.

“For the time being,” I said, “I’d like to pass on the fruits of our labors to Ms. Futarishizuka.”

“Oh? That’s unusually generous of you,” she replied.

“Do you have a complaint, child?” demanded Peeps.

“No, not really. I’d be more than happy to take you up on that.”

“In exchange,” I continued, “would you consider our debt from the incident with Peeps paid in full?”

“I’d be too frightened to push the sparrow any further,” she answered. “I agree—taking care of that now seems the safest solution. But I’d prefer to receive my reward fairly soon.”

“I’m well aware, and I think it can be arranged.”

“..I am truly sorry,” Peeps said to me.

If my actions could help keep my neighbor even safer, then I could think of no greater reward. My financial issues had been solved thanks to my exchanges with the otherworld, so for the moment, I simply needed to focus on maintaining

a good relationship with Ms. Futarishizuka. Peeps seemed to understand all that and didn't object. I was, however, feeling a little uneasy at how much more important she was making herself in the grand scheme of things.

"If possible, I'd like to say hello to the girl over there, too," said Abaddon, looking to his side at Lady Elsa.

The blond girl didn't understand him, but she realized the conversation had turned to her. She looked over at me, troubled, and said what I figured she'd say. "Sasaki, what is that boy saying?"

"He says he'd like to talk to you."

"But I can't speak this land's language," she said, tilting her head to the side as she wondered what to do.

I addressed Abaddon in her place. "As you can see, she speaks a different language from the rest of us."

"But you seem able to communicate with her just fine."

"Please think of it as yet another strange mechanism at work—just like your isolated spaces and Disciples. At present, however, I can't give the ability to anyone else."

I couldn't allow Lady Elsa to become involved in the angel-demon proxy war. I felt bad for my neighbor and her partner, but putting Lady Elsa into contact with the death game participants would only place her in greater danger. I wanted to politely decline here and now.

Perhaps guessing my intentions, Abaddon decided to change the topic. *"I'm surprised there's a language I don't know in this day and age,"* he reflected.

"You can understand other languages?" asked my neighbor.

"Well, yes. I'm actually quite studious, you know."

"...I see."

"So when I see the grades you get on your English quizzes—"

"P-please don't say any more. Be quiet!"

"Whoops! Looks like I've been silenced."

It sounded like my neighbor was having a rough time in English class. Considering her disastrous home life, it seemed cruel to expect her to do anything beyond maintaining her health. She seemed embarrassed about it, though, and started arguing with Abaddon.

It was like watching an elder sister having a friendly quarrel with her younger brother. I hoped he would continue to be a good influence on her. If so, I could move out of my current apartment without fear or worry. *I wonder if I'm just being arrogant.*

“In any case,” interjected Ms. Futarishizuka, “would you all like some dinner?”

“Us too? Are you sure?” asked my neighbor.

“Of course. You’re the guests of honor.”

“*Such an enticing offer,*” replied Abaddon. “*My partner here doesn’t often get to eat her fill, you see.*”

“Oh? Well then, you may feel free to eat to your heart’s content.”

Once we finished discussing our mutual cooperation, dinner was the obvious next step.

Spurred on by her desire to impress my neighbor and Abaddon, no doubt, Futarishizuka bent over backward to treat us to a lavish meal—a stroke of luck for those of us joining in. Peeps, too, happily tucked into some delicious-looking meat.

Once the food was gone, it was time for our trip to the otherworld. As before, we first headed to our warehouse headquarters to select what goods to bring, then set off for the Kingdom of Herz.



Despite everything that transpired that day, we were able to cross worlds that night the same way we always did. We hadn’t spent any longer than usual in Japan, and given prior experience, the time difference between worlds meant at least half a month had passed on the other side—a month at most. According to Peeps’s calculations, it varied each trip.

In any case, we first paid a visit to the town of Baytrium, under the control of Count Müller, and headed straight for his estate to deliver a video letter from Lady Elsa.

“It’s nice to see you again, Count Müller.”

“I’m glad to see you as well, Lord Sasaki—and Lord Starsage.”

“*My apologies again for never informing you of our arrival in advance.*”

“Please, no need to apologize. You’re always welcome here.”

We exchanged pleasantries from our seats on the sofas. Peeps fluttered off my shoulder and settled onto the little perching tree on the low table in front of us. I suspected the sparrow did this partially because he knew how much it made the count smile.



I placed the laptop next to the tree, then played the video letter for him as I'd done last time. When it was over, I reported on Lady Elsa's recent situation. I decided to keep the whole affair with the proxy war a secret for now. She hadn't been personally wrapped up in it, and there was no reason to needlessly fan the count's unease. I'd already discussed the matter with Peeps, too.

Eventually, once we'd laid out the situation in Japan, the count straightened up and changed the topic. "By the way, Lord Sasaki, there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"What is it? I'm all ears." *Another problem, maybe?* I thought. Things had been so crazy in Japan recently that I was hoping to spend some nice leisure time in the otherworld. It'd be nice if nothing bad had happened.

But the next words out of the count's mouth dashed all my hopes. His news shocked me.

"I've received word that Prince Lewis plans to invade the Ohgen Empire," he explained.

"Huh...?"

I couldn't help my surprised response.

Prince Lewis was Prince Adonis's elder brother. I had the great luck to see him for a few moments during my audience with the king. In contrast to his jolly, attractive younger brother, I remembered Lewis as having a more subdued beauty.

The two of them were competing for the Herzian throne. They'd never cross blades with each other directly, but there was no shortage of nobles and aristocrats around to stab each other in their place.

Count Müller belonged to the faction supporting Prince Adonis—and the same went for "Baron Sasaki." In other words, Lewis was the highest general in the ranks of our political enemies. And now, for some reason, he'd declared war on the Ohgen Empire.

"Since we've been gone, has there been any indication within Herz that hostilities might begin?" I asked.

"No—at least, I haven't heard of anything."

"I'm curious what Prince Adonis thinks of this."

"Actually, I heard this from the prince himself. He seemed quite troubled."

Even Peeps got an angry word in. "*This is madness. Does Lewis intend to destroy the country without even waiting for the ascension of a new king?*"

From the bird's point of view, this place was his former home, for which he'd given everything. His incredible loyalty had even earned him enough resentment

from his peers to get him assassinated. Ever since his reincarnation as a Java sparrow, he kept court business at arm's length—but this was enough to provoke even *his* ire.

“It is as you say, Lord Starsage,” agreed the count. “However, the prince seems stubbornly determined. He’s already begun calling on the nobles supporting him. I doubt he’ll make a move right away, but I don’t believe he will give up, either.”

“Is he so certain the dragons on the border will take Herz’s side?”

“That, I do not know. I cannot dismiss the possibility, however.”

“*Hrm...*,” The distinguished sparrow groaned, tilting his head in bafflement, looking very cute.

If Peeps is groaning like that, I thought, Prince Lewis must be a pretty incredible guy. He previously caused Count Müller a lot of trouble by saying he’d take Lady Elsa as his concubine. That was why she and the count were still living apart.

Was he really the type of person to act on a whim? *Because if he is, that’s more than a little troubling. If a guy like that has a chance at becoming the next monarch, Herz is in worse shape than I thought.* I hadn’t wanted to touch the faction war with a ten-foot pole. But after hearing all this, I couldn’t help but root for Prince Adonis.

“I’ll continue to hunt for more information,” said the count.

“*We’ll leave it in your capable hands, then,*” replied Peeps.

“Thank you.” Count Müller bowed deeply.

I bet he’s happy the Starsage asked him to help. Peeps does tend to solve everything on his own, after all.

At first, the difference in the flow of time between this world and Japan had worked to our advantage. But now, as we involved ourselves ever deeper in its affairs, I recognized the cons of this, as well. Every time we met with the count, it seemed he had more big news—or word of some new trouble brewing.



After trading updates, Count Müller recorded his video letter for Lady Elsa and we took back the laptop. Once all our work was done, we decided to set out for Baron Sasaki’s territory that same day.

Considering the scope of their progress the last time we visited, we couldn’t afford not to check. Only a day may have passed in Japan, but I couldn’t even

imagine how far they'd gotten. I hoped funding hadn't run dry; that would spell disaster.

To get there, we used Peeps's teleportation magic. The count wouldn't be accompanying us this time, so it was just the two of us heading over. First, we set our destination high in the sky so we could use flight magic to get a bird's-eye view. Then my vision flashed black, and the familiar Müller estate reception room was replaced by a new set of surroundings.

All around us were clear blue skies. The wind whistled past, tickling my cheeks refreshingly. The sunlight was warm, too; it was perfect afternoon weather.

"Well, well," said Peeps as we both took in the sight below. "*Their progress is once again astounding.*"

"Looks like it," I replied.

He was right—construction on both the ramparts and the fortress had evidently proceeded at a fever pitch. Last time we were here, we saw a lot of what seemed like foundations for the structures. Now, though, it looked like a few had their upper sections already completed.

The large golems helping with construction made the work look a lot simpler than in modern times. Scaffolding seemed scarce here—there was only as much as the workers needed. It was like they were making buildings out of toy blocks. Maybe the lack of hassle made the work go even faster.

"*Those golems are providing a wonderful boost to efficiency,*" remarked Peeps.

"You think so, too, huh?"

"*And their movements are so precise. For one person to be controlling several is impressive.*"

"Yeah, their movement seems as quick as a human's."

"*This type of magic lacks visual appeal—and thus is not well-known to society. Few casters in the field have much renown. If this one is in the civil construction industry, they must be so talented, they could charge almost anything for their work.*"

Peeps almost never gave other magic users such rave reviews. They must have a real master helping out. There were actually quite a few such people in modern times. They didn't show up much in the media, but certain craftspeople got to be so well-known that they became synonymous with the jobs they did.

Though, personally, I wish this crew would work a little more slowly.

"Could we head down and say hello to Mr. French?" I asked.

“Very well.”

With the sparrow’s approval, I used flight magic to decrease my altitude. I’d grown pretty accustomed to this part. I landed near the area with all the tents—the one we’d visited last time. This was essentially the living quarters for the on-site workers. The population density had risen here, and there were now twice the number of dwellings. There were even some simple wood houses among the tents.

In addition to the on-site workers, more people who looked like merchants and adventurers had arrived. I even saw a few carriages coming and going. At a glance, it looked like a refugee camp, but I could tell it was already starting to function like a full-fledged settlement. *Why, I’d say this place is more lively than some villages.*

As I walked along, I spied a familiar face.

“Sir! I knew it was you!” he exclaimed.

“It’s good to see you, too, Mr. French,” I replied.

“I saw someone come down from the sky, and I had a feeling!”

“Well, thank you for coming out to meet me.”

“Of course. Thank *you* for taking the time to visit.”

Luckily, Mr. French had caught sight of me, saving me the trouble of seeking him out. We stopped in the middle of the area with the tents to exchange greetings. He wore rougher clothes now than his old chef’s uniform—a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of coarse pants. With his stern features, he cut an intimidating figure. He had dirt and dust on him, too; he must have been working on-site again today.

“First the restaurant and now this,” I observed. “I really can’t thank you enough.”

“No need for thanks. I’m doing this because I want to,” he replied with a smooth, attractive smile. The expression, combined with his rough appearance, radiated reliability.

“Nobody’s been bothering you, have they?” I asked.

“We’ve had no problems of the sort so far,” he reported.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“And the Ohgen Empire’s kept quiet, too, just like you said it would.”

Previously, a man named Viscount Ohm had visited Count Müller on Duke Einhart’s orders. I’d been worried those troubles might continue, but apparently I hadn’t needed to.

“If you ever require more funds, don’t hesitate to ask,” I told Mr. French.

“More?” he repeated. “Never. In fact, we might actually have too *much*, sir.”

“Really?”

“People have been arriving here every day looking for work. If the pay gets any higher, all hell might break loose. You’ve already provided enough to employ several high-ranking magicians, after all.”

“Oh. No wonder things are moving so quickly.”

“Yes! Thanks to you, both the walls and the fortress are coming along well.”

“I feel bad asking this when you’re all working so hard, but what is this fortress meant to be for? If Herz planned to station troops here to keep the Empire at bay, I would have appreciated being informed in advance.”

“What? No, it’s going to be your personal estate, sir.”

“My...personal estate?”

“This territory belongs to you, doesn’t it?”

That was a little troubling. How was I supposed to appreciate being given an estate square in the middle of this empty grassland? This place was the boonies! It had “thirty minute drive from the nearest convenience store” written all over it. I fully intended to stay at that luxury inn in the count’s town.

Peeps seemed slightly concerned, too, and his little body gave a shudder. Our ideal life of rest and relaxation was quickly turning into a frugal subsistence on the frontier. And we had no idea if and when the Ohgen Empire was going to attack. Plus, some awfully enormous dragons were living nearby. I didn’t want to say it, but this seemed like one of the least livable areas I could imagine.

“As you know, Mr. French, my visits here are brief,” I reminded him.

“Even so,” he insisted. “We can’t allow a noble such as yourself to live like a rootless wanderer, sir.”

Most importantly, we were absent from this world for far longer than we were present. If something was to happen, it was very likely we wouldn’t be here for it.

Maybe the best option was to explain all this to Count Müller and have him give the fortress to family members or something. They’d be overjoyed to have a frontline base for Baytrium, and we’d be overjoyed to not have to change our lives around. *Yeah, that sounds good.*

“But don’t worry, sir,” Mr. French went on. “We don’t intend to leave you with an empty domain.”

“I couldn’t possibly ask for anything else,” I insisted.

“Work has already started to fix up the major road connecting to Baytrium.”

“Major road? You mean that dusty, broken path?”

“That’s the one, sir. By the time we finish the fortress, it should be easier for carriages to come and go. Before, it used to take a week to travel either way in good conditions. But once we’re done fixing up the road, I hear they’ll be able to come and go more quickly.”

“I really can’t thank you enough for going to such lengths.”

“You’re doing your best for us, sir! We’re with you all the way.”

The residents of Baytrium, Mr. French included, had already experienced being one step away from an Imperial invasion. Pushing out the front lines like this—even if it meant giving the area to a foreign noble like me—must have held a lot of weight with them. Otherwise, there would be no reason for them to work this hard. Maybe we could even get help from other nobles with lands bordering the Empire.

In the meantime, another familiar face approached from behind Mr. French.

“Hey! I thought it must be you, Baron Sasaki.”

It was the man we’d met last time when Count Müller had been with us—the master builder who ran a construction company in Baytrium. He cut a striking—and terrifying—figure, with his stern features, shaved head, huge frame, and rippling muscles. After spotting us, he trotted over.

“It’s good to see you again,” I said.

“Here to take a look at the work, m’lord? We’ve come pretty far, eh?”

“You have. I’m shocked—I never thought things would move this quickly.”

He’d probably noticed us descending from the sky like Mr. French and come to see us; his own work uniform was just as dirty as the chef’s. I felt bad pulling them away from their jobs like this.

“I was actually just asking Mr. French about the progress,” I told him.

“I see, I see.”

With this new addition to our group, the three of us stood around making light conversation, and I had them fill me in on the status of the work. As always, Mr. French seemed to be in high demand. The master builder told us all about how hard he was working, just like the last time we visited. Apparently, he was so engrossed in building the fortress, he sometimes forgot to sleep or eat.

That was probably why, after a few minutes, an idea suddenly dawned on me. I’d just thought of a brilliant way to distance ourselves from the frugal future now facing us.

“By the way, who’s been giving orders on-site?” I asked.

“Orders, sir?” replied Mr. French. “Right now, the people who know what they’re doing are taking command in different areas. Sometimes people come to

me, but if there's a problem, we all gather together and figure it out."

"What about when you need to have one person serve as a representative to some third party?"

"That almost never happens," explained the master builder. "We haven't really considered it, m'lord."

Perfect, I thought. Time to pop the suggestion.

"Unfortunately, due to various circumstances, I'm unable to stay here for long stretches of time. Should that cause the work to stall, I wouldn't be able to face any of you—not when you're all working this hard."

"We already heard as much straight from Count Müller, m'lord," said the master builder. "He said while you're a Herzian noble, you also serve as a merchant directly under the count, and you can't neglect those duties."

Incredible! I thought. *Didn't think the count would be helping me out here, too.* No wonder the workers hadn't grown dissatisfied with their good-for-nothing lord who was never around. This also reminded me just how well the people of Baytrium loved their count.

Thanking my lucky stars, this poor excuse for a noble continued. "It looks like more people are visiting this place than before. I'm guessing it will grow into something of a settlement before too long. Naturally, that also means we'll be seeing more guests from other places."

"What are you getting at, m'lord?" asked the master builder.

"I was thinking of giving full authority to develop my lands to Mr. French for the foreseeable future."

"Wait!" exclaimed Mr. French. "Sir, I... That's way too much for me to handle!"

"Are you being serious, m'lord?" asked the master builder. "There're more money and goods invested in this place than your average noble could get from a year's worth of taxes. And you want to entrust it to a commoner you're not even related to? That's going beyond simple eccentricity, don't you think?"

At my proposal, their expressions shifted dramatically. They looked at me with total and utter shock. I cleared my throat to buy time, then put on a show of looking around, my eyes naturally drifting over to the sparrow on my shoulder.

A moment later, I saw him give a nod. *Great!* I thought. *Approval secured from the Lord Starsage himself.*

"But none of that would have been possible without Mr. French's help, so I can't be upset, no matter what the end result is. And so, I'd like to ask again. Would you please do me the favor of taking on full responsibility for this

fortress?”

What was the worst that could happen—we’d fail and have to start over again? That would take a lot of time—which was exactly what Peeps and I were after anyway.

“I promise to continue my funding, of course,” I added.

“B-but I’m only a cook,” objected Mr. French. “I could never take on that much...”

“Then for the time being, why don’t you talk with the master builder here and everyone else. Get their opinions on how to proceed.”

“.....”

This was my plan—to progressively transfer control of these lands to Mr. French and his people. Returning gifts was difficult for anyone. And while the chef didn’t personally feel any hostility toward me, the rest of the workers developing this land were attached to him, not me. When it came to rights and interest, at least one of the people close to him was bound to feel resentment—believing Mr. French much more suited to be lord of the land than a noble who was never around.

As Baron Sasaki, that was a wonderful prospect. Eventually, I’d get so much pushback that I’d have to feign resignation and hand over the entire kit and caboodle. And once Peeps and I were rootless wanderers again, we’d stay in Count Müller’s domain and do nothing but eat and sleep.

“Sir,” said Mr. French, “I had no idea you were considering such a thing...”

“Can I leave it in your hands, Mr. French?”

“I don’t know how much I can do, b-but I’ll give it everything I have, I promise!”

“I appreciate it. I feel at ease knowing you’ll have it covered.”

This should stabilize relations in the domain for the time being.

Our goal was a life of leisure—nothing more. We didn’t have time for all this land development nonsense.



Once I was finished playing the baron and checking on the work site, we headed to the Republic of Lunge, once again relying on Peeps’s teleportation magic to get us there.

Before meeting with Mr. Joseph, we transferred the goods from Japan into the warehouse he’d been lending us. Sugar and chocolate took up most of the real

estate, but we also brought food items that would be difficult to source locally, as well as specially requested items such as calculators and medicine.

This was all routine work for us, but aside from delivering video letters to Count Müller, it was our most crucial task in the otherworld. In other words, as long as we got this done, nothing else mattered.

And that was *exactly* the kind of life we were after.

Once we finished unloading, we visited the offices of the Kepler Trading Company. After being shown to the reception room, we found Mr. Joseph already there waiting to greet us.

“It’s good to see you again, Mr. Sasaki.”

“Mr. Joseph. It’s been some time.”

After exchanging greetings, we each chose a sofa and sat down. We were alone in the room—apparently, Mr. Marc was absent today.

“We’ve stored the products in the warehouse again, as usual,” I told him. “Here’s the inventory. We brought extra sugar, as requested. We also brought more contraceptives, among other things.”

“I appreciate it,” he replied, reaching across the low table for the inventory. “I’ll have someone check everything over right away.” He clapped his hands. A man entered from a side door, dressed like a butler. Mr. Joseph whispered something in his ear, and the man immediately exited into the hallway.

This was all business as usual. I’d had Peeps write the inventory I’d just given Mr. Marc; I still couldn’t read or write this world’s language.

“All the medicines you’ve brought us have been incredibly effective,” the man continued. “We’re constantly getting orders for them. Though this was true for the tranquilizers as well, the effectiveness of the contraceptives has become a hot topic among the upper classes, if a little belatedly.”

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear it.”

Recently, medicine was beginning to catch up with our original big sellers—manufactured goods like calculators and transceivers. Mr. Joseph had told me to bring him as many as I could source.

This was one of the items I’d become able to procure thanks to Ms. Futarishizuka’s help, and with demand so much higher than supply, the price had risen considerably. Plus, since they were consumables, people were going through them like crazy. And to top it all off, technology here was unable to duplicate them, giving me a complete monopoly.

Personally, if some mysterious merchant tried to sell me medicine, I’d be too terrified to use any. But this world’s values and the fact that healing magic was

relatively common meant that even people in high society were surprisingly willing to try it out. The idea was that if anything went wrong, they could just go crying to whatever practitioner of the healing arts they had on retainer.

After a few moments of looking over the inventory, Mr. Joseph picked up a pen from the low table and began scribbling something on the paper—numbers in this world’s language, next to each of the tightly packed product names. I couldn’t do letters, but I could manage numbers. I’d decided I needed to learn those if nothing else, so I spent time studying them.

“How about this for the total price?” Mr. Joseph asked.

He’d added unit prices and subtotals to the inventory with a grand total at the bottom. All told, it would be about three thousand in Herzian large gold coins. If I swapped them for regular gold coins and melted them down into ingots, it was sure to weigh a ton. That would be more than enough to repay Ms. Futarishizuka for everything. She’d been so helpful lately that I couldn’t afford to neglect her.

“That looks perfectly fine to me,” I responded.

“Excellent. I’ll prepare the payment as soon as we’re finished checking the goods.”

Through the good offices of Mr. Joseph, we stayed the night in the Republic of Lunge. As always, I was well-taken care of and spent the night comfortably. By the next day, the checks were complete, and I received full payment on the spot. It seemed our products were selling fantastically.

We decided to return to Baytrium that same day and went straight to the Hermann Trading Company to deposit money for the development of my territory. I further explained that I’d transferred control to Mr. French and instructed them to go to him if any questions arose about the handling of the money.

We’d be splitting our income roughly into thirds: One would be sent to Mr. French, one brought back for Ms. Futarishizuka, and the rest we’d set aside for emergencies. For this last sum, Ms. Futarishizuka had provided us with a vault in a corner of the warehouse. It was actually more of a locked shipping container, and we’d just been tossing ingots inside. We’d probably continue stashing our extra funds there for the time being.

Last time, we sent five hundred large gold coins to Mr. French; this time it would be double. The scope of their work had expanded, so I was adding a little extra. After all that big talk, I really didn’t want to let funding run out.

After finishing all our tasks, we finally had some time for magic practice. We used the plains bordering the forest outside Baytrium as before. There were no

human settlements out here, so we'd been using the area for this purpose ever since we first started visiting this world. According to Peeps, we were also well-removed from the major roads.

Over several days, we traveled back and forth between there and the inn, and I studied magic under Peeps. Thanks to all the time we were able to devote, I was seeing good results.

"I continue to be amazed at how quickly you learn magic," commented Peeps. *"You have a real sense for this."*

"Really? It means a lot hearing you say that, Peeps."

"As well it should. You ought to be proud."

I then received a lecture on magic from the distinguished sparrow, and true to his compliment, he saw fit to teach me one more spell—specifically, the one to create a golem. It was the same spell Peeps always used to manipulate the laptop. Category-wise, it was intermediate level magic, though that only covered its creation. Skill in golem manipulation varied wildly from person to person, and according to the bird, proficiency was everything in this world.

It felt sort of like operating a radio-controlled toy in my mind. For now, the most I could do was make a little earthen golem stomp around a bit. I couldn't immediately think of a use for it, but I'd grown interested after hearing it was a rare skill employed in my territory's development. I decided to study it, in the hopes that I could help out if an opportunity arose in the future. As for the going-to-work spell, I still wasn't seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

In any case, time flew by, and we soon came to the last day of our otherworld sojourn. We were now back in the luxury inn in Baytrium.

"We should probably return soon," remarked Peeps, looking up from his struggle with the laptop on the living room table. On the screen in front of him, a clock ticked away, the background pitch-black. Apparently, he'd been simulating the passage of time in Japan. I couldn't believe how resourceful this sparrow was—he was even skilled in time management.

"All right, then, Peeps. I'm ready."

"Understood. Let's be off."

In this world, too, there were many causes for concern. But I decided to be grateful that I had a chance to slip away from the uproar back home and relax for a while. I felt as though I'd enjoyed some of that slow life we were after for the first time in a while. Plus, I got to chat with Peeps about all kinds of things, so I was pretty satisfied.

Now refreshed, I was ready to return to my bureau job in Japan.

<Investigating What Fell>

Back in modern times, we each got to work on our usual tasks. Peeps was on the desk in front of the laptop, engaged in a fierce staring contest with the screen as it displayed the time difference between worlds. I, on the other hand, picked up my work phone to see if anyone had tried to contact me while I was absent.

I'm sorry my task is way, way easier than yours, Peeps. I wished I could help him, but he was already far beyond any assistance I could provide. As I started poking apologetically at my smartphone screen, I found a notification icon in the corner. A missed call.

When I opened it up, I saw Mr. Akutsu's name. It was seven o'clock local time, and he'd called just a few minutes ago. As I looked at it, the phone started vibrating, notifying me of an incoming text message. The sender was, as expected, the section chief. He wanted me to come into the office as quickly as possible.

"Peeps, I'm afraid I've been summoned by my boss."

"Are you leaving now, then?"

"Yeah, looks like it."

Sans notification, I planned to head over to Ms. Futarishizuka's villa and do nothing but eat and sleep all day. I was a little frustrated—it felt like the chief had seen right through me.

I hurried to get ready. "Sorry," I told Peeps. "Would you mind watching the place while I'm out?"

"Not at all. Take care."

"Thanks, Peeps."

After saying good-bye to my pet bird, I left the apartment.

But it didn't take long before I realized something. If I simply headed to the station, I'd end up neck-deep in the morning rush hour. Lately, I'd been relying on Peeps's magic and Ms. Futarishizuka's car. When was the last time I had to brave a fully loaded train? I began to grow anxious. I was spoiled now—could I even handle being packed in like a sardine again?

Just then, by some trick of fate, I saw a taxi parked near the front of my apartment complex. The sign on its roof read VACANT.

“.....”

No, no, I thought. *I can't indulge in that kind of luxury*. But in truth, I still had quite a bit of money left over from my recent business deals in the otherworld. If I really needed to, I *could* go through Ms. Futarishizuka to convert the gold from the otherworld into yen.

The moment I started thinking this, my feet turned toward the road. I couldn't stop them. A moment later, the taxi's rear door popped open. My heart, weak at the thought of avoiding packed trains, drove my wobbling legs ever closer to it.

“Where are you headed, sir?”

“Oh, um, if you could take me here,” I said, pulling up my personal phone's map application and showing him the building where the bureau was located. All the while, I feigned a calm demeanor, forcing an expression that I hoped said *Yeah, I take a taxi to work every day*. The driver fiddled with his phone for a bit, and then we were off.

Crap, I thought. *I just hired a taxi. Is this more of a luxury than I deserve?*

For me, taxis were reserved for when I fell ill and needed to get to the hospital. Climbing into one while perfectly healthy filled me with guilt. I fidgeted, wondering if I'd made a mistake. At the same time, though, my heart was aflutter at the prospect of a little adventure so early in the morning.

Eventually, the taxi arrived at our destination without issue. I paid the bill—enough money to eat for several days—then alighted. We were a short distance away from the building—I didn't have the gall to get out right in front of the entrance. I was afraid that if anyone I knew saw me, they'd get suspicious.

Quickly, I headed for the bureau, passing through the front entrance and onward to my assigned desk. I still wasn't accustomed to the place. Then, as soon as I set down my bag, I heard Section Chief Akutsu call for me.

“Sorry, Sasaki, but could you come to the meeting space?”

I headed over to the conference room as instructed, no time to switch on my work computer. Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka were already there.

“Good. Now that we're all assembled, let's get down to business,” said the chief.

Apparently, they'd all been waiting for me. Mr. Akutsu and Miss Hoshizaki took seats on one side of the table while Ms. Futarishizuka and I lined up across from them. The chief had a laptop in front of him, and a cable connected it to the large screen used for meetings. As he moved his hands across the keys, several

photographs came up on the display.

“What is *that*?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“It’s...floating in the sea, right?” Miss Hoshizaki chimed in at nearly the same time.

She was right—all the images seemed to show the ocean from above. No land could be seen anywhere nearby; it had to be pretty far out. The pictures had probably been taken from an aircraft.

Naturally, the focus wasn’t on the ocean itself, but on a gigantic living creature right in the middle of it. It looked like some sort of dragon-octopus hybrid—an octodragon—like the two creatures had fused together. It had the body of a dragon, with several squirming, tentacle-like appendages coming out of it. Its entire form was covered with tightly packed scales, and it had a few spikelike protrusions, as well. If I had to give my first impressions, I would say it reminded me of some eerie monster out of the Cthulhu Mythos.

In short, it looked like something straight out of the otherworld.

“Let me guess,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “You’re calling it a *kraken*?”

“Involved agencies have all adopted the code name Abnormal Object Four, or AO4 for short.”

Ms. Futarishizuka had come up with a much cooler name. What was an “octodragon” anyway? I chalked it up to the generation gap. *Wait, isn’t she a lot older than me?*

“Then is that lizard person who fell on the convenience store parking lot considered number one?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Don’t tell me our companions are numbers two and three,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“You’re both right on the mark.”

Apparently, Peeps and Lady Elsa were being considered “abnormal objects” here at the bureau. They’d been given numbers according to the order of their discovery, sort of like typhoons here in Japan. I wondered if I was already in the running for number six.

The chief pressed a key on his laptop, and a new set of photographs appeared on the display. With the pictures all being of open sea, it was really hard to get a sense of scale. The only hint came from one picture in which we could see the wreckage of a helicopter. One of the monster’s many tentacles had coiled around it. It was a military helicopter, probably about ten meters long, at least.

The tentacle was wrapped all around it, and the creature was hoisting the machine into the air.

“Chief,” I said, “this thing looks...large.”

“According to reports, its body alone is over fifty meters tall.”

“I wonder what it must have eaten to grow so big,” wondered Ms. Futarishizuka aloud.

It was even larger than a blue whale—the poster child for big animals. What’s more, the monster wasn’t long and thin, but stocky and solid. It probably weighed even more than a whale. If you included its tentacles, which numbered in the double digits, it would probably give an ocean tanker a run for its money.

As we looked on in astonishment, a video began to play on the screen. It was of Abnormal Object Four and had been shot from a fixed point in the air a good distance away. You could hear the whirring of rotors in the background, so the camera was probably on a helicopter. In the video, another helicopter was making its way toward the object.

Eventually, one of the monster’s tentacles lashed out toward the aircraft, now close by. The creature was quite agile despite its size, and as the helicopter attempted to escape, the tentacle closed the distance in a flash. It wrapped up its prey, paying no mind to the powerful, spinning rotors.

The monster had more reach than I would have imagined. The helicopter pilot probably hadn’t believed they were in range of attack. One of the aircraft’s blades—which could have easily torn through a person, bones and all—had been stopped dead by the tentacle’s surface. We couldn’t make out any changes to its scales. Not even a dent. It had to be extremely solid.

A moment later, like a snake squeezing its prey, the tentacle contracted. The helicopter crumpled and immediately exploded. Then, as if startled by the unexpected sound, the kraken tossed it away into the sea. That must have been the wrecked helicopter we’d seen in the photo. The video was around two or three minutes long, and when it finished playing, it went back to the starting scene and froze.

“So what do we know about this octodragon?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

I couldn’t believe it. She had the same exact naming sense I did. Part of me was pleased, but another part was disappointed. It was complicated.

My senior colleague’s gaze moved from the screen to Mr. Akutsu. Ms. Futarishizuka and I followed suit.

“Abnormal Object Four... We’ll nickname it the Kraken for now. Anyway, let me give you the rundown...”

Ah. So the chief is with Ms. Futarishizuka. I felt an indescribable sense of defeat.

He proceeded to bring us up to speed on the octodragon—or, rather, the Kraken. Since he'd only invited the three of us to this meeting, he must have been suspicious it was somehow related to Lady Elsa or Peeps. He didn't say a word about any of that, though.

"First, its appearance. It showed up a little west of the international date line in the North Pacific Ocean. According to satellite imagery, the Kraken suddenly materialized in the air, just like the lizard person who landed in the store parking lot. Then it fell into the ocean."

"Really? I'd love to see a video of *that*," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"They've got that one on lockdown," explained the chief. "Even we haven't received it."

"That's a shame," replied Ms. Futarishizuka as a map appeared on the display.

One spot on the map had been indicated with a marker. If I had to give a rough position based on the islands nearby, its latitude was about that of Hawai'i or Taiwan, with roughly the same longitude as the Marshall Islands. As far as I could tell, it looked well within international waters—outside the territory of any one country.

"Could you at least tell us when it appeared?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"It's been about ten days since it was sighted," answered the chief.

I felt uneasy about how much time had passed. If they'd been keeping it secret for so long, why had they suddenly decided to share the information with the bureau? Considering the Kraken's location, I highly doubted other countries were just sitting around observing.

"Has it perhaps *moved* in the meantime?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"You're on the right track." The chief pressed another key on his laptop, and the marker slid from east to west—to the left, in terms of its position on the screen. "This is its location as of yesterday."

"Of all the directions it could have gone," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "It decided to come west."

She was right—the Kraken was headed straight for Asia. If it kept going, given its current trajectory, chances were high it would end up in Japan.

"We received information that it is continuing westward," explained the chief.

"Wait, are you serious?" exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

"Naturally, the government is already tracking its course. However, it's extremely difficult to judge where it will go—unlike typhoons, we can't use past data or external factors. We won't be able to rely on their predictions."

At that, I saw Miss Hoshizaki grow nervous. The real question, though, was

why he'd called *us* here. The monster could crush a helicopter with a single tentacle, and it was bigger than a whale. I suspected even a group of B-rank psychics would have a very hard time dealing with it. Even A-ranks might fail depending on the matchup.

At this point, I was forced to ask the question. "So, Chief, what did you call us in here for?"

"You can't possibly expect us to do anything about *that*, can you?" added Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Given where it appeared, I doubt you'd be allowed to go out and exterminate it even if you wanted to, for political reasons," said Mr. Akutsu, turning back to face us. "But the bureau can't remain uninvolved forever. The higher-ups are already asking for opinions."

Apparently, it wasn't time for a monster-killing quest just yet. Based on the chief's explanation, it sounded like Japan was still in talks with other nations about how to investigate or whether to initiate an attack. I sighed in relief.

But his next words caused me to tense right back up.

"In any case," the chief continued, "they've asked us to send personnel to investigate."

"You're not talking about *us*, are you?" I asked.

"The Kraken isn't all we need to worry about out there," explained the chief. "We'll likely need Futarishizuka's help as a rank-A psychic. Also, the location is out in the middle of the open sea. Since Hoshizaki can control water, she can put her powers to good use."

"I agree that the two of them are a good choice to conduct the investigation," I said tentatively.

It wasn't clear how we'd be getting out there, but the destination was literally in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It didn't exactly have a train stop. If he assigned us to the job, it would take a long time to get there and back.

It was a long trip out to Iruma when we recruited the glasses boy previously, and that was nothing in comparison. Considering Peeps's and my daily business deals in the otherworld, this was one job I needed to turn down at all costs. I couldn't exactly bring my pet sparrow out there, after all.

Unfortunately, my hopes were quickly dashed.

"And the only one with a good affinity with Futarishizuka and the flexibility to coordinate with Hoshizaki is you, Sasaki," finished the chief. "Given the nature of this job, your communication skills will be even more important than your combat ability."

“I believe Ms. Futarishizuka is more than adequate in that department,” I argued.

“You’re trying to weasel out of this and leave us with the mess?” complained the girl in the kimono. “That’s rather cruel, don’t you think?”

“You’re pretty up front about stuff like this, huh, Sasaki?” commented Miss Hoshizaki.

“No, no, not at all,” I replied. “I was just lamenting my own lack of strength.”

“But it’s only an investigation,” my senior pointed out. “And the extra pay you get for long-distance work is pretty good, you know.”

“.....”

Miss Hoshizaki was all about work, as always. She had on a huge smile and was already raring to go—incredible.

“But there’s only so much I can do...,” I said.

“Please understand that even if we must limit ourselves to investigative work, this is a very big deal,” explained the chief. “That’s why I chose the personnel most likely to get results. Sasaki, I have high hopes for you as a member of this bureau.”

Once he put it like that, it became a lot harder to keep objecting. And if I turned him down now, after my little presentation the day before, he was sure to ask why I wanted to become a bureau member in the first place. There’d definitely be backlash. All this, plus the debt I owed him after the hotel incident, left me no choice but to accept.

“Understood, sir,” I said finally.

“The higher-ups are expecting a lot from us,” the chief went on. “And I have faith you three will achieve sufficient results.”

He probably planned to use the Kraken to get more information out of us, despite not knowing of the otherworld’s existence. As Abnormal Object Six, I wasn’t quite sure how much to give him. Either way, I’d need time to discuss it with Peeps. And if possible, I very much wished to get word to those in the otherworld about my forthcoming absence.

“So when do we leave, Chief?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“I know this is sudden, but I’d like you to set off within the day.”

“My, aren’t we restless?” commented Ms. Futarishizuka. “Though I suppose this is par for the course.”

He wasn’t kidding when he called it sudden. I was shocked. He hadn’t said as much, but maybe he’d really had to push the higher-ups just to secure an investigation. That thought only made me more uneasy about going, however.

Ms. Futarishizuka, too, was staring at the chief with an accusatory look.

“Chief, my passport is actually expired...,” I said.

“No need to worry. You’re not entering another country, so you won’t need a passport or a visa.”

“I see.”

“More importantly, you won’t be going back home to pack,” he explained. “We’ve already prepared everything you’ll need. I apologize for the rush, but as soon as you pick up your luggage from the resources department, I want you to head out.”

“With only the clothes on our back, eh?” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The tickets we’ve secured for your trip are somewhat special, you see.”

“Can we assume that we’ll be on the job the entire time, right up until we return?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Yes—you may think of it that way.”

And so it was decided we would head out to investigate the Kraken immediately.



Following Section Chief Akutsu’s instructions, the three of us left the bureau. Just as he’d said, we found a hired car already parked in the building’s lot. Unlike a normal taxi, this was a new model deluxe sedan, painted black with tinted windows. I naturally had doubts about this strange preferential treatment.

When I asked the driver where we were going, he simply said we’d find out when we got there. He didn’t talk anymore after that. Maybe he was ordered in advance to refrain from conversation.

The three of us couldn’t talk among ourselves, either, for fear of leaking crucial information, so we kept talk to a minimum while in the car. Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka traded some light banter in the back seat, but that was about it.

Eventually, the car brought us to a Maritime Self-Defense Force air base located in Atsugi. This particular base was shared between Japan and another country. When the vehicle passed through the gates and onto the premises, Miss Hoshizaki looked surprised. Ms. Futarishizuka, on the other hand, seemed to have guessed what was happening; she didn’t show much of a reaction. As we entered, they asked for bureau identification from all three of us.

No wonder the section chief had been in a rush—these were not your average

tickets.

The car eventually came to a stop in front of a building deep inside the base. I could see a few amenities for those employed here, such as a convenience store and a shopping mall, but we were far away from these. I saw a runway much closer.

As we climbed out of the car, a uniformed member of the SDF arrived immediately to greet us. Surprisingly, it was a young woman with a very pretty face who looked to be in her midtwenties. She'd probably been chosen out of consideration for Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka, but her formal salute and brisk movements as she led us away made it clear she was still a real member of the SDF. I could sense the gulf between her and our group of phony public servants.

She guided us into the building. According to her explanation, this was the Fleet Air Wing 4 headquarters and office building. We ended up in what looked like a reception room. While the building itself was made of rough concrete, the room seemed pretty decked out—maybe they welcomed guests here as well. Even the sofa set where we were asked to sit was made of expensive-looking leather.

Eventually, the person in charge came to meet us. He was a tough-looking man, and he took a seat next to the woman who had shown us here. He was probably in his late thirties or early forties. Quite large for an Asian man, he had to be close to 190 centimeters tall. His shoulders were broad, too, and he was very well-built. He was in great shape, easily in the same league as those handling rough work in the otherworld. Plus, he looked really suave in his uniform. His hair was cut in much the same way as his fellows—a longish crew cut. He had deep, prominent facial features, and the sharp look in his eyes was a little terrifying.

According to the insignia on his shoulder, he was a captain. A pretty high rank, considering his age. This kind of base was usually overseen by a rear admiral, only one rank higher, so this guy was probably quite a big shot around here. Perhaps that was why the guide sitting next to him seemed considerably more nervous than she had when she showed us in. Her rank, incidentally, was that of ensign. Judging by her young appearance, she had to be a cadet.

There was no one else in the room, likely to keep the bureau's existence as secret as possible. Personally, the fact that I was in an organization with more secrets than the SDF made my heart start beating a little faster—I felt like a special forces operative on my way to deal with a giant monster. It seemed Ms.

Futarishizuka's remark from some time ago had become reality.

"So you're the ones Akutsu sent...?" said the captain.

The first words out of his mouth included our boss's name.

For a corporate drone like me, used to beginning such conversations by exchanging business cards, his lack of manners alarmed me.

"You're familiar with our section chief?" I asked him.

"If I wasn't, we never could have put this together so quickly."

"I'm much obliged you've taken time out of your busy schedules to arrange this."

Apparently, this man was an old acquaintance of the section chief. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about their relationship. One belonged to the Cabinet Office and the other the Maritime Self-Defense Force. It'd be a nice story if they somehow got to know each other as two bright, ambitious career men from the same generation, despite belonging to different organizations. I didn't want to think about what it meant for us if this man knew the chief for the *wrong* reasons.

"My name is Sasaki, sir," I continued. "These two are Hoshizaki and Futarishizuka. We're all members of the bureau."

"Captain Yoshikawa," the man replied. "The one who brought you here is Ensign Inukai."

Miss Inukai bowed to us at Mr. Yoshikawa's prompting. A moment later, the two women with me spoke up.

"If we're at a JMSDF base," said Miss Hoshizaki, "does that mean we'll be going by boat?"

"That would be a little much, don't you think?" remarked Ms. Futarishizuka. "It would take quite a while."

Even faced with this tough-looking SDF executive, neither of them seemed daunted in the least. I supposed I could understand, given their abilities. However, as the one charged with looking after them, I couldn't help feeling a chill as I watched. I wished they would have introduced themselves a little more amicably.

Incidentally, the two of them were sitting on either side of me. This was because Miss Hoshizaki wanted some distance between herself and Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Don't worry," said the captain. "Even the Maritime Self-Defense Force has aircraft."

"Oh really?" said Miss Hoshizaki. "That's excellent."

“I’d heard stories, but it seems the people in your organization are indeed quite unique.”

“I’m honored, sir,” my senior replied. “Unlike the SDF, we place great emphasis on individual discretion.”

“.....”

It seemed she was impervious to sarcasm.

Miss Hoshizaki’s such a powerhouse, I thought. It would be a little much to expect a high school girl to understand how the SDF was organized. That said, she and the captain were not on the same page at all in terms of viewpoint or priority. It was a little embarrassing listening to their exchange from right beside her. Even Ms. Futarishizuka was looking at me as if to say, “Can you shut her up?”

As someone who wanted to get this job over with and go back to his hotel, I didn’t want to spend too much time here. Taking over from Miss Hoshizaki, who was grinning intrepidly as she spoke, I tried to urge the captain on.

“I apologize, but Akutsu told us this was very urgent.”

“Right, I’m aware,” he replied. “I need you all to get ready right away.”

After that, Mr. Yoshikawa explained the plan. The aircraft was already prepared, so we’d be leaving the base the moment we were ready. The vehicle had another reservation coming up in a few days, so he instructed us to hurry. Our organization probably wasn’t the only group keen on investigating the Kraken.

We did as we were told, preparing ourselves and heading to the facility’s terminal. The building was situated along a north-south runway. It had big glass windows facing the tarmac, like a regular airport would, and I could see aircraft parked all over outside. A few of them had a friendly nation’s flag painted on their fuselage.

Mr. Yoshikawa and Miss Inukai would apparently be accompanying us on our trip, and we met up with them again once we were ready. They’d also swapped outfits, exchanging their crisp formal uniforms for camo-patterned work clothes. They were now fully armed and more than a little intimidating.

At their instruction, we headed for one of the planes on the runway. The other SDF members nearby saw us off with a salute, probably because we were with their captain. Regardless, I felt like I’d suddenly moved way up in the world. *Oh no, this feels really good.*

Finally, we came up to the craft we were scheduled to board.

“This plane looks kind of like a puffer fish,” commented Miss Hoshizaki. “It

does fly, right?”

As she said, the vehicle was short and stout. The belly—or whatever you’d call it—had a swollen lower half, giving it a very distinctive, chubby silhouette. As a fellow layperson, I couldn’t blame her for doubting its flight capabilities. The fact that it had propellers for propulsion only intensified this impression. Although it had a total of four wings that I could see—two on either side—they were quite small compared to the craft itself. *It really does look like a puffer fish.*

Ms. Futarishizuka wasted no time interrupting, however. “This is an expensive seaplane, you know,” she said. “One produced in Japan, too. Very sophisticated.”

“Really?” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“I’d estimate it costs about twice as much as the one you two shot down in Iruma.”

“Hold on,” I said. “That was the magical girl’s doing.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

I really wished she’d practice a little more discretion in front of the SDF. When she said stuff like that, I started to worry something else might come crashing down.

The incident in question seemed to be a topic of conversation around the base, as well. At Ms. Futarishizuka’s remark, Mr. Yoshikawa’s expression grew stern. He didn’t offer any criticism, however. That made me *really* curious how the incident was being treated here.

Perhaps worried about her superior’s mood, Miss Inukai jumped right into an explanation. “This is an amphibious seaplane called a US-2. Its main role is seaborne rescue operations. It has a top speed of five hundred and eighty-three kilometers per hour and a flight distance of about four thousand, seven hundred kilometers. Its somewhat plump appearance is necessary for landing on the water’s surface and taking off again.”

The plump underside of the fuselage was probably there to dissipate waves. Personally, the in-depth specs didn’t make too much sense to me. I did, however, get the feeling that it was a pretty amazing plane, underneath its charming appearance.

Ms. Futarishizuka took over responding to the woman. *So much for me being the “communicator.”*

“Then will we be refueling at Ogasawara?” she asked.

“Yes. We’re scheduled to refuel at the JMSDF’s Chichijima Base,” said the ensign. “We’ll be staying overnight nearby, then taking off for Abnormal Object

Four the next day. We'll be heading out a little earlier tomorrow morning.”

“How long will we have for the investigation?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Due to the aircraft’s schedule, we’re expecting to wrap things up in half a day. We’ll finish in the afternoon, then return to Chichijima Island to refuel again before returning overnight to Atsugi Base.”

This business trip was shaping up to be a two-day, one-night affair. At most, it might spill over into the early morning of day three. That relieved me somewhat. It would have been a mess if they’d said we weren’t returning for a whole week. If that happened, several months would pass in the otherworld. And with Lady Elsa in our care, that was a major concern.



Urged along by Mr. Yoshikawa and Miss Inukai, we boarded the JMSDF seaplane. Inside were two rows of seats facing each other, like those in city train cars. There wasn’t much space inside, though—at most, ten people could fit if they squeezed. That meant the three of us would be sitting alongside Miss Inukai.

Our seating arrangement, starting from the side closest to the plane’s nose, consisted of Miss Inukai, followed by Miss Hoshizaki, myself, and Ms. Futarishizuka. Mr. Yoshikawa was the only one of our group absent; he was sitting in the cockpit.

Three male SDF members I hadn’t met sat in the other seats a short distance away. Mr. Yoshikawa introduced them as mechanics and communications officers. We exchanged only greetings with one another, nothing else. Unlike Miss Inukai, who would speak to us about this or that, they remained completely silent.

As she explained, this craft’s main role was rescue, and I could see a stretcher built into the wall of the plane, along with various other fixtures whose purpose I couldn’t guess. If I had to give a summary of the plane’s interior, I’d say it was *extremely practical*.

Though I felt rude thinking this, I’d rate it zero stars for comfort. There was no use expecting in-flight service, either. I figured that was like looking for a smooth ride in an ambulance and eventually gave up. Still, the idea of being in here for over ten hours, including the trip back, was really depressing. Belatedly, I found myself relieved we’d be staying overnight somewhere in the middle of it. Lately I’d grown too reliant on Peeps’s teleportation magic and completely lost

my endurance. *This must be how people become soft.*

“The acceleration when we took off was incredible,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki. “I didn’t think a plane could get off the ground so quickly.”

“Compared to a fighter jet, propellers tend to seem slower,” Miss Inukai responded. “But during liftoff, the sense of acceleration can be equal to that of a jet—or even greater. The same is true of civilian planes. People boarding propeller aircraft for the first time are usually surprised by it.”

“Really? You learn something new every day.”

Miss Hoshizaki was particularly energetic, and she seemed genuinely impressed as she spoke to the ensign. When she smiled, I caught a glimpse of the young girl underneath all that thick makeup.

When I was young, chatting with friends always seemed to make the time pass more quickly. These days, that seemed impossible. Maybe I’d simply become harder to impress and narrowed the scope of my interests; the thought scared me a bit.

“If I’d known this would happen, I’d have brought some games,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Don’t you have any good fighting game apps on your phone you can play offline?” I asked.

“Oh, I hadn’t even thought of that. Damn.”

As I looked at my colleague, whose interests were many and varied, I wondered if a similar feeling had led her to become the way she was—playing all the latest games, driving her own car and motorcycle.

“What is it?” she asked, noticing my stare. “That’s an odd look in your eyes. Horny?”

“No,” I replied. “I was just thinking about what it means to grow old.”

“Bleh. You do so enjoy being rude to a person’s face.”

“To be fair, I was genuinely impressed.”

“You speak as though you’re not in the same boat.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard from the little one,” she explained. “Something about an elite? A higher-ranked individual?”

Sometimes, individuals in a species with a grounding in magic would undergo a change, and those changed individuals were referred to as *elites*—higher-ranking versions of their species. Peeps had told me as much in the past. But I hadn’t expected Ms. Futarishizuka to know about it. After all, it was more of an otherworld thing.

“Excuse me for asking,” I replied, “but did he tell you that himself?”

“People like me aren’t exactly common in this world,” she replied. “When we become isolated, we’re often shunned. He asked me to look after you if anything was to happen to him. The nerve, demanding one thing after another of me...”

“...I didn’t realize.” I hadn’t thought the bird was looking out for me to *that* extent. He was so good at moving things into place behind the scenes like this. *Though I do feel bad for Ms. Futarishizuka. It sounds like he’s really using her however he pleases.*

“Anyway,” she went on, offering me a suspicious grin, “I have a head start when it comes to living a long time. I’ll teach you all there is to know.”

“Sure,” I said with a small nod. “Just don’t go too hard on me.”

It was easy to forget, but I’d need to be even more conscious about my golden years—or my future, rather. Depending on how I conducted myself, there was a chance a longer life might bring me the kind of misfortune someone living normally would never suffer. But this girl here had already successfully overcome that obstacle.

“Sasaki, what are you two talking about?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Just discussing the game she’s playing,” I told her.

“Really?”

With nothing else to do, we passed the time chatting. We were graced with good weather, and our flight was the definition of smooth. After around two and a half hours, we arrived at Chichijima Base.

By the time our flight was over and we stepped out from the plane, the sky was already turning crimson. The inlet right next to the harbor glittered in the sunlight, creating a beautiful scene. How long had it been since I last saw white beaches, with waves rolling in and out over the sand?

I’d sent a text message to Peeps using my personal phone on the way to Atsugi Base, informing him we wouldn’t return tonight because of work. Before getting on the seaplane, I’d received a response. “*Understood. Take care,*” he said. What a wonderful sparrow—he could even use a computer to send me messages.

We departed from the base, and Miss Inukai led us to our lodgings nearby. This area was called Omura, the busiest neighborhood on Chichijima. Apparently, a lot of visiting tourists stayed around here. We were no exception; we’d be staying at a *minshuku*, essentially the Japanese version of a bed and breakfast.

But when we arrived at our lodgings, Miss Inukai brought in her own luggage and began checking in, just as we had.

“Oh? Will you be joining us?” asked Miss Hoshizaki, glancing at her from the side.

“Though our time together is short, my superior has ordered me to serve as your guide,” she explained.

“You have my apologies,” I told her. “You must be so busy.”

“No need. There’s only so much I can do here anyway,” she said.

“Would it not be more appropriate to call you a *supervisor* rather than a guide?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“We’re little better than civilians ourselves,” I reminded her. “No use criticizing.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Miss Inukai said. “Those orders came from above as well...”

“Don’t be. We’re in your care.”

Among office workers, going out to drink on work nights was very common. Recently, fewer and fewer people were doing that sort of thing, and when I remembered my previous place of employment, I couldn’t really blame them. That said, there was no denying that alcohol imbibed on a business trip was especially delicious. Getting to sample the local booze and snacks was what was so great about these sorts of trips—the only real thing to look forward to, in fact.

“We have a dinner reservation tonight at a nearby restaurant,” continued Miss Inukai. “I know you’re probably all tired, but would you mind gathering here again once you’ve put away your things? I won’t force you if you don’t feel up to it, of course.”

“Why don’t we assemble back here in thirty minutes?” I suggested.

“I don’t need thirty minutes, Sasaki!” countered Miss Hoshizaki.

“Hear, hear!” agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. “If we don’t head out for food soon, my stomach will start growling up a storm.”

“I mean, I don’t care one way or the other, but...,” I said, trailing off.

While Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka looked pretty much like they always did, Miss Inukai was dressed extremely plainly. If we were going out on the town, I figured she’d need some time to reapply her makeup and so on.

“If you’re being considerate of me,” said Miss Inukai, “there’s no need.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes. Let’s meet back here in a few minutes, then.”

Afterward, the four of us speedily left the *minshuku* and headed to a local restaurant.

At the table, Miss Inukai casually asked us a few things about the bureau. I

had a hunch that, in addition to her role of supervisor, she'd been instructed to get any information out of us she could on the topic of psychics. Thankfully for the rest of us, Ms. Futarishizuka did a good job of evading all her questions with vague, noncommittal answers.

When dinner was over, we went straight back to our own rooms in the *minshuku* and went to sleep. We needed to go to bed before the date changed in preparation for the next day's work.



We set out from Chichijima Base first thing the following morning. For passage, as originally planned, we used the JMSDF's seaplane, fresh from refueling. The positions of its occupants were the same as the day before, with Miss Inukai, Miss Hoshizaki, myself, and Ms. Futarishizuka sitting side by side in that order.

Mr. Yoshikawa was the sole exception. No longer in the cockpit, he now sat directly across from us. We were about to hold a meeting inside the plane regarding the Kraken investigation.

According to what we heard from Miss Inukai the previous evening, the Kraken had destroyed several other aircraft and marine vessels in addition to the helicopter in the video Section Chief Akutsu had shown us. Naturally, everyone from the SDF was on edge.

Additionally, a whole host of other nations' vessels and aircraft were currently at work in the surrounding waters. Depending on their actions, it was possible we might meet with some unforeseen dangers—the other investigative teams present wouldn't all be from nations friendly with Japan. The tension was really ramping up.

"Current estimates place AO4's tentacle range at around one hundred and fifty meters," explained the captain. "That doesn't mean it can't reach farther, though, so we'll be maintaining a distance of at least five hundred meters at all times. I don't know what orders you have from Akutsu, but this much is nonnegotiable."

"Understood, sir," I replied.

We had no plans to leave the seaplane during this investigation. Still, we all wore life jackets, just in case. The JMSDF members had supplied them to us; everyone else on board wore one as well.

"Is that why you handed out binoculars?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka, picking up the set hanging from her neck.

"I would've liked to get a little closer," complained Miss Hoshizaki, "since we

came all the way out and everything.”

These remarks earned a strict rebuke from Mr. Yoshikawa. “You’re free to get yourselves killed, but I will not allow you to put the lives of my people in danger. If you want to get any closer, you’ll have to jump out of the aircraft and swim—in which case, you’ll be on your own for the return trip.”

“My, what a frightening thought,” said Futarishizuka.

“Oh well,” replied Miss Hoshizaki. “Guess we’ll just observe from afar for now.”

The captain was a huge man with stern features, and at the moment, he was fully armed. A threat from a guy like him, even if I knew I’d have the advantage in a fight, was very scary for a novice like me who wasn’t used to this sort of thing.

I couldn’t help but be impressed at how straightforward and unfazed the other two were acting. *Just how fearless are they?* I wondered.

The captain’s face grew sour as he continued. “The three of you will be under my direct command until your investigation of AO4 is complete. While on-site, my word is final. If you don’t listen to me, then I won’t be able to guarantee your safety. Please keep that in mind.”

“I understand, sir. Thank you for going to all this trouble,” I said, bowing my head obediently in place of my two compatriots.

Casually, I looked around at the other crew members. They were watching us with expressions that said *Are these three really going to be okay?* Our bureau was pretty lax when it came to training, so maybe that had them feeling anxious. *Can’t say I blame them.* That laxness came from the fact that we were just a ragtag bunch of civilians. Ms. Futarishizuka, for example, literally looked like a little girl. Every time we had to coordinate with another organization, it hammered home just how far removed we were from normal society.

“If you have any questions,” said the captain, “now is the time to ask.”

“Our boss has instructed us to photograph the Kra—Abnormal Object Four, as well,” I replied. “Is there anything you don’t want us getting on camera? If so, I’d like to know before we get started.”

“No, you can photograph or film whatever you want.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Could we perhaps open up the aircraft door over there?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Yes,” returned the captain, “if you don’t mind falling into the ocean.”

“So stingy.”

“Ms. Futarishizuka,” I began, “Don’t cause trouble for everyone else by asking the impossible.”

“Fine, but the windows are so *small*. How are we supposed to get a good view of the outside?”

“If you’re using binoculars, your field of vision will be the same from the window as anywhere else,” said Mr. Yoshikawa, his face growing sterner and sterner. And yet he continued to answer every outlandish question Futarishizuka asked. *Maybe he’s more caring than I gave him credit for*, I thought. Miss Inukai, meanwhile, observed us in silence.

“Anything else?” asked the captain.

“This aircraft seems to be flying at a pretty high speed,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki. “What will we do when we reach our destination? Regardless of how big the thing is, won’t we just be flying right past it at this rate?”

“That’s a good question,” the captain replied. “Once we arrive, we’ll lower our speed and enter into a slow loop around the object.”

“This plane can fly that slowly?”

“Over the sea, it depends on the wind direction and velocity, but this craft can maintain altitude even at the speed of a car, just like a Cessna. We can’t stop in midair like helicopters can, but we can go slowly enough to make a wide circle around a target for observation.”

“Oh yes?” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “How very convenient.”

“I’m sorry,” I broke in, “but there are a few things I’m still curious about...”

I took advantage of this opportunity with a high-ranking SDF officer to ask some questions of my own. Eventually we began discussing things outside the scope of the investigation, but Mr. Yoshikawa was kind enough to answer anyway.

A little under an hour passed before the question and answer session settled down, and conversation petered out. That was when we heard a voice from the cockpit call out, “Abnormal Object Four sighted!”

With the announcement that the Kraken had come into view, Mr. Yoshikawa gave the order to begin our investigation. As originally planned, the three of us stood up and looked out the seaplane windows.

“Watch out for sudden turbulence,” the captain warned.

“Understood, sir,” I replied.

We each gazed out a different window of the craft. If allowed, I would have had them open up the door like Ms. Futarishizuka suggested—that probably would have made it easier to see. It would be horrible if someone fell out,

though, so I obediently stayed indoors and looked through the glass, remembering to keep my camera at the ready.

Skies were clear that day, and visibility was good. When I raised my binoculars to my eyes, I had an excellent view of the Kraken.

“Whoooa,” breathed Ms. Futarishizuka. “He’s a tall one, isn’t he?”

“Looks like a lot of other aircraft are buzzing around here, too,” commented Miss Hoshizaki.

Neither of them wasted any time giving their impressions. They were right, though—the monster was bigger than it had seemed in the photographs and video. We were currently looking diagonally downward at it from the sky.

Other than its size, however, the creature looked the same as it had in the photos. Simply speaking, it was exactly as I had described it—an octodragon. Most of its many tentacles were tucked away under the water, drifting to and fro beneath the surface. It didn’t seem bothered by the aircraft circling above it. I became very curious as to how intelligent it was.

We also saw a few maritime vessels far in the distance. Most of them had the characteristic flat silhouette of a warship. Several helicopters whirred around nearby, so the ships were probably the aircraft carriers that had brought them here. Every one of them had the colors of another nation’s flag painted on its side.

“We can’t bring her any closer than this,” explained the captain, “but we can change our position a little if needed. We’ll circle the target a few times to start. If you would like to request a change, please speak up.”

“I’d like to see underwater, if possible,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

“We’re looking into using unmanned submarines to investigate below the surface.”

As we continued our observations, we noticed a change near the Kraken. A helicopter began to close in on it from a distance. It had lifted off a stationary aircraft carrier and was now headed straight for the creature. The tandem rotor helicopter was painted in tricolor grays—likely a military craft. It had the same striking design with the fat fuselage as our seaplane.

Suddenly, its door opened, and a moment later, several people jumped. They’d stepped out in midair without a single parachute. Under normal circumstances, they would have plummeted straight into the water upside down. But the entire group maintained their altitude and *flew* toward the Kraken.

Their outfits, pretty and covered in frills, fluttered in the wind.

Ms. Futarishizuka gave a low groan. “Some magical girls just left a helicopter

out there.”

“Wh-what the hell are they even doing here?!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

Confusion spread among the SDF on board at the incongruous term. They had no idea what “magical girls” were. Mr. Yoshikawa grabbed a pair of binoculars and rushed to a window.

“.....”

They were indeed magical girls. Not just one this time, either—a whole group of them. I’d seen two of them before.

The first one was the girl Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka had battled in the hotel suite only a few days earlier. The other was the blond who had supported her during their attack on the bureau. In contrast to the former’s pink coloration, the latter’s outfit was mainly yellow.

I could see several other girls in the same age range with them. They wore vividly tinted clothes in colors like red or blue and carried magical staffs in their hands. I’d never seen any of them before, but judging by their similar style of clothing, they had to all be magical girls.

We’d heard there were only seven in the world. I counted them; there were five here.

“They’re launching an attack on the Kraken,” observed Ms. Futarishizuka.

As soon as the girls left the helicopter, they all lined up and fired Magical Beams at the Kraken simultaneously, which melded together to form one immensely thick beam.

The octodragon idling about in the sea was instantly engulfed in the flash of light. It was so bright I didn’t want to look directly at it. We felt the impact and heard the roar of the explosion in our seaplane a few moments later. The craft wobbled to the side, and I stumbled a little.

Miss Hoshizaki staggered as well but kept her binoculars to her eyes as she yelled, “Five magical girls in one place? Isn’t that a little weird?”

“They probably have some kind of network,” I suggested, frantically working my camera. *Hope this thing’s image stabilizer works.*

“That yellow one teamed up with the pink one to attack the bureau once,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’m more worried about who’s commanding them,” I pointed out.

I remembered hearing from the pink one that all the magical girls were in contact with one another. That didn’t mean they were all friends, but they probably had at least one other girl they knew well in the group.

A dozen or so seconds had passed since they fired the Magical Beam;

eventually the light began to die down. We all held our breath and peeled our eyes.

Instantly, the magical girls began to move. Using Magical Flight, they scattered, putting distance between themselves and the Kraken. A moment later, multiple tentacles lashed out from the water's surface toward the spot they had just left.

"I can't believe it," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "The beast endured their beams."

"And it doesn't even look hurt," observed Miss Hoshizaki.

They were right—I couldn't see a scratch on the Kraken as it whipped its tentacles around with sharp, quick motions. Seeing this, the magical girls escaped higher into the air, climbing until they were clear of the tentacles' reach.

Then, just as quickly as they'd separated, they assembled again and formed a circle. *Discussing strategy, perhaps?* I wondered what language they were speaking—their skin tones and facial features suggested an array of ethnicities.

"Excuse me, sir," I said to Mr. Yoshikawa, "but were you made aware of any of this in advance?"

"Of course not," he answered, evidently shocked as he watched the magical girls. "I can't believe they're real..."

It sounded like he'd heard of their existence but had never seen one in person before. The others appeared to know nothing. They were all speechless at the scene unfolding over the ocean.

In the meantime, the Kraken displayed a clear reaction. It looked to me like it had just registered the magical girls as a threat. It stopped moving and turned its head, previously pointed in the direction of its advance, up to look at them. It seemed fairly intelligent—it clearly understood where the beam had come from.

Its giant eyeballs rolled and fixated on the girls as they continued their discussion. At the same time, its enormous jaw opened wide and let out an earth-shattering roar. It resonated clearly despite the growing commotion, even inside our seaplane.

The next thing we knew, something odd emerged right in front of the Kraken.

It was a large, flat circle, with a dense series of what looked like letters and patterns packed together inside. And as it appeared, it began to glow—with its normal vector aiming straight for the magical girls in the air.

"What's this, now?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. "That certainly looks familiar."

"....."

I had a hunch I'd seen it before as well. It looked a lot like the magic circles that appeared whenever someone from the otherworld, like Peeps or Lady Elsa

—or myself, for that matter, used magic. I wasn't exactly surprised to get confirmation that this huge sea monster from the sky had originated in the otherworld.

Just to be safe, I'll take a few pictures of it with my private phone, too, I thought. At this point, it seemed like we'd get a lot more information from asking Peeps than from investigating on our own out here.

It appeared the magical girls noticed the Kraken's activity, too. Looking panicked, they all pointed their magic staffs at the target. A moment later, a crimson-red glow blasted out of the magic circle's center, soaring up from in front of the Kraken toward the group in the air.

"Oh!" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "They're taking that octopus thing's attack head-on."

"What the hell is that attack...?!" exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

The glow of the Kraken's magic scattered and dispersed, flowing around and behind the Magical Barrier the girls had deployed like the flow of a river splitting in two around a stone jutting out of the water.

But the attack was still pushing them back, shrinking the girls' safe zone little by little. Left alone, they'd be engulfed within minutes.

"Just looking at them makes me anxious," said Miss Hoshizaki. "Are they gonna be okay?"

"Who knows?" replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

As we watched, the magical girls made their next move. Maintaining their Magical Barrier, they began to move away from the Kraken while lowering their altitude. They continued until, eventually, they plunged into the ocean—all the while keeping a perfectly even distance between each other, never straying from their course. It looked like they were performing some kind of aerial acrobatics.

Once they'd disappeared from its field of vision, the octodragon's magic slowed and stopped.

"For children, they sure think fast," remarked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Jealous of a bunch of children, eh?" said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"...Oh, shut up."

Finished with its spell, the Kraken began to move again, this time toward the patch of ocean where the magical girls had dived underwater. Most of the tentacles protruding from the surface dipped back under, writhing and slithering about. Its persistence indicated to me it had some level of emotion.

But within moments, the magical girls burst back out of the water. The five of them emerged in a circle around the creature, simultaneously rising into the air.

Once they'd risen higher than their target, they took aim at the seabound monster and fired their Magical Beams all at once.

The monster took a direct hit, then roared in fury. It picked its tentacles up out of the water and moved to counterattack.

I felt like I was watching a movie—*The Giant Sea Creature Versus the Magical Girl Alliance*. The stark difference in their fighting techniques only made it more surreal.

"Things are really heating up," noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

"What if we get hit by a stray beam?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Excellent point," agreed the captain, nodding. "We're ending this investigation and withdrawing immediately."

At around the time they were speaking, another of the Kraken's attacks struck a maritime vessel trying to flee the scene just like us. A spell aimed at the magical girls flitting about in the sky had missed its mark, just as Miss Hoshizaki had feared.

The ship's nose was sheared away, and it seemed to lose control. It didn't blow up or anything, but it wouldn't be going anywhere now. Before our eyes, it lost its balance, keeled over, and began to sink. Through the binoculars, we could see its crew trying to evacuate into the water.

"...They're friendlies," Mr. Yoshikawa said, swearing under his breath before giving another order. "We're moving in to rescue."

This surprised the three of us. Ms. Futarishizuka, in blank amazement, asked, "What? Are you serious?"

Personally, I wanted to get out of here just as much as the next guy. We were pretty far away, but the Kraken was going wild down there. Though the giant monster's tentacles appeared slender, they were each several meters thick. Huge white waves were rolling every which way like a typhoon was going through.

Plus, we were smack in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean, thousands of kilometers from Japan. If something happened, and our seaplane was damaged, we wouldn't be returning.

"Hurry!" barked the captain in spite of our concerns. "If we move now, we'll be able to maintain distance from AO4."

The seaplane entered an approach toward the sinking naval vessel.

"Wait, wait!" pleaded Ms. Futarishizuka. "What if we get hit in the process?!"

"We're the closest ones to them right now," explained Mr. Yoshikawa. "And AO4's attention is on the magical girls. If we circle around the object as we approach, there's a good chance we'll be able to rescue them. We cannot

abandon any who might be saved.”

“Can this plane even hold that many people?” she demanded.

“Fortunately, we can land on the water’s surface. We should be able to rescue a fair number of people by ferrying them to the other ships nearby. If you’re unhappy about it, then you three can disembark with the first round of survivors.”

“Well, don’t mind if I *do!*”

The three of us didn’t have any training. Trying to help would just create confusion. Wouldn’t it be better to take him up on his suggestion and evacuate? I did a little mental fist pump at Ms. Futarishizuka for dragging that particular compromise from the captain.

“Is there anything we can help with?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“What?!” exclaimed Ms. Futarishizuka. “What are you—?”

“I appreciate the offer, but you all would just get in the way.”

“I see. How disappointing,” replied Miss Hoshizaki, her dreams of heroism quickly quashed.

A few moments later, our aircraft approached the sinking vessel. We felt our altitude drop as the plane came in for a landing. At last, the aircraft hit the water, kicking up waves as it slid along the surface.

“Wh-whoa, we’re really shaking!” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“This plane can even land on waves three meters high,” replied the captain.

We only coasted along the water for a few seconds—the seaplane quickly lost its momentum and came to a stop. Thanks to the pilot’s skills, we ended up right next to the shot-up boat and away from anyone floating in the water. The crew moved quickly to open the hatch.

“Seems we wound up opening it anyway,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Bit of a different story when you’re soaring in the air,” said Mr. Yoshikawa, aiding the other crew members as they inflated a rubber boat. *He’s still responding to Ms. Futarishizuka’s silly comments. What a guy!*

“Now see here, even an old lady can help out with this,” she said. “What a perfect opportunity to place these people in my debt.”

One man had seen us land and swum all the way to the hatch on his own. She reached out her arms, casually hoisted him up and dragged him onto the plane. He was a huge white guy, probably a head taller than me. But she picked him up with ease, as though he were nothing more than a baby.

“Huh?!”

The man looked a little panicked as he helplessly flailed his limbs, held aloft

in her arms. Mr. Yoshikawa and the rest of the crew blinked at her in astonishment, like they'd been playing a game and had suddenly run into an unexpected glitch in the programming. They could logically understand what was happening, but their brains had trouble accepting what they were seeing.

After a few seconds, Mr. Yoshikawa addressed her. "I take back what I said earlier. Would you mind helping, after all?"

"Oh, I suppose," Futarishizuka replied.

Mr. Yoshikawa and a male crew member boarded the rubber boat. Ms. Futarishizuka joined them, and they set off across the water to rescue the allied soldiers floating nearby. Everyone else remained on standby in the craft, busily preparing to treat the wounded and so on.

But just as the rescue crew stuck their oars into the water, I heard a scream from somewhere ahead of them. It had to be a drowning allied soldier.

"Shark! Shaaaaaaaark!" someone cried out in English.

I may not speak much English, but there's something very Jaws about the sound of that scream. In a panic, I peered through my binoculars toward the source of the voice. Several shark fins were protruding from the water's surface. Had someone been wounded when they were tossed into the sea?

After a few moments, I saw the screaming man get pulled underwater.

"Oh. I suppose I should assist," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Let me help!" exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki, suddenly leaping out of the hatch and, amazingly, landing on the rubber boat.

Mr. Yoshikawa roared at her. "You fool! Get back in the plane!"

"I'm fine! Just get this boat moving! I'll disable the sharks!"

"D-disable?! What on earth?"

Miss Hoshizaki was really holding her ground. This was not the kind of courage you'd expect from a high school girl. I bet a normal high school girl would have broken down in tears. *Come to think of it, I don't know squat about normal high school girls.*

"Move those oars!" she repeated. "You're gonna let those people die when we could save them?!"

"Ugh... Fine," said the captain.

She probably intended to freeze the seawater to stop the sharks from moving, and it seemed she'd be getting her way. The captain, for his part, appeared to indeed be an old acquaintance of Mr. Akutsu's. He was familiar with magical girls, and he probably knew a thing or two about psychics. I bet Futarishizuka's little display a few moments ago also helped make the man more receptive to our

suggestions.

“Movies about shark attacks seem to be all the rage lately, eh?” remarked the girl in the kimono.

“Would you mind keeping Miss Hoshizaki safe?” I asked her.

“No problemo. I’ll take excellent care of her.”

There was nothing I could do here. At most, I could stand by inside the plane and help to pull the rescued people out of the water. I couldn’t exactly reveal my magic in front of everyone. I’d managed to secure Mr. Akutsu’s silence, but he probably wouldn’t protect me if someone else found out. Without much choice, I silently watched the rubber boat head off into the distance.

Throughout our relief efforts, the battle between the Kraken and the magical girls raged on. The latter group deserved particular attention. They were using Magical Barriers to keep themselves safe, Magical Flight to zip around in the air, and a volley of Magical Beams to maintain their offense. Meanwhile, the monster was firing off a series of bright-red rays from the water’s surface.

Both sides struggled to land a decisive blow, and neither seemed to have taken any damage at all. Ever since the maritime vessel sunk, the magical girls seemed more cautious of collateral damage and were trying their best to remain up high. *That’s very considerate, I thought. This way, the Kraken won’t aim at the water.*

When I took another look at the girls through the binoculars, I noticed they had portable intercoms in their ears. It seemed likely they were receiving instructions from somewhere else.

“Look at the size of this catch,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “What a splendid sight.”

“I’ve been doing nothing but sitting since yesterday,” added Miss Hoshizaki. “This is the perfect stress reliever!”

Past the rubber boat, I could see fully frozen sharks bobbing up to the surface, one after another. My senior was at the top of her game out here. It was no exaggeration to say this much water made her invincible.

I made up my mind then and there—I’d never piss her off near the ocean.



We’d been at the rescue operation for a little while, and the rubber boat carrying Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka was back from yet another trip. As I was looking after a group of survivors, we heard the voice of one of the communications officers over the onboard comms.

“Mr. Yoshikawa, incoming message!”

“From who?”

“Well, it’s...”

Luckily, Mr. Yoshikawa happened to be present to take the call. He headed into a corner of the cabin where an officer was seated near some kind of communications apparatus. The officer handed him a pair of headphones connected to the device, and the captain began speaking to whoever had called.

Their exchange was all in English, so I didn’t have a clue what any of it meant. Eventually, he turned back to the three of us and said, “Request for rescue from allied forces. We’ll be heading there now.”

“Request?” repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. “Have we not already saved them all?”

“It’s from the magical girls.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Aren’t they all flying around in the sky, doing fine?” said Miss Hoshizaki.

I looked out the window again, decreased the magnification on my binoculars, and counted the magical girls zooming overhead. There was one less than before.

“I don’t see the one wearing blue,” I pointed out.

“Oh, you mean that girl with the star-spangled scarf around her neck?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

The other magical girls were still fighting the Kraken. But when I looked more closely, I could tell they were being a lot more conservative with their Magical Beams. Occasionally, one of them would raise their staff, then put it back down without doing anything. It was like they were hesitating to attack.

When I glanced over to the Kraken, I realized why.

As I watched, Mr. Yoshikawa explained the situation. “One of the magical girls came into contact with AO4 and is currently unable to withdraw.”

I increased my binoculars’ magnification as high as it would go and saw a magical girl sprawled out limply on the monster’s upper body. Though the creature was lashing out ferociously with its tentacles, its torso remained relatively still, so she hadn’t yet been flung off. It was also possible her clothes had gotten stuck on its scales.

“Did it catch her with one of its tentacles?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“No,” replied the captain. “It seems she fell on top of it and lost consciousness.”

Evidently, the other magical girls were fighting to get the blue one back. But

the Kraken's giant tentacles were swinging around quite busily. If any of them took a direct hit, it would be like an 18-wheeler ramming them at top speed. And if a tentacle managed to wrap them up, even their Magical Barriers might not save them. All this was making it hard for them to reach the monster's body, despite their efforts.

"Is that worth risking your own unit?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"The orders come from above."

"Oh, do they? I see we both suffer from good-for-nothing-boss syndrome."

"....."

I wondered if allied forces had spoken to his boss and demanded our assistance in the field. This was a move even the most corrupt corporations would blanch at. And since it involved magical girls, it *reeked* of politics. The rest of the crew weren't saying anything, but their faces had all turned sour.

"What do you suggest?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. "Freeze it the same way we did the sharks?"

"I doubt freezing will do much to stop it," replied Miss Hoshizaki.

The monster could easily demolish a helicopter. My senior was right—even if she wrapped it in ice, it would probably break out pretty quickly. It might even use those destructive red laser beams.

"Why not go all out? You know, shoot some missiles?" suggested Ms. Futarishizuka.

"With the firepower we have on hand," the captain began, "we won't be able to damage AO4. Its scales will block most weapons. Plus, it can heal whatever wounds we manage to inflict."

"Wait, it can repair itself?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"That's what the report says."

"Sounds like a whole lot of exaggeration coming from people who fled with their tails between their legs," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"They've already put it to the test," replied Mr. Yoshikawa. "And with our rescue target unconscious, she could fall into the ocean and drown. Until we can get closer to AO4, I can't permit the use of weapons. We cannot risk the target dying, so we cannot agitate the monster into crushing her with a tentacle or knocking her into the ocean."

"Couldn't have picked a better monster to come falling out of the sky...," grumbled Ms. Futarishizuka, casting a bitter gaze my way.

I didn't know what she wanted *me* to do about it. She seemed convinced the Kraken was a product of the otherworld. Maybe she'd even begun to suspect,

between this and the reptilian incident, that Peeps and I were plotting something diabolical. We weren't, of course.

For now, I decided to raise a thought of my own. "Personally, I'm curious about each of the magical girls' unique powers."

"Do you think they'd be willing to reveal them?" wondered Ms. Futarishizuka. "Even to protect one of their own."

"Each magical girl has their own sponsor, so some may not even be allowed to use them," suggested Miss Hoshizaki. "Though, if they're facing down the monster together, their employment situation might be similar to ours at the bureau."

"That seems very likely," I agreed.

"Or perhaps they've already used them, and we simply can't tell," mused Ms. Futarishizuka.

My two compatriots were concerned, and rightly so, that there were a lot of people watching nearby. More than a few cameras, just like the one in my hands, were pointed at the magical girls under the pretext of investigating the sea monster. *And I've heard that satellite imagery is getting far more advanced at surface analysis these days.*

If the magical girls wanted to keep certain abilities a secret, it made sense they'd hesitate to use them here. I was reminded of the time a pair of them attacked the bureau as a team; I didn't see them use any special powers back then, either. They'd both stuck to a small set of moves as if their lives depended on it.

And now, as a result, they were up the creek without a paddle.

We put our heads together, trying to think of what to do. Just then, the pilot yelled to us from the cockpit.

"M-magical girl approaching!"

"What?!" In a panic, Mr. Yoshikawa leaned out the hatch.

As he did, a figure smoothly landed inside the plane—one of the very girls we'd been talking about.

Hovering with Magical Flight, she drifted past Mr. Yoshikawa and proceeded into the cabin. She then approached our group and landed on her feet with a *thud*.

She looked like she was in cosplay, her clothes replete with ribbons and frills. Their eye-catching design was primarily a vivid pink. This was the magical girl based in Japan.

"Tch..."

Every one of the crew members immediately drew their gun and pointed it at her. I was shocked by how smoothly and quickly they moved.

Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka both turned to the girl as well. The former had her gun out, just like the crew.

But the girl ignored their reactions. Instead, she looked at me and spoke.

“It’s the magical middle-aged man,” she said.

“I’m finding this hard to believe,” I began, “but did you need something from me?”

“...Please save my friend.”

How was I supposed to object when she put it like *that*? After all, she was just a little girl, no matter how you looked at her. And not a fake one like Ms. Futarishizuka, either. I could see desperation in her eyes as she pleaded with me to save her friend. There was no way I could refuse. But I couldn’t act conspicuously, either, so my options were limited. I couldn’t afford to betray Peeps’s wishes by selfishly acting at my own discretion.

“If you save her, I’ll do anything you ask,” she said.

“You shouldn’t make promises like that so easily,” I told her.

“Why not?”

“Because not every adult is trustworthy.”

“Why are you looking at me?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

Incidentally, I didn’t see any dirt on the magical girl’s clothes this time. All the frays and tears had been neatly fixed up, and I didn’t smell that awful stench coming off her, even though she was standing right next to me. She’d probably been cleaned up for the big group operation—likely by the other magical girls and their sponsors. It made me think. Maybe she’d be better off letting one of those other places scout her. *That would probably make her Japan’s enemy, though.*

“Sasaki, a moment?” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“What is it?”

“*Magical middle-aged man?*”

“Oh well, that’s...” I hadn’t expected her to bring that up now. *You never go unpunished for trying to look cool, huh?*

“The chief told me not to pry into the hotel stuff yesterday, either,” she went on. “Obviously, I’m all kinds of suspicious. Would it kill you to trust me a little more? I want us to stay good buddies.”

“Whoa-ho?” interjected Ms. Futarishizuka. “I wasn’t aware you had *that* sort of relationship.”

“Th-that isn’t what I meant!” stammered Miss Hoshizaki.

“Leave the lovers’ quarrel for later,” cut in the captain. “Tell this to the magical girl. We wish to rescue her comrade per a request from allied forces. If it’s all the same to her, I’d like to discuss our strategy.”



Ms. Futarishizuka had deflected Miss Hoshizaki very smoothly. I was acutely aware of her gaze; it felt like she was saying “You’d better be grateful for this.”

As for the magical girl, Mr. Yoshikawa beat us to the response. He spoke calmly and with a broad smile. I wondered if he had any idea that this little girl was feared by psychics all over Japan and boasted a kill score in the double digits. This little Jason Voorhees was probably the strongest one here.

“Can you not use Magical Field to move in close and grab her?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I tried,” replied the girl. “It didn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“That monster goes crazy when we use magic.”

“I see.”

“Does that mean you could get in close if you *didn’t* use magic?” I asked.

“Yeah,” agreed Miss Hoshizaki. “It doesn’t seem like the creature realizes the blue girl is stuck to it.”

“Maybe it’s so large it simply misses things that tiny,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “You or I wouldn’t notice a mosquito sucking our blood until the bite swelled and got itchy, right? Though if it’s buzzing around in your face, you’re liable to get annoyed.”

“Then we’ll need to approach from its blind spot.”

Everyone looked at the captain in shock. Was he *actually* suggesting we approach it in the seaplane? Even his subordinates looked like they doubted his judgment. What happened to not getting closer than five hundred meters?

“Excuse me for asking,” I said, “but do you plan to use this vehicle to approach?”

“No,” he replied. “We’ll use the rescue boat.”

“Not the most reliable craft to be paddling around all those tentacles...,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If worse comes to worst, we’ll have allied forces support our return.”

But if that happened, how many days would it take for me to get back home? Just thinking about it gave me a headache. But I had no valid reason to object, so I found it difficult to argue. Telling him I was opposed because I wanted to go home was completely out of the question.

“Guess that’s our plan, then!”

Miss Hoshizaki, on the other hand, immediately agreed with the captain’s proposition. As her junior, I was curious about her reasoning. *It couldn’t be because she’d keep receiving wages until we returned, could it?* If we had to be

picked up by an allied vessel, the whole time until we returned to Japan would likely count as work hours for the bureau.

For the next few days, we'd just be sitting on a boat, imagining the sound of all that money tumbling into our bank accounts. And there'd be an extra bonus on everything for travel, too. Add the multiplier for the times we "worked" overnight, and it would end up being quite a sum.

"Send a message back," shouted Mr. Yoshikawa to the comms officer. "Tell them to inform the magical girls of our movements and have the girls move away from AO4 so that its tentacles aren't swinging. Also, have them prepare a backup plan in case something happens to us."

Soon the Magical Girl Alliance pulled back from the sea monster. Though the creature had previously been chasing the girls, when they flew up into the sky and used their Magical Fields to disappear, it stopped pursuing. It must have decided to give up.

"It'll be cramped if we try to put four or five people on the rescue boat," I pointed out. "If we want speed, we should go with as few as possible. Who were you thinking of sending?"

"It'll be me, the magical girl," said the captain, "and if possible, you." He looked at Ms. Futarishizuka. He'd just seen her incredible physical prowess, after all.

"Again?" she replied. "And over someone from your own team, at that?"

"I'm putting a lot of stock in your abilities should things take a turn for the worse."

"Ms. Futarishizuka, would you say yes if I accompanied you?" I asked.

"Whaaat?" she whined. "Now you're on his side?"

If we wanted an easy, quick trip back to Japan, this was where I had to put in the legwork. I couldn't afford to cause more trouble for Peeps or our friends in the otherworld. Count Müller had already entrusted us with Lady Elsa, after all. If we failed our rescue attempt and had to be retrieved by another nation's warship, I wasn't even sure a *week* would be long enough to get back home.

"Just so you know," said Ms. Futarishizuka, "my help does *not* come cheap."

"If we get back safely, I'll make it up to you."

"...Well, fine, then."

Likely understanding what was at stake, Ms. Futarishizuka eventually caved. She was probably wary of Peeps. I felt truly guilty over how much I'd been forcing her to do lately.

And with that, the magical girl rescue team had been decided.

Our boat was filled with air, made of rubber, and sported a single engine. The SDF members on the seaplane quickly made the necessary preparations, and Mr. Yoshikawa, the magical girl, Ms. Futarishizuka, and I climbed aboard and took off.

We set the engine to a relatively low rpm; we wanted to approach the target as quietly as possible. Uneasily, I watched the seaplane grow smaller and smaller in the distance.

“By the way,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “why were you all out here battling this huge sea monster anyway?”

“Because my friend said she needed my help,” responded the magical girl.

“Are you talking about the girl who crash-landed on the Kraken?” I asked.

“Kraken?” she repeated.

“That big octopus monster,” explained Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Yes, that’s her. Then we all got together.”

The Kraken showed no reaction at our approach. We were coming in from behind, so hopefully it hadn’t noticed us at all.

“In other words,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “we’re cleaning up the mess made by our so-called allied forces.”

“I’m sorry for putting you through this,” replied the captain. “I mean it.”

“We shouldn’t be taking it out on Mr. Yoshikawa,” I said.

“But we’ve basically won the bad luck lottery!”

Maybe Mr. Akutsu already knew of the Magical Girl Alliance’s upcoming attack on the Kraken when he dispatched us the day before. That could be why he chose us in particular—yes, that made a lot of sense. This situation held exactly zero disadvantages for him. Ms. Futarishizuka probably understood that when she lashed out at Mr. Yoshikawa.

“How terrifying,” she said, looking at the creature. “One swing of a tentacle, and we’re done for.”

“I have a feeling you’d probably be okay,” I remarked.

“You think I’d be able to swim all the way home from here? My body might survive, but my spirit would be shattered.”

After coming within range of the tentacles, we lowered our speed even further and continued our approach. Eventually, we shut off the engine entirely and started paddling with the oars. Fortunately, it seemed it still hadn’t noticed us. It had stopped moving now and simply floated in place. What was it thinking? Maybe it was taking a little rest after driving off the magical girls.

“How are we planning to save your friend anyway?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“If we can get close, I’ll go save her,” answered the magical girl.

“Oh? You set an old lady’s mind at ease. We shall withdraw immediately.”

“When we withdraw,” said the captain, “we will request, via allied forces, that the magical girls resume their attack.”

“In that case, we should probably leave right away,” I pointed out.

“Yes,” agreed the captain. “As soon as the girl is off, we’re getting out of range of those tentacles.”

Once we got up close to the Kraken, the blue girl would be but a hair’s breadth away. The magical girl would then use Magical Flight to rush in, rescue her friend, and zoom up into the air. Even to an amateur like me, this plan seemed pretty likely to succeed. And if the other magical girls were providing a distraction, the chances of success would only rise.

In fact, *our* escape seemed to pose the greatest challenge.

We weaved through the tentacles for a while, our rescue boat advancing across the water, until we came within meters of the Kraken. The beast’s every little fidget sent huge waves in every direction—the weather might be peaceful, but the seas here were rough. We were about as close as we were going to get; I could make out each individual scale on the creature’s body and see the subtle patterns they created.

This close, the monster was a vertical wall.

“Oh, how I’d love to tear off one of those scales and bring it back with me,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“A single scale would be bigger than this whole group,” I pointed out.

“We might get an extra bonus if we take one back to the bureau, though, hmm?”

“Several countries and other organizations already have people down at the seafloor looking for pieces of AO4,” explained Mr. Yoshikawa.

“I don’t think this is the time to be worrying about bonuses,” I said.

Eventually, we heard the voice of the comms officer via Mr. Yoshikawa’s handheld radio. The officer was telling allied forces that the pink magical girl—apparently nicknamed Magical Pink for convenience—was commencing her rescue. After a few moments, the Magical Girl Alliance reappeared high in the sky.

This was now a joint operation between the magical girls and the SDF.

“Looks like your friends are here,” I said.

“...I’m going,” replied the magical girl, using Magical Flight to take off from the rescue boat. She accelerated like a rocket, speeding toward the Kraken’s

head.

“We’re withdrawing!” announced Mr. Yoshikawa, turning the boat around, restarting the engine, and speeding away. We slid through the water like a racing boat—so fast I was almost flung off.

Upon seeing the magical girls, the Kraken began to move again. Several of its tentacles began to undulate and flail. I saw them splashing in the water not far from us, making waves. Our boat rocked up and down furiously, adding another layer of terror.

The tentacles moved first right, then left, as if searching for something. I followed their motion and saw a figure flying between them. It was Magical Pink, carrying Magical Blue in both arms.

“Looks like she’s got her, Mr. Yoshikawa,” I called to the captain.

“What about the tentacles?”

“Most of them are focused on the magical girls. I think maybe...” *Maybe we’re all right.*

But just as I was about to finish that sentence, I caught sight of a tentacle approaching us out of the corner of my vision.

Was it intentional? Or just a coincidence? I had no idea what was going through the Kraken’s head. But a tentacle thicker than the total length of our boat was heading this way.

“What...?!” yelled Mr. Yoshikawa, seeming to notice it as well.

The boat’s engine roared—but it didn’t seem possible we’d make it.

Ms. Futarishizuka might be all right; she could regrow torn-off limbs. But Mr. Yoshikawa didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of surviving that thing. If he fell into the ocean, it would be very difficult to locate him and use healing magic. He might as well have been caught in a collapsing building.

Various thoughts flashed through my mind in the span of an instant. I thought of my fight with little Mika; that encounter had left me less than confident about relying on barrier magic. Nor did I want to reveal the otherworld’s existence to a high-ranking SDF officer. Did I have any options that didn’t cross that line?

My desperate thinking bore fruit, and I soon had an epiphany. This was something I’d learned even earlier than flight magic—back in the otherworld, when I’d been falling upside down through the air.

“I’m going to speed up the boat,” I called out. “Grab onto something!”

“What?! What do you intend to do?!” cried Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Understood,” replied the captain.

Firmly planting both feet on the bottom of the boat, I faced backward and held

out my arms.

Then I fired my water spell.

Liquid blasted from my hands as if one of those thick pipes buried under roads had burst. I angled it slightly downward so it was skimming over the surface of the water and felt the pressure on my body grow.

With the additional propulsion, the rescue boat quickly accelerated.

“Whoa!” cried Ms. Futarishizuka. “This is fast!”

“Don’t talk—you’ll bite your tongue. Be careful,” warned Mr. Yoshikawa.

This way, I wasn’t using any abilities the bureau didn’t already know about. I got the feeling I was putting out a little *too* much water, but this wasn’t the time to get picky. If anyone asked, I could just tell them that my ability had leveled up.

Not a moment later, a tentacle slammed into the water where the boat had just been. We’d barely avoided a direct hit.

Ms. Futarishizuka let out a whoop. “Made it in the nick of time! That shaved a few years off my life!”

“Thanks, you really saved our asses!” said the captain.

Both of them sounded relieved. I was, too. I breathed a sigh and stopped casting.

But the boat was slick with water, and my footing was unstable.

“Ack—”

That and the pressure change when I ended the spell caused me to lose my balance and fall toward the water. I thrust out my hand, but I couldn’t grab ahold of anything; the boat was too slippery. I was going to fall into the sea for sure at this rate.

Should I use flight magic to pull myself back up? I wondered.

But in that instant, an arm looped around my back.

Ms. Futarishizuka’s face appeared in front of me as her incredibly powerful arm reeled me back in.

“That was close,” she said. “You should have been the one grabbing onto something.”

“Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said, turning back to face her. “I nearly fell in.”

Not only did she have amazing physical strength, she had fantastic reflexes as well. And thanks to her, I was able to stay in the boat without resorting to magic.

But as I turned to look at her, I saw that her small hand had been burned raw. Had she touched the boat’s engine when she stopped my fall? We’d been at this

rescue operation for a while now, so the boat's metal parts were very hot. Everything from her palm to her fingertips was burned. *How awful*. As expected, however, the wound soon began to heal.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "It's my fault your hand is—"

"Oh, this?" she interrupted. "This is nothing. It'll heal right back up."

"But it must hurt."

"The pain when you beat me before was much, much worse, you know?"

"We were in different positions then."

"I suppose that's true." She grinned and gave a low chuckle. If not for the mark on the back of her hand, I might have fallen for her right then and there. And if that had been her ploy all along? *That'd make her one dangerous woman*, I thought.

After that, we raced back to the seaplane with the engine at full throttle. Thanks in part to the Magical Girl Alliance's diversion, the Kraken didn't pursue us, and we were able to safely reboard the aircraft. Once the crew helped us in, and we packed up the rescue boat, our mission would be finished.



The seaplane withdrew at top speed, and as soon as we were away from the Kraken, allied forces contacted us. According to the comms officer, they wanted to thank us—and asked if it was possible for us to meet. Apparently, the magical girl we’d rescued wanted to see us, too.

This was a perfect chance to forge connections with magical girls from other countries, not just Magical Pink. Mr. Yoshikawa seemed pleased with the idea and granted his permission.

Personally, I was pretty interested in these “allied forces,” or whatever they were. However, I had to decline, citing another pressing matter.

If we got mixed up in even more trouble at this meetup, we’d lose the possibility of leaving on time, which I’d worked so hard for. And besides, Mr. Akutsu had told us beforehand that the giant monster wasn’t the only thing we needed to be cautious of.

And so the seaplane proceeded straight back to Chichijima Base as originally planned. There, we refueled, then set off that same day for mainland Japan.



By the time we got back to Atsugi Base, the sun had already set.

We were all exhausted from everything that had happened, so we decided to wait until the next day to deliver our reports to Section Chief Akutsu. We split up upon leaving the base, and while Miss Hoshizaki’s love of paychecks brought her back to the bureau to write up her report, Ms. Futarishizuka and I headed straight home.

The latter had her car sent from the bureau parking garage to a spot near the base around the time we left Chichijima Island, and she invited me to accompany her. As always, she was excellent at handling these things.

I took her up on the offer, and we went back to my apartment. There, we reunited with Peeps and moved straight to Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa.

“Ahhhhh,” she sighed, plopping down on a sofa as soon as we arrived in the living room. “I am so tired!” The violent motion caused her kimono hem to ride up, offering a full view of her thighs, but she didn’t seem to care in the slightest, despite Lady Elsa’s and Peeps’s presence.

I could understand how she felt. I took a seat on the sofa across from her to relax and heaved a long sigh myself. As I sank back into the cushion, I could feel the bottoms of my feet stinging.

Peeps, on the low table between us, welcomed me back. “*It seems that was a*

difficult assignment.”

“The trip there and back was so long I feel mentally drained,” I told him.

“Difficult?” repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. “More like downright perilous. We were very nearly strangled to death by that octopus.”

“Octopus?”

“Do you have them in your world, Peeps?” I asked.

“*They’re the animals with lots of legs that live in the ocean, yes?*”

“Sounds like a yes.”

I was overtaken by the desire to simply lie down and fall asleep on the spot. But I couldn’t rest yet. There were things I had to ask Peeps about the Kraken. In a way, this was even more important than our on-site investigation.

“*What about them?*”

“There’s something I want you to see.”

“*Is there?*”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, would it be all right if I used the TV for a bit?”

“Do whatever you like,” she said.

At that, I fished the video camera I brought with me out of my luggage. I’d barely settled into the sofa, and now I was getting up again. I walked over to the TV in the corner of the room and used a cable to hook up the camera to it.

Normally, I’d be disciplined for sharing this stuff with outsiders. But I could show Peeps and Lady Elsa all I wanted, and nobody would ever know. I pushed the PLAY button and revealed what we’d captured that day. After a few seconds, the Kraken appeared on the screen.

The sparrow immediately asked a question. “*Did this happen in your world? This world?*”

“According to the boss,” I said, “it was the same thing as with the reptilian.”

“*...I see.*” Peeps nodded, a hint of something else coming into his voice. He sounded serious, almost somber.

“Do you know something about it?” I asked.

“*As you two have no doubt surmised, this creature does indeed originate from my world.*”

“I should hope so,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka. “Think of the alternative!”

As the video continued, it showed the magical girls starting to fly around. Eventually, Magical Blue got into trouble, and the rest temporarily withdrew. Magical Pink requested help, and we prepared to take the rescue boat straight over to the Kraken. That was about all the footage I had. I’d passed the baton to Miss Hoshizaki after that.

She'd caught our struggle on the boat from afar. I sped up the video so it wouldn't take forever; most if it just showed the Kraken sitting there.

After watching the whole thing, Peeps spoke again. *"I didn't think something this large would slip through."*

"Would you give the ominous remarks a rest?" muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Could you tell us any more about the creature?" I asked.

"Yes." The bird nodded, then moved from the low table over to the TV. He whipped out one of his wings and pointed to the Kraken, which was enlarged and frozen on the screen. *"This is a type of dragon native to the oceans of our world."*

"Wait," I said. "This is a dragon?"

"It may look strange, but it is most certainly a dragon."

Compared to the golden dragons Peeps had summoned in the otherworld as familiars, this creature was decidedly less draconic. I'd been calling it an octodragon myself, but now that I knew it really *was* a dragon, I suddenly became skeptical.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," I said, "but can it fly or anything?"

"I've never heard of one flying."

"Oh god," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "Imagine if that thing could fly."

Apparently, the creature was very rare even in the otherworld.

After hearing Peeps's full explanation, Lady Elsa made a comment of her own. "I've never seen nor heard of any such creature."

"They are almost never seen by humans," explained the sparrow. *"Or rather, those who encounter them don't return with their lives. They cannot be defeated—one can only hope to flee. They very rarely venture onto land, but I can think of one instance in the past where such a creature destroyed an entire city overnight."*

"Sounds positively terrifying," said Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Do you not have such threats in this world?"

"In our world," she said, "we eat the rulers of the ocean for dinner."

"...I see."

I had the utmost respect for the otherworld, but apparently even its oceans were set to the highest difficulty level. *Fishers and the like must have a really hard time over there.*

"I see it is also using magic," continued Peeps. *"Normally, though they possess mana, these creatures never use laborious spells such as that one. It's highly probable this is an elite. In fact, I am certain of it."*

I recalled hearing the term *elite* several times in the past. This term referred to individuals of a species endowed with significantly more magical power than their fellows. Peeps had once explained that I was essentially an elite human. The orc I'd fought alongside Count Müller and Prince Adonis had been an elite as well.

"Is it stronger than the dragons you summoned?" I asked him.

"Yes, and it would be so regardless of whether it was an elite. This type of dragon is more powerful."

"I see."

Those two golden dragons alone could stave off a military force numbering in the tens of thousands. I couldn't even conceptualize this monster being stronger than them. Was it stronger than Peeps, too? But I hesitated to ask that directly. *Not with Ms. Futarishizuka and Lady Elsa in the room.*

"At this point," said Futarishizuka, "I think we should just vaporize it with a nuke or something."

"I think that's a possibility, given its location," I agreed, "but everyone's bound to argue over the when, who, and how. And I shudder to think what would happen if it survived."

"You're such a worrywart," she replied.

"Sasaki," said Lady Elsa, "is there anything I can do?"

"Something you can do?" I repeated.

"I feel bad sitting here in comfort while you and Futarishizuka are struggling. If there's anything at all I can help with, please tell me. Even just cleaning this mansion. I'd like to help in whatever way I can."

The blond-haired girl was sitting at the head of the table, as it were, in an armchair to the side of the sofas where Ms. Futarishizuka and I were seated. The way she sat up straight with her legs together starkly contrasted with how the other girl was lazing about.

Everyone else turned to look at Lady Elsa. "What did the girl say?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"She's frustrated that she isn't doing anything when the two of us seem so busy," I explained. "And she's asked to help, even if it's only to clean this villa."

"Oh, what a good girl!" said Ms. Futarishizuka, sounding moved as she looked at her, though that was probably a dig at Peeps. "You're our guest. You needn't do anything but sit back and relax."

"Sasaki?" asked Lady Elsa. "What did she, um...?"

"She wants you to relax, because you're our honored guest," I translated.

“But...”

“Though, if we end up biting off more than we can chew, we may ask the bird to come out and greet us,” continued Ms. Futarishizuka, looking back over at Peeps on the low table. When it came to that giant monster, I had to admit it was a distinct possibility we’d need the sparrow’s help.

“*Based on what I’ve heard,*” replied Peeps, “*I would hardly hesitate to offer my support should the need arise.*”

“How unusually kind of you,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

“*I’ve merely judged that handling that creature may be too heavy a burden for the people of this world.*”

“You saying that to my face has sent a chill down my spine.”

“But we do want to avoid revealing your identity if possible, Peeps,” I pointed out.

“Could we not simply warp the monster over to your world, like we do the sugar?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“*Any elite dragon will have incredibly high magical resistance. If it were friendly, that would be one thing, but whisking it away against its will would be nigh impossible. At least, if we have to avoid people seeing it.*”

“Then we’ll need to cook up some kind of plan,” I remarked.

“Yes...”

“Well,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “there’s no guarantee the job will fall to us again. What point is there in being so serious about this *now*? If you’ve discussed what you wanted to discuss, let’s have some food and go to sleep. I’m exhausted.”

“Yes, I agree,” I said.

Now that we’d gone over the details concerning the Kraken, it was time for dinner. The helpers working at the villa cooked a meal and set the table for us—the food was as extravagant as the residence—and very delicious.

After eating, it was time for Peeps’s and my regular trip to the otherworld. We returned from Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa to my apartment, made a quick stop at the warehouse, and then it was on to the otherworld. We’d been gone a whole two days in Japan, so I decided to bring extra product to make up for it.

I chose a selection of sweeteners, chocolate, medicines, and manufactured goods we’d sold before, among other things. But the first item on our agenda was a visit to Count Müller. With Lady Elsa’s newest video letter in hand, we headed for the town of Baytrium.

<Territory and Expansion>

As always, we paid a visit to Count Müller's estate and were immediately brought to the reception room. The count was already there. And of course, Peeps sat on his little perching tree on the low table between the sofas. Once we were all settled into our usual spots, the conversation began.

"I apologize for yet another long absence, Count Müller," I told him.

"You needn't worry," he replied. "I'm sure you two have a lot going on."

"I am truly sorry for causing you undue distress while we're taking care of your beloved daughter," said Peeps.

"Please, there's no need," said the count. "I'm the one imposing upon your goodwill."

Like always, the three of us were the only ones in the room. A maid had been present earlier preparing our drinks, but she was gone now, leaving only our steaming, tea-filled cups sitting in front of us. Next to them were expensive-looking snacks. Peeps had been provided with specially designed tableware, as always.

"Several unexpected occurrences delayed our return," explained the sparrow. *"Depending on how matters unfold, those issues may cause us to be away for longer again. I apologize in advance and hope you understand."*

"Forgive me for being blunt, but has something happened over there?" asked Count Müller. "I'm more than willing to hear you out, if you are at liberty to share. I would like to help you two in any way I can."

He was basically saying the exact same thing as Lady Elsa. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree,* I thought.

"A sea dragon from this world has appeared in that one," Peeps told him. *"This man and his comrades have been busy dealing with it. I'd be very grateful if you could inform us of any sightings of things from his world here in ours."*

"What? A dragon...?" repeated Count Müller, taken aback by the sparrow's explanation. He quickly followed up with another question. "Could this dragon have used the same magic as you, Lord Starsage?"

“I know not the reason for its appearance, but I believe the chances of that are low.”

We never told Count Müller about the reptilian expelled into modern times. Perhaps that resulted in a slight misunderstanding. These creatures had not voluntarily crossed between worlds, but rather, a variety of factors seemed to have pushed them across the barrier. After we explained things in more detail, he seemed to get it.

“I see,” he said. “In that case, I shall put together an investigation of my own.”

“There is no need to go all-out in your searching,” replied Peeps, *“but if you notice anything, please tell us.”*

“Understood, Lord Starsage.”

Wow, I thought as I looked at the count. *He really takes the initiative, doesn't he?* And as always, he simply adored the Lord Starsage. I wondered how he'd react if he found out about that video getting leaked. Not that I would ever tattle on Peeps and ruin his reputation, of course.

Once Peeps and I had explained the situation on our end, the count broached a new topic. “By the way, Lord Sasaki, I have some urgent news as well.”

“What is it, my lord?” I unconsciously sat up a little straighter at the word *urgent*. It had been around one month here since our last visit, and the conflict over who would be Herz's next king had been heating up. That was plenty of time for trouble to occur. I steeled myself for news of the court—only to be caught completely off guard by what the count said next.

“Prince Lewis is currently visiting your territory, Lord Sasaki,” he said.

“My territory? You mean the Rectan Plains?”

“That's correct.”

That was certainly not the place I'd been expecting. Prince Lewis was the first prince of the Kingdom of Herz. He and the second prince, Adonis, were the ones competing for the crown. The country was split between the two factions, and I was pretty sure Count Müller and I were on the latter's side. So Prince Lewis had essentially jumped straight into the middle of enemy territory.

“Does this have anything to do with what you told us last time?” I asked.

“It does indeed,” replied the count.

Prince Lewis was moving to invade the Ohgen Empire and bringing all the nobles supporting him along for the ride. Or at least, those were the rumors Count Müller had relayed to me during our previous visit.

I basically forgot all about that until his name came up, but I think I'll keep that to myself. We'd been so busy in Japan lately that I'd started forgetting what

was happening in the otherworld. *Sorry, guys.*

“You’re building a fortress along the border, yes?” prompted Count Müller.

“Ah. Is that why, my lord?”

I thought back to how I’d left essentially everything in Mr. French’s lap. Thanks to his popularity and cooking talent, my territory’s development was going swimmingly. With the addition of several large golems, work was proceeding so fast it would put modern construction companies to shame. We were on track to finish well ahead of schedule.

“Forgive my asking,” I said, “but has the prince paid you a visit as well, my lord?”

“Yes, he has—personally, just last week.”

“*Where is he now?*” asked Peeps.

“It’s been a few days since he left for Lord Sasaki’s lands.”

“*Which means he’s probably already arrived...*”

“Is Prince Adonis with him as well?” I asked.

“No, he isn’t,” responded the count. “He only brought some nobles from his own faction.”

At the moment, I had a few different ideas as to why Prince Lewis would be visiting my territory. None of it went beyond the realm of speculation, however, since I hadn’t actually talked to the man. And if I was going to find out, sooner would be better than later; if he ended up quarreling with Mr. French or the other workers, it could cause a mess. I didn’t want to put them through that kind of stress. *I should probably head straight there.*

I’d be facing someone at the very highest stratum of aristocratic society. I had arrogantly entrusted Mr. French with my domain, but what if Prince Lewis and his people wouldn’t even listen to him?

Never in a million years did I expect a boss-level character to come barging into my domain. “I’d like to head there immediately,” I told the count. “With your permission, of course.”

“Would you mind if I came along?” he asked.

“Not at all.”

“*Apologies for involving you in our mess, Julius,*” said Peeps.

“My own town is so close by, it naturally concerns me as well,” the count explained. “In fact, I should be the one going there to deal with it. I’m terribly sorry for placing this burden on the two of you.”

“*We’ll be heading straight there,*” replied Peeps. “*Are you all right with that?*”

“Yes, I am. And thank you.”

After confirming Count Müller was ready to go, we immediately set off from his estate. And with a burst of teleportation magic, we warped right to Baron Sasaki’s territory.



Just like our last visit to the Rectan Plains, our plan was to take to the air with flight magic and move over the site. I wanted to get a bird’s-eye view of how things were coming along.

Our vision flashed black, and Count Müller’s estate disappeared. We now saw an endless blue sky all around us, grasslands below stretching all the way to the horizon.

Right in the middle of those plains, however, was a spot where the plant life was now gone—a busy, chaotic area. Last time we’d seen a few structures with their upper portions near completion. Now we could see one that looked like a building, though not yet finished. If you looked up the word *fortress* on an internet search engine, you’d probably find something similar. It was rough and made of stone, and while it looked simplistic on the outside, you could easily tell how sturdy it was.

Other tall stone walls were being erected around it. They’d been equipped with bartizans, and on their sides were small windows, likely crenels. The design seemed to imply its purpose was not simply a dwelling, but a place to do battle. The space within the walls was vast—perhaps it was meant to house large quantities of soldiers.

Both the walls and the fortress itself were under construction in various places, but the building had proceeded far enough that I could envision the completed product. A few more days in Japan, and it would probably be ready to move in.

Nearby, I saw carriages lined up in several places. They must have been transporting supplies to the fortress on a pretty large scale. Even a casual glance revealed three digits’ worth of them, at least.

“*Work seems to be proceeding apace,*” remarked Peeps.

“Baytrium has become a hub for those traveling here and back from other towns,” said the count. “People have gathered from all over after hearing rumors of this land. I have no doubt many have fled their old lives to come here.”

“Rumors, my lord?” I asked.

“Many of Herz’s nobles are still in dire financial straits after the Ohgen

Empire's assault," he explained. "I should think many have set taxes quite high in order to recover. When their subjects hear of large-scale, well-paying development work elsewhere, they will flock to it."

Several months had passed here since the development efforts began. That was more than enough time for rumors to spread and people to start making decisions. All around the main construction area with its fortress and walls was a sprawling settlement—bigger even than the construction site itself—of tents that housed the site's workers. You could even see a few log houses here and there. It was starting to resemble a little town.

Like before, a host of golems was moving about the construction site. But now there seemed to be even more. Had they hired more casters? I could make out people who looked like magicians here and there, waving staffs around.

"I am impressed they would come so close to an enemy nation's border," said Peeps.

"For those involved," the count replied, "the choice is being killed in an attack tomorrow or starving to death today."

"I would have liked to leave something behind, even something minor, that the kingdom's people could cling to."

"I have been too weak. For that, I am deeply ashamed."

"No, pay me no mind. My words meant nothing."

Hearing Peeps's words and seeing his eyes grow distant put me in a somber mood, as well. I looked at his face from the side; it exuded more dignity than usual, and I felt I was seeing a glimpse of Peeps the statesman. Although on the surface, he was nothing more than a normal Java sparrow.

But now I understood how much faith others were putting in my domain. The conversation had grown pretty heavy, and I was really feeling the pressure.

"Shall we descend?"

"I'd like to say hello to Mr. French first," I told the bird.

"Very well."

After observing the progress from the skies for a little while, we used flight magic to decrease our altitude. Peeps, as usual, was helping Count Müller. We landed right next to the fortress, and someone ran up to us immediately.

"Sir! It's so good to see you again! A-and you, too, my lord!"

"I apologize for my long absence, Mr. French."

"No need," the man replied. "I should be thanking you for coming." Mr. French was in his work clothes again. Recently, I was more accustomed to seeing him like this than in his chef outfit. "I must say, you came at a *very* good

time.”

“Should I take that to mean Prince Lewis is already here?” I asked.

“Oh? You already know?”

“I just heard about it from Count Müller.”

“Then could you possibly lend us some assistance? You’ve done a lot of good by us, but there isn’t a soul here who can speak directly to a prince.”

“Of course—and it is I who should apologize for putting you in this situation. I’ll deal with it right away. Would you mind showing me to him? If anyone’s been wounded, I’ll have a look at them first.”

“No wounded, at least. Here, he’s this way.”

Mr. French hurried us across the work site, toward the opposite side of the fortress. We left the construction area and passed through the tents, before reaching a spot where several carriages waited in a line.

I’d seen them from the sky, but up close I could tell how lavish they were. *These certainly aren’t the type commoners would be using to transport goods.* I could see many more in other areas that might be used for transport, but the ones in this vicinity were very different. These were luxuriously decorated for use by nobles and royals. I could see quite a few knights and maids on hand, as well.

There were a *lot* of carriages here. The one in the center seemed the most ornate, but many others were dazzling in their own right. Of course, the first prince would never come to the border on his own—he’d bring a retinue of nobles along.

Mr. French headed straight to the middle of the row of carriages, and a knight quickly hailed him. If it had been just Mr. French and me, he probably would have turned us away, but this time, we had the count with us. The knight must have recognized his face, and we were able to get a meeting with Prince Lewis.

We were shown to what had to be the most exorbitant, garish carriage in the vicinity. As we stood next to it, a familiar face peered out from the window—the young man who had stood next to the throne during our audience with the king. It seemed he was indeed Prince Lewis.

“Oh?” he said. “Count Müller, what are you doing here?”

“The lord of this land wishes to greet you,” explained the count, kneeling on the ground as he spoke. “I have accompanied him.”

I, as Baron Sasaki, followed suit, hastily assuming the same position. If I’d been alone, I definitely would have screwed up and simply bowed. Next to me, Mr. French had bent the knee in the same way.

“Hmm? Well, that’s very thoughtful of you,” said the prince, his eyes darting

from the count to me.

Several knights—serving as guards, no doubt—stood right next to the carriage. They were probably his personal entourage. Even with the count present, they maintained their sharp gazes, ever vigilant. Since we supported the second prince, Adonis, we were the enemy faction. The knights were probably on edge, having set foot in what was essentially hostile territory.

I decided to greet the prince as well, hoping to alleviate the tension. “It is my great honor that you have graced me with a visit, Your Royal Highness. I am Sasaki.”

“I remember seeing you during an audience with my father,” remarked Lewis.

“I’m honored once again that you remember, sir.”

In contrast to his younger brother’s handsome charm and winning smile, the elder brother had a kind of gloominess about his expression as he gazed at us. I could feel him looking me up and down, appraising me. His long hair and mild way of speaking only strengthened the impression.

As a blood relative of Prince Adonis, Prince Lewis’s features were similarly handsome. He was definitely a heartthrob in his own right. And yet the dreary way he moved and spoke and his gloomy visage were the total opposite of his brother.

“You initiated direct negotiations with my father in front of us all,” Lewis noted. “Anyone would remember.”

“I’m terribly sorry for my actions at the time, sir,” I responded. “They were out of line.”

He seemed to recall my face with no trouble. That brought me no joy, however, since I’d already cast my lot with Prince Adonis. I’d honestly prefer he just forget about me.

Count Müller must have had complicated feelings as well. This prince’s whims had separated him from his daughter for the time being. But he far outranked us, and the count had to bow to him. *Hope we can figure out what he’s here for and send him on his way quickly.*

“Sir, may I have a word?” I asked.

“Very well. What is it?”

“As you can see, sir, this land is desolate. I apologize from the bottom of my heart for causing you such a grave inconvenience. If you wish, we would be able to entertain you much better elsewhere.”

Thanks to my deals with Mr. Joseph, I had quite a bit of pocket money to use on whatever came up. *I’ll wine and dine him until he’s satisfied and send him*

back to the palace, I thought.

But the prince furrowed his brow at my words. “There is much here, is there not? A splendid fortress is under construction, after all,” he pointed out, his eyes moving to the incomplete structure standing behind us.

The fortress was already big enough to be seen over the surrounding tents, even from out here. Through the unfinished walls, you could catch glimpses of the large golems moving about. *Talk about an otherworldly construction site.*

“Is the fortress of interest to you, sir?” I asked.

“I am the first prince of this kingdom,” he replied. “Our relationship with the empire across the border is precarious; I believe it’s only natural I should come to observe a major development undertaken so close by. And I believe my father was the one who originally suggested all this.”



“I apologize for speaking out of line, sir,” I said. “You are quite correct.”

Could he have come here to use this border fortress as part of the succession dispute? The prince was right; this had all come about after an exchange between Duke Einhart and the king. And it would be easy for him to show up and snatch away the fruits of the landowner’s labor. I was a new baron—and very far from the capital.

Plus, this would give him a means to keep Prince Adonis in check. *First the Lady Elsa incident and now this? Maybe he’s one of those “I always get what I want” types.*

“It’s fortunate you two have shown up together,” continued the prince. “Give me a tour around the fortress. I don’t mind if it’s still in progress. This land would be on the front lines in a war with the Ohgen Empire. As one who may rule the kingdom, I must have a good sense of its scope.”

“It is as you say, sir.” How was I supposed to refuse? I had no choice but to nod and agree. The count didn’t offer any objections, either.

The prince gave a little smile. “A good response,” he noted. “Let’s be off at once, then.”

Seeing our reactions, Prince Lewis alighted from his carriage. The knights stationed near the cabin all moved, surrounding him in a tight formation that said *Do anything even slightly suspicious, and we’ll cut you down without question.*

That was the party Count Müller and I had to lead to the fortress.



Prince Lewis’s surprise inspection was quite the event for those working at the site. *I feel so bad for them.* Just moving from the carriages to the fortress created a big stir. Even though the prince insisted to everyone that they didn’t need to stop working, they all groveled on the spot.

Walking through them as this happened was *very* uncomfortable.

Mr. French came along, too, helping us show the prince around. As we headed to the fortress, he was able to field questions about everything from how many people currently labored in my domain to their future plans and schedules. I couldn’t be more thankful. Eventually, we came right up to the front of the fortress.

“It looks several times stronger and more solid than it appeared from afar,” Prince Lewis remarked.

“I’m honored to hear it, sir,” I replied.

“I see many golems about. I assume they’re being put to good use?”

“Yes, sir. Thanks to the golems, work has been proceeding exceedingly smoothly,” I answered, merely passing on what Peeps had told me. Without those golems, we probably wouldn’t have made even half this much progress. With the combination of magic to make objects float and the golems’ brute strength, there was no need for things like tower cranes. They were also working wonders hauling supplies from Baytrium.

“I’m curious to see how the inside is coming along,” said the prince. “May we enter?”

“O-of course, sir!” exclaimed Mr. French, nodding enthusiastically. “Right this way!”

We followed him as he began to walk toward the entrance. Peeps and I hadn’t seen the inside yet, either. We all streamed into the structure, the prince’s knights included.

The first thing I noticed were military facilities, such as guardrooms and cafeterias for soldiers, as well as storehouses for holding supplies. I also saw a full array of everything a lord in the outskirts might need, such as offices, reception rooms, and a guest room. It seemed the crew really was treating it like a local noble’s estate.

At the moment, the interior was all exposed stonework—not concrete, I reminded myself. The stones had all been precisely measured and cut, though, so the place didn’t look too shabby. No need for modern wallpaper here. Once they brought in some carpets and furniture, things would really start to shape up. It looked crude by modern standards, but it was more than adequate for this world. *It’s like a theme park castle.*

I did spot a few areas that looked unfinished, however. The finishing touches must have required a human rather than a golem to get them just right.

After giving the place a once-over, we moved to an upper-floor balcony. From here, you could see everything around us—the city of tents and the plains beyond. A table and chairs had been set up, though I wasn’t sure when they had arrived. Some women in maids’ outfits were already present, preparing tea. A moment later, the knights surrounding the prince moved in to pull out a chair and perform other small tasks for their lord.

The people Prince Lewis brought with him probably set this up while we were observing the interior. I looked around again and noticed the nearby workers were all gone. I felt bad for getting in the way of their tasks.

The prince took a seat at the table, while the rest of us stood around it, facing

him. Naturally, his knights stood behind him, glaring at us.

“This workmanship is much more impressive than I’d expected, Baron Sasaki,” he said.

“I’m honored by your compliment, sir.”

“You must have very skilled craftsmen working for you.”

“That is correct, sir.” I hadn’t personally done anything at all. I wanted to hand off the credit to Mr. French and the others who were actually putting in the work. But considering the prince was from an opposing faction, I hesitated. *Best keep our conversation as short as possible.*

“I’d like to ask you something,” said the prince. “How many troops do you think we could potentially station here?”

“Well...” Having passed all these decisions off, I groped for an answer.

Count Müller quickly stepped in to help. “We do not yet have an exact number, sir, but I would imagine it could hold five to six thousand without issue.”

“That’s far better than nothing,” noted the prince. “But considering the enemy’s numbers, it leaves me uneasy.”

“I believe there are yet more things to be concerned about, sir,” replied the count. “Nearby villages were razed in the previous scuffle. As this place is relatively isolated, securing supply lines would require much labor. When the Empire attacked us, we found enemy troops setting up ambushes as far into Herz as Baytrium’s outskirts.”

“Oh, I’m aware of the need to maintain the roads.”

The prince’s concerns were reasonable. The Ohgen Empire had mobilized over ten thousand soldiers during their previous invasion. If not for the dragons living in the big hole, even this fortress we were working on so diligently would quickly be taken by the enemy.

“Sir,” said the count, addressing the prince. “There’s something I would very much like to ask.”

“And what would that be?”

“Have you already made up your mind on invading the Ohgen Empire, sir?”

Way to cut straight to the point, I thought. The knights around us all visibly tensed. How much had they been told?

“Yes, I have,” replied the prince with a casual nod, as if it were the most natural response in the world. “And I’d like to have your cooperation when the time comes.”

“We have pledged our allegiance to the Herzian royal family and to His Royal

Highness Adonis,” returned the count. “If you and he are to ride out and conquer the enemy, we vow to serve as your swords and fight until the very last man.”

“Be frank, Count Müller. You can admit that you want no part of it,” said the prince, offering a smirk in front of all his subordinates.

“.....”

The count faced the prince’s provocation in silence. Watching these two attractive men confront one another was like looking at a scene from a painting. It made me—an average Joe—want to turn right around and exit stage left.

“Forgive my rudeness, sir,” said the count eventually. “But do we have a chance at winning?”

“Well, naturally,” replied Prince Lewis. “I have no intention of throwing away my own life.”

Count Müller’s forward suggestion would have normally drawn at least one critical comment from the knights. But they all stayed silent and watched the two nobles. Were they curious about their lord’s intentions as well?

“If you don’t mind,” replied the count, “I’d like to ask the reason for your confidence on this matter.”

“I *do* mind,” the prince returned. “Very much, in fact. Would you have me reveal my entire strategy right here?”

“No, I would never—”

“This is not some jest, Count Müller,” interrupted Prince Lewis. “I am no fool.”

“I apologize for overstepping, sir.” The count bowed his head meekly at the prince’s scolding.

Keeping the count in his peripheral vision, the prince reached for a freshly brewed cup of black tea sitting on the table. He brought the cup to his lips and took a sip. Behind him was the fortress balcony, overlooking the great plains along the border. Seeing him enjoy his tea so elegantly against this backdrop felt once again like gazing at a work of art.

“In my mind’s eye, I can already see our soldiers, clear as day, striking a decisive blow to the Empire. You need only follow my instructions, and I shall skillfully bring our nation out of its current predicament.”

“.....”

Count Müller stared at Prince Lewis, clearly wanting to say something—but he chose to remain silent.

Ugh, this is so uncomfortable. Just watching them is giving me a stomachache. Though politically speaking, we may have been enemies, this man was the first

prince of Herz. If the count pressed any further, the knights waiting to the side would not stay silent. And obviously, this wasn't the kind of situation where some backwater baron might insert his own opinion.

In desperation, I glanced over to my shoulder at Peeps. The sparrow, however, gave no response, calmly pretending he was merely a bird. He was acting so birdlike, in fact, that for a moment I worried he had been swapped out without me knowing.

Meanwhile, our party, which had been standing under a bright sun, was momentarily blanketed in darkness. At the same time, we heard a roar as something passed over us in the sky. I looked up, and there it was—a huge dragon. One of the golden dragons Peeps had summoned had passed very close to the fortress. Had it picked up on the bird's presence and come to check on him?

The knights around Prince Lewis looked flabbergasted. In a panic, they drew their swords and readied themselves. Mr. French and Count Müller, on the other hand, seemed used to it—their expressions were no more excited than if they'd just caught sight of a sweet potato seller rolling into the neighborhood.

“Is that one of the dragons rumored to be nesting nearby?” asked the prince.

“Yes, that's corr—”

But before I could finish my sentence, Prince Lewis raised one of his arms toward the dragon. *Now what's he doing?* I wondered.

Then, moments later, magic blasted out from his hand. It was an uncharmed attack spell that sent a fireball the size of a person straight at the dragon.

Someone shouted an astonished “What?!” but I wasn't sure who. I was just as shocked as they were. Attacking a dragon with magic? Of all the things I could have seen coming, that was not one of them. It was so sudden I could only stand there, dazed.

The fireball zoomed through the air and connected with the dragon's tail, exploding and covering the surrounding sky in a storm of flames.

Naturally, that brought the dragon to a sudden halt. Then the creature swiveled in midair to face us. From what I could see, it was unharmed. I couldn't make out a single scorch mark on its radiant golden scales.

A moment later, it opened its jaw and gave a huge, threatening roar, spreading its wings and appearing to take up a fighting stance. It was still pretty far away from us. But because of how large the dragon was, it was plenty intimidating.

“S-Sir?!” cried Count Müller. “What are you doing?!”

“Count Müller, I'd like you to observe the dragon's reaction,” said the prince.

“Its reaction?” repeated the count. “I don’t—”

As soon as it turned in the direction of the fireball—toward us—it let out a roar of obvious anger. Now flames were rising out from its throat. I was afraid they’d cook the fortress and everyone inside.

Its frightening eyes swiveled before fixing on our group. But not long after it opened its mouth to try to threaten us again, it suddenly shook.

Its gaze was still focused on our party on the balcony, but it had begun to reluctantly fold its wings. Halfway through its ear-splitting roar, it fell silent and stopped, its mouth hanging open. It paused there in the sky and took no further action, simply continuing to stare at us.

My assumption was that the dragon was looking at the little sparrow nestled on my shoulder. Perhaps it had gotten angry at being hit with fire, then spotted its master near the source of the attack and was now unsure of what to do.

It was so terrifying a second ago, I reflected. But now it almost seems a little cute. Even the way it grumbled, now meek, struck me as charming.

“Well, what is going on here?” asked the prince. “Why does the dragon not attack us?”

“Sir, please come inside the fortress, quickly!” shouted the count.

“Why? I see no movement from our dragon.”

“But—!” Grasping the situation, Count Müller was making a show of trying to distance the prince from the dragon. The knights nearby were on the same page and kicking up a fuss of their own.

But Prince Lewis remained seated in his chair, looking up at the sky. “It may have no interest in humans, but I attacked it without warning. What strange sort of dragon wouldn’t be angry with us? In fact, it looked as though it was about to strike back and then *hesitated.*”

“.....”

Apparently, the prince had caught on to what those dragons in the hole were really about. And yet I couldn’t believe he’d shot one with magic as soon as he saw it. What a terrifying display of courage—he was checking his theory with a game of Russian roulette. If Peeps hadn’t been here, everyone present would have been roasted a fine golden brown.

For a negative, gloomy character, he sure took the initiative. He reminded me of those YouTubers who voluntarily did dangerous stunts for views.

“What do you think, Count Müller?” the prince asked.

“I know not what goes through the minds of dragons,” replied the count. “But for now, I believe we should prioritize your safety. I do not know how long it

will hold, but please come back inside the fortress.”

The count had his sword drawn and was standing among the knights at Prince Lewis’s side. He clearly planned to continue feigning ignorance about the dragons. Mr. French, for his part, was now white in the face, his knees shaking.

“Hmm...,” murmured the prince, seeming lost in thought as he looked over everyone on the balcony without a care for the count’s advice.

In the meantime, there was a change in the sky. After a short interval staring at us, the dragon turned its head away, then spun and flew off as it had originally planned, without doing a thing.

Its tail, which had been straight and taut a few moments ago, was now a little droopy. That made me curious. Was the dragon trying its best to be considerate of us? When I thought about it that way, I began to feel an attachment to these neighbors of ours, and I thought once again how nice it would be to have a big pet.

“Behold,” announced the prince. “The dragon leaves.”

As we looked on, the dragon did, in fact, fly off into the distance. After a leisurely flight, it settled into the great hole in the middle of the plains. Apparently, it had been on its way back home. Had it found food elsewhere? Or had the warm sunlight enticed it out for a walk?

Once the dragon had vanished out of sight, everyone relaxed. The knights and Count Müller lowered their swords and breathed sighs of relief.

A moment later, the count advised the prince, “Please, sir, I believe it best if you refrain from such actions in the future.”

“Aren’t any of you curious as to that dragon’s origins?” asked the prince.

“I suppose so, sir,” replied the count, “but there is no need to provoke the beast.”

None of the knights objected to his remark; they probably agreed. In fact, they looked like they were happy the count had said something.

“Baron Sasaki,” said the prince, “I would hear your viewpoint on the dragons living in that vast hole.”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” I replied, “but unfortunately, all I know is that they haven’t attacked anyone. Although, I have heard that behavior may not apply to people crossing the border. There have apparently been casualties among the Ohgen Empire’s forces in the past.”

“What I want to know, Baron,” replied the prince, “is your opinion on that very ecology.”

“I would guess that inside that hole, or perhaps somewhere else near the

border, is something keeping them here,” I suggested. “However, I have not yet tried to confirm this theory for fear of the dangers involved.”

“And your perspective on why that one left, despite my attack?”

“They say some dragons exhibit greater intelligence than humans, sir. I would venture to guess it’s much the same as how we will swat at a fly that annoys us, but we won’t chase after it to strike it down. Perhaps they only see us as flies, sir.”

I knew it was a lame excuse. But the prince didn’t have any means of verifying the truth. If he ordered people to investigate, we might have to get the dragons to try a little harder. Hopefully, whatever troops he sent would give up at that point. Though it wasn’t the nicest strategy, it would be far less costly in terms of human casualties than invading the Empire.

“So then you know very little at present,” said the prince.

“I am terribly sorry to admit it, but you are correct, sir,” I replied.

After that, we spent some time conversing, and I learned that Prince Lewis would be staying near the fortress for the next few days. In addition to observing the commoners at work, he would be sending investigative teams to nearby villages wiped out by the Empire.

The fact that he’d come all the way to this backwater location to personally take charge made his position on invading the Empire seem more trustworthy. That said, I couldn’t imagine the Kingdom of Herz taking down the Ohgen Empire, no matter how clever the tactics. I’d caught a glimpse of the size of the enemy’s forces in the past, and I’d never forget it. Plus, since we supported Prince Adonis’s faction, we felt a resistance toward going along with the first prince’s plans.

When I consulted with Count Müller, he urged me to focus on my own business and insisted he would look after the prince and his people himself. He knew that the funds for the territory’s development were being covered by my trade in the Republic of Lunge, so he was being considerate in that regard. I decided to take him up on his kind offer, since our time in the otherworld was limited.

I was already quite busy back in Japan. If I missed another visit, close to a month could pass without me. I felt bad for the count, but in that light, this was the only choice I had.



We set off from the Rectan Plains and headed straight to the Republic of Lunge, remembering to hop back and forth between modern times and the otherworld to ferry our goods into the warehouse prior to our visit with Mr. Joseph. I'd written up a memo of the products he requested in advance and brought everything on the list.

Peeps set to work teleporting the extremely heavy storage containers—each one must have weighed several tons—with his magic. I was pretty used to this process by now, and I could tell we were becoming more efficient; we managed to finish up after only a few trips.

Eventually, we arrived at the Kepler Trading Company's reception room. As always, I sat down on the sofa and greeted Mr. Joseph across the low table. "I'm very sorry for my extended absence, Mr. Joseph."

"No, don't be," he replied. "It's no problem, Mr. Sasaki."

The casual, familiar exchange soothed me. Both worlds had begun to get a little out of hand as of late, so I found the predictable routine very comforting. The things I said had been thought out beforehand, and his replies were all expected. *Thank you, Mr. Joseph—you've brought this corporate drone some much-needed peace of mind.*

Like every other trip, we handed over the goods, had them assessed, and exchanged the money. I made about five thousand Herzian large gold coins on the sale. That was another two thousand more than our previous deal. We brought extra since it had been two days since our last visit, and it had paid off. I couldn't help but wonder if I even needed any more money.

Whether it was funds for our life of relaxation or the development of my barony, we already had more than enough stored away. I'd have to allow for maintenance costs in the case of the latter, but it seemed fitting to raise that money through management of the territory itself going forward.

As the deal came to a close, someone familiar paid a visit to the reception room. There was a knock at the door and then a voice: "Excuse me, but I heard Mr. Sasaki was here."

"Oh? Mr. Marc, you've returned," called out Mr. Joseph. At his prompting, the visitor immediately opened the door, and from the hallway appeared the very man Mr. Joseph had named.

"It's so good to see you again, Mr. Sasaki," said Mr. Marc. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here to greet you when you arrived."

"No," I said, rising from the couch. "I must thank you for stopping by—I know how busy you are."

We both bowed our heads. Then, once Mr. Marc was in the room, Mr. Joseph spoke up.

“You’ve come back at the perfect time.”

“Were you by any chance visiting the Kingdom of Herz?” I asked.

“There was a matter that couldn’t be settled by correspondence, so I headed there personally,” he answered. His shoes and the hem of his pants were speckled with dirt. He must have heard about our visit upon his return to the Republic and run straight here. *Now I feel really bad. Come to think of it, he’s been back and forth between the two nations quite a lot. He seems so busy, and all because of me—Baron Sasaki.*

“I’m terribly sorry for causing you so much trouble,” I said.

“As someone born and raised in Baytrium, what you’re doing means a lot to me. I’m proud to work for the benefit of my hometown, so please don’t worry about it.”

Count Müller, Mr. French, Mr. Marc—it seemed like I was burdening everyone around me these days. But since they were all such good people, they kept saying that they didn’t mind and not to worry. But I just didn’t feel right leaving things as they were. And that was why, this time, I’d brought a new product specifically to rectify the problem.

Though perhaps “product” wasn’t the right word, since I didn’t intend to sell it. Instead, I meant this equipment to be used mainly among my inner circle.

“I can’t keep burdening you like this, Mr. Marc,” I told him. “So I’ve brought something especially for you, to improve your work in the Kingdom of Herz. Do you have time to hear me out?”

“I’m incredibly grateful for your concern,” he replied. “And yes, I have plenty of time.”

“Does this have anything to do with that bag you brought in?” asked Mr. Joseph, his eyes darting to the suitcase set beside the sofa.

“Yes, it does.”

This was an item I’d brought without being asked, separate from the deals we’d hashed out beforehand. I was already standing, so I opened the case and placed the item on the low table in front of me. Naturally, Ms. Futarishizuka had been the one to source it back in modern times.

To the untrained eye, it looked like an AV amplifier with a black metal exterior. The front featured a liquid-crystal display and several buttons, while on the back were rows of holes for hooking in a variety of cables of different sizes. It weighed about two kilograms, so it was fairly heavy.

As one might expect, Mr. Marc and Mr. Joseph were at a loss for words. As I smugly placed it onto the table, the former asked, “Forgive my ignorance, but what sort of item is this?”

“This is a tool much like the transceivers I brought in the past.”

“Oh? Now that *is* interesting.”

In fact, this device *was* a transceiver. But being a stickler about words and definitions with people from this world was pointless, so I didn’t worry too much about it. I idly wondered if this word from another language would be passed down through the generations, its meaning altered.

When I told them it was a wireless radio, both of the men changed their expressions and gazed at the box with intense fascination.

In more concrete terms, this was an amateur radio. Despite the moniker, however, it was a pretty costly piece of equipment; just one went for several hundred thousand yen, about the same price as a brand-new midsize motorcycle. I could only afford to make this kind of offer because I was able to convert valuables from this world into yen.

In truth, use of the machine required additional work, such as setting up antennas and preparing a power source. You also needed special knowledge to operate it. I didn’t even know if this world’s ionosphere was located at the proper height.

Thus, my idea was to experimentally connect the Marc Trading Company headquarters in Lunge to its branch in Baytrium in conjunction with the development of my barony. If they were able to use it properly, Mr. Marc’s workload would decrease considerably. I explained as much, abridging the more complicated parts.

“So it’s a tool for conversing across national borders...,” murmured Mr. Marc. He stood next to the low table, a look of surprise on his face. Mr. Joseph stared at the radio in silence.

“You need specific knowledge in order to use it. And it needs a specific type of fuel to work, just like the transceiver batteries I introduced previously. My idea is to experiment with it as a means of communication between the Mark Trading Company offices.”

I’d prepared a few different types of generator to use as a power source. Recently, stores were selling a lot more compact varieties that used gas cylinders as fuel and powered things like portable stoves. And if I absolutely had to, I could bring over a diesel generator, so I figured we’d manage.

More difficult would be teaching them how to use the device. Its manual was

written in Japanese, so it would be up to me to read the explanations aloud to Mr. Marc and the other company employees. I'd never gotten into amateur radio myself, so I would also be starting my otherworld ham radio life from zero.

"Do you intend to sell this tool as well, Mr. Sasaki?" asked Mr. Marc hesitantly.

"I do not," I answered. "I intend to limit its use to this group."

"Is that because of how its fuel source works?"

"Yes, that's right. It needs a special kind of fuel—and a lot more than those transceivers do. It would never be able to spread to the rest of the world."

"I see..."

Mr. Marc had immediately started asking questions. I could be somewhat flexible if I switched out some of the sugar or chocolate we regularly brought for diesel fuel, but that would be to our own disadvantage. Monopolizing an electric power source in the otherworld seemed much more worthwhile.

And so with greed in my heart, I continued my explanation. I'd told all this to Peeps beforehand and already secured his agreement. During that conversation, he also told me all about electrical usage here. It seemed they learned about electricity through lightning and magic. From experience, they learned to wear insulating clothing in order to resist lightning magic.

However, Peeps wasn't aware of it ever being used for industry. He'd never heard of generators before, either. Basically, while magnets were common, they hadn't yet discovered Faraday's law.

I had a feeling a big reason for that was the existence of monsters and magic. There were many creatures in this world more powerful than humans. Even if you put a lot of work into building a power plant, it would be difficult to distribute the electricity produced to various settlements. They couldn't even keep their roads in usable condition half the time—the idea of maintaining power lines was a pipe dream. Even if electricity proliferated, it would likely be limited to a few major cities.

On the other hand, this world had magic—a super-convenient means of producing illumination, creating water, making objects float, and exterminating monsters. I could easily imagine that becoming a major obstacle to not only the development of electricity, but scientific advancement in general.

For this world, I thought, the continued development of magic is likely the proper way to go. Depending on how much flight and barrier magic improved, these people might even start colonizing space ahead of those on Earth. The chance to see how this world developed was like a kind of extravagant

entertainment provided me by my beloved pet sparrow.

“Is this item being used in other places?” asked Mr. Joseph eventually.

“No—this one is the first of its kind,” I replied.

“Should I take that to mean it’s the first of its kind on this continent?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“...I see.”

He looked really serious about this—almost scarily so. His expression was more intense than I’d ever seen it.

His concerns about its use in other places confirmed for me that this world had yet to advance to the point of long-distance communication. If the merchants of Lunge hadn’t heard of it, then even if it existed, it had to be extremely rare.

This all lined up with what Peeps told me. The fastest method of communicating with someone far away was to employ flight-capable familiars or magicians to relay your message. It was like the magical version of the messenger pigeons and express couriers of the Edo period.

They might be faster than those couriers of the past, but depending on the distance covered, delivering a message could often take over a day—and it would generally take two or three to travel internationally. What’s more, I’d heard that letters got lost in transit or were stolen by highway bandits on a regular basis. According to Peeps, teleportation magic wasn’t very common.

When I asked if there were any more “magical” means of communication, he began an academic lecture about how one might harness the weak mana waves produced and scattered across long distances whenever large-scale magic was used, and so on and so forth. That was all still under research, though; no one had made it a reality yet.

“It pains me to ask this, but would you agree not to give this product to anyone else? And if possible, I’d like to keep its use within the Marc Trading Company a secret.”

“I understand,” I replied. I had no problems with Mr. Joseph’s request. Besides, I hated to think what might happen if I refused him, so I obediently nodded. This was more serious than simply threatening the interests of messenger familiars and magical express couriers—refusing Mr. Joseph could mean picking a fight with every trading company in Lunge.

I was keenly aware of the nature of his apprehensions. Back in modern times, tens of billions of yen might change hands in the couple of minutes it took to relay a message.

“You’re free to review all future records of any correspondence we engage

in,” I told him.

“...Are you sure?” asked Mr. Joseph.

“I fully understand your concerns in this regard.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to hear it.”

Our objective—our *only* objective—was a life of leisure with as little trouble as possible. We were merely using the Kepler Trading Company as cover to scrape together a meager livelihood. Once the development of my territory was taken care of, I wouldn’t mind smashing the thing while Mr. Joseph watched. I didn’t want anyone to come and assassinate me for harboring ambitions, like they did to Peeps.

“Mr. Marc,” I said, turning to him, “do you have time after this? I’d like to give you a rundown on how to use this tool. It requires some technical knowledge even just to set up, so I wanted to do it together to show you.”

“A-are you sure I should be touching it?” he stammered.

“I know you didn’t ask for this, but will you lend me your assistance anyway?”

“Actually,” said Mr. Joseph, “may I join you?”

“Certainly,” I replied.

Following our meeting, the three of us formed a lively ring around the radio and whiled away the time. Despite having checked everything in advance, it took more time and effort than expected to get the antenna and everything else set up.

The next day, we were able to pick up waves being sent from another location I’d already prepared for that purpose—our room at the inn in Baytrium.

To tell the truth, Ms. Futarishizuka was the one who taught me how to use the radios. As she set up the antenna with practiced hands, she told me it had been a long time since she fiddled with a radio like this. I’d already discovered her interest in mobile games, cars, and motorcycles; next up was apparently amateur radio.

Thanks to her, the hurdle to starting out was lowered considerably. But as a result, she’d been the one to do most of the setup work. I’d simply made a note of all the steps between powering it up and beginning transmission—and brought the fully set-up device into the otherworld. Most of the buttons on the box were totally beyond me.

The older the wiser, as they say.



The day after finishing our business in Lunge, we returned to Herz. Our first stop was the Baytrium branch of the Marc Trading Company—formerly the Hermann Trading Company. I explained the radio equipment to them just as I had with Mr. Mark and Mr. Joseph. I'd had Mr. Marc write a letter to the person in charge, so the conversation went smoothly. For the time being, they planned to trade news at a specific time each day. Hopefully that would alleviate some of the stress on Mr. Marc.

Unfortunately, this meant that for the foreseeable future, I'd be stuck doing after-sales service on the machines I'd brought over. I had only told them the bare minimum needed to work the radios; I didn't really understand them to begin with. But I planned on enjoying myself and learning about amateur radio as I worked.

In any case, that concluded our business, and we returned to our lodgings in Baytrium.

"That took more time than usual," noted Peeps. *"What would you like to do about magic practice?"*

"I'm thinking it might be nice to take a break and relax for a while," I told him.

"Yes, I very much agree. And I shall join you."

After that, I settled onto the living room sofa and spent some quality time with my pet bird. We talked about this and that as he perched on the little tree set on the low table. I felt at peace. This was precisely what I'd been working so hard for.

"Hmm," I said. "What should we do about dinner?"

"Won't we just have the usual?"

"Now that Mr. French is working hard somewhere else, I think it would be bad for appearances if we visited his restaurant too frequently," I explained. "I do have another suggestion, though. Why don't we spend some time exploring the other restaurants in town instead?"

"Would it not then be best to visit the Republic of Lunge?"

"Actually, that's a really good idea, Peeps."

Economically speaking, Lunge was more prosperous than Herz, so we could expect its eateries to be of higher quality as well. And we'd already had a couple of pretty extravagant meals there, thanks to Mr. Joseph's hospitality.

A gourmet eating tour of the otherworld? I couldn't think of a better way to spend the time. I'd been exerting myself so much lately, and this would serve as a good reward.

But maybe I jinxed it—because just then, there was a knock at the door. The voice of our suite’s maid came from the other side. “Lord Sasaki,” she called, “there is a messenger from House Müller here to see you. He says it’s urgent—and that he needs to speak with you immediately.”

“All right,” I called back. “I’ll be there shortly.”

I couldn’t ignore an urgent message from the count. I glanced at Peeps; he flew up from his little tree onto my shoulder. Once he was settled, I poked my head out from the guest room into the hallway. In front of the door was a knight—one I thought I recognized. *Probably one of the count’s usual guard.*

“Baron Sasaki,” he said after seeing my face, “we’ve received an urgent message from Count Müller.” He took an envelope from an inside pocket and held it out to me. It was sealed with the count’s family crest.

“Thank you for coming all this way,” I replied.

“My instructions were to bring this to you as soon as possible.”

“All right. Shall I open it here, then?”

“Yes, if you would.” The knight offered me a letter opener. Grateful for the gesture, I took it and popped open the envelope. Inside was a neatly folded letter. Naturally, I had no idea what it said, but I unfolded it and pretended to read through it anyway.

Sounding anxious, the knight asked, “Is something amiss, my lord?”

“I apologize, but I’ll be leaving at once. I have the letter now, so may I be excused? I’ll make sure to see the count personally within the next day or two.”

“Pardon me, but has something happened to the count?”

“No, nothing like that. Don’t worry.”

“I understand, my lord,” replied the knight. “In that case, I’ll be taking my leave.” The maid led the knight out to the front door, and their footsteps quickly faded.

Once we could no longer hear them, I rushed back into the living room and immediately questioned Peeps.

“What does the letter say?”

“*It says that Lewis has been taken captive by Imperial troops,*” he replied, having already read the letter from his vantage point atop my shoulder.

“.....”

This news was especially shocking considering the adorable little mouth used to deliver it. I was speechless.

“*Now that you’ve received the letter, he wants you to return to your barony should the issue remain unresolved. The letter seems to have been written*

yesterday—we received it very quickly.”

The count must have sent it via messenger familiar or magical express courier, which spoke to how frantic he was. “We really shouldn’t ignore this, should we?”

“*It would be one thing had this occurred in another noble’s lands,*” answered Peeps, “*but it took place in yours. Now that we’ve been informed, we cannot feign ignorance. We’ve already received the letter, so there can be no excuse.*”

“Could I ask you to send us straight there, then?”

“*Of course. We’ll be off right away. I’m concerned about the dragons as well.*”

We’d barely gotten back to our lodgings, and we were already heading off to the Rectan Plains. It looked like we’d have to take a rain check on our eating tour of the Lunge Republic.



Thanks to Peeps’s teleportation magic, we reached our destination in the blink of an eye, leaving our lodgings behind and arriving in the Sasaki barony a moment later. We immediately went to find the investigative team led by Prince Lewis. But on the way, we ran into Mr. French’s acquaintance, the master builder. Apparently, he’d been awaiting our arrival, and he asked us to accompany him.

We agreed without objection, and as expected, he led us to the very group of carriages we were originally headed for. There were fewer than before, likely because Prince Lewis had taken several escorts along on his trip to the surrounding areas. Still, over half remained.

Count Müller was already there, speaking with some knights and nobles beside the row of extravagant vehicles.

“Count Müller,” I called out to him, running over. “I apologize for making you wait.”

“Lord Sasaki!” he replied. “No, I should apologize for calling you out here like this.”

I didn’t want to put any extra stress on the master builder after he’d already guided us here, so I said I’d inform him as soon as the situation simmered down and suggested he go home for the day. I requested he relay the same message to Mr. French, as well.

“How’s the situation, my lord?” I asked the count.

“A group of soldiers snuck onto our territory and raided a merchant caravan

on its way here from Baytrium,” he explained. “Prince Lewis’s investigative team ran into them by chance and fought valiantly to protect the commoners. Unfortunately, the prince’s party was captured and taken along with them.”

“.....”

What a nightmare. I got the feeling my position as a baron was on the line here. The prince, on the other hand, was in an extremely *good* position. I’d thought for sure this was a kidnapping targeting the prince personally—but in a situation like this, I’d have to lend him my full cooperation. In fact, if I didn’t, I could be executed for treason.

All the knights and nobles present were giving us stern looks. If anything happened to the prince, their heads would be the first to fly. They must all have been desperately trying to think of how to pin the blame on someone else.

“It’s been a full day since the attack,” continued the count. “We sent a team to the location to investigate, but they haven’t turned up much. We were just putting together a unit to expand our search into the Empire’s territory.”

“I see.”

It would be one thing if the incident was confined to the area around the fortress—but if we were talking about crossing national borders, this was an emergency. And the next group sent to investigate would be in far, far more danger than the first.

“Then we should go out to search for him at once,” I concluded.

“I’ve recruited a few of those working here into the search party as well. I apologize for co-opting your workforce like this, but I hope you understand. I’ve also sent for more people to join us from Baytrium.”

“That is all completely fine with me, my lord.”

As I was speaking to Count Müller, the knights and nobles were ceaselessly arguing with each other about whose fault this was, or whose head would be on the chopping block, or who was authorized to send troops. Pretty scary stuff. *Feels like I have a front-row seat to all the most unfortunate aspects of the kingdom*, I thought, though I supposed I couldn’t blame them; they wouldn’t be long for this world if they volunteered and failed.

“I’d like to set out right away,” I said. “Could I get someone to show me the way?”

One of the knights, a man around twenty, answered me. “R-right away, my lord!” he said. He was covered in dirt and mud; he’d probably been present for the prince’s kidnapping and had been the one to bring back word. That would make him far more culpable for what had happened and was probably why he

responded immediately even to a noble of the opposing faction.

“I don’t need to prepare anything,” I told him. “Are you ready to go?”

“Huh?” said the knight. “Oh, um, my apologies, my lord. I’ll g-go gather some people—”

“Baron Sasaki’s magical skills make him as strong as a thousand men,” interrupted the count right away, backing me up. “That skill is part of the reason His Majesty saw fit to bestow him with a title. Time is of the essence. Let’s not waste it finding more men—the baron can search for the prince more efficiently by himself.”

His explanation held a lot more weight than mine would have. *He’s probably pretty panicked right now.* I wasted no time adding, “If my going alone makes you uneasy, you’re welcome to return here immediately after showing me the way. I’m sure the count will regroup and leave right away with another search party.”

The knight who had volunteered as a guide paused to consider this for a moment. “Understood, my lord,” he said eventually. He was reluctant, but still nodded in the end. It seemed the blood splattered on his armor wasn’t just for show. “I’ll bring you there at once.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “Let’s head out.”

Though Prince Lewis and Prince Adonis had different perspectives, they were still brothers. The former might be the leader of the opposing faction, but I couldn’t simply leave him to die.



Our search party was composed of the knight from Prince Lewis’s retinue who had agreed to lead us to the site, a handful of knights of Prince Adonis’s faction that Count Müller had assigned to guard him, and me. Urgency had dictated a small but elite group.

It took about two or three hours to reach our destination on foot. The trouble had occurred in a part of the forest bordering the Rectan Plains. *The Niekam Forest, if I recall correctly.* I wondered if this was the same area I wandered around in with Prince Adonis and Count Müller. We’d run across a village under attack by orcs and gone to the people’s aid—the whole thing was still fresh in my memory.

A path, evidently cleared just recently, now wove through the dense foliage, just large enough for a single carriage to pass through. I’d heard they started

maintaining the roads in conjunction with the fortress's construction; this path must have been part of that effort.

As soon as we arrived at the location, the knights turned back toward the fortress, fearing more Ohgen Empire soldiers might be lurking about the area. It seemed a reasonable response, considering the prince's party had been well escorted.

We could see fresh traces of battle in the area; a scorched carriage and the bodies of those cut down and left behind. The previous unit had already identified the corpses, and we could see evidence of people having rummaged through clothing and belongings. As far as I could see, all of those who had fallen were commoners. *I'll bet the VIP corpses have already been retrieved.*

"I see a few bodies that appear to belong to Imperial soldiers," noted Peeps.

"Like that one over there wearing the armor?" I asked.

"Yes. That armor belongs to an official soldier of the Empire," the bird murmured back, staring at the corpse.

Now that nobody else was around, I was free to chat with my distinguished Java sparrow. And chat we did, discussing the corpses and their belongings that littered our surroundings. He was right—I spotted a few other soldiers, each wearing the same armor as the first. Compared to the kind worn by Herz's knights, they lacked a certain flair. If you were being charitable, you might say they were plain but sturdy. As for the casualty ratio, we saw a few dozen dead on the Herz side, but only a handful of Imperials.

I'd already gotten the rundown on what happened from my guide. Apparently, the enemy force had included one particularly talented magician. Prince Lewis's party outnumbered them, and as soon as he confirmed they were from the Empire, he'd given the order to rescue the merchant caravan. The knights who entered the fray were then met by that magician, who proceeded to quickly mow them down.

"I find it curious that some of our neighbor's soldiers are present among the dead," I remarked.

"I'm quite interested in that fact as well," agreed Peeps.

"Maybe the dragon Prince Lewis attacked decided to pout— aggressively."

"I doubt it's anything like that. It is possible, however, that they let some invaders through. I instructed them to threaten anyone crossing the border in the plains, but they would be unable to handle any forces that detoured around—or those that already lurked within the kingdom."

"You mean they could have been sending a few people over at a time."

“I’d imagine so.”

We looked around for a while but didn’t see anything that might lead us to Prince Lewis. We found none of his belongings, either. I’d asked my guide if he knew anything about the magician, but unfortunately he didn’t—just that the person wore a robe and kept their hood pulled far over their face. The knight hadn’t gotten a good look at them.

“Maybe we should check a little farther out,” I suggested.

“I agree.”

Peeps and I strayed from the path and stepped into the woods. The sun was beginning to set, so we used an illumination spell for our search. It was incredibly inefficient; the foliage was so dense we could barely see in front of us. If Imperial troops were lying in wait nearby, we’d be sitting ducks. I kept up a barrier spell at all times to guard against any sudden arrows or magic that might come flying.

We’d been wandering around the forest for a little under an hour when we heard a voice call out, “Excuse me, um, who might you be?”

It sounded like a young woman; she’d probably noticed the light from our illumination spell. She spoke gingerly, and her voice shook. I doubted she was an Imperial soldier, but I had no proof.

“Can we go look, Peeps?” I asked softly.

“It could be a trap,” the bird warned. *“Remain vigilant.”*

“Will do,” I replied, directing my steps toward the voice.

After a short walk through the trees, I spotted the source—a young woman who appeared to be in her midteens, as I’d expected. She had shoulder-length brown hair, with large, bright, charming eyes. Her clothing marked her as a village girl; she held nothing in her hands. I could see cuts in the edges of her skirt and sleeves. *Pretty light clothing for walking alone in the forest after nightfall.*

When she saw us, her eyes widened in surprise. “B-black hair and yellow-toned skin...,” she stammered. “Pardon me, but might you be Baron Sasaki?”

“Yes, that’s me,” I replied honestly. “Why?”

“Ahhh!” Her expression immediately brightened. “How fortunate!”

Her expressive face and youthful demeanor were quite lovely. I threw a casual glance at Peeps, but he didn’t respond. I decided to stop and hear what she had to say.

“What are you doing all the way out here?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, my lord,” she said. “My name is Natalie. We were

attacked by Ohgen Empire soldiers on our way from Baytrium to your lands, and I've been wandering in the forest ever since."

"Are you alone? What happened to the others?"

"Several others captured along with me aided my escape, my lord. They told me to get help. But eventually the sun went down, and I don't know which direction to go to reach a human settlement."

She must have been with the caravan Prince Lewis tried to rescue, I thought. I gave her a closer look, and sure enough, I could see several specks of blood on her clothing.

But just to be sure, I asked, "Are the other captives nearby?"

"Regarding that, my lord, would you be willing to hear the whole story?"

"Yes, of course."

Overcome with emotion, she launched into an explanation. According to her, Prince Lewis was being held in a nearby village. Just as the escaped knight had informed us, his captors were Imperial soldiers. The group responsible had raided a nearby settlement and set up camp there to make further preparations.

Miss Natalie told me she'd been wandering the forest, trying to find someone and tell them what she knew. By modern Japanese standards, she would have been in middle school or high school. And yet she didn't wail or cry—she delivered her own description of the events with a firm clarity. *What an impressive girl for someone so young.*

"That must have been very difficult for you," I said.

"My lord, won't you go and save them?" she pleaded.

At least Prince Lewis was alive. That was a relief. He was the first prince, after all, so the soldiers had probably decided he would be useful, despite his kingdom's state of decline. The Empire had been shying away from a direct attack due to the recent appearance of dragons nesting along the border; a roundabout approach like taking hostages must have appealed to them.

Meanwhile, Natalie's request was a godsend for me.

"Then would you mind showing me the way to the village?" I asked her.

"O-of course, my lord!" she exclaimed. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart!"

Now that I had a guide, it was time to go rescue the prince.



Miss Natalie led us through the forest for a time until eventually we arrived at a

settlement among the trees. Incidentally, the entrance to the village was familiar to me; it was indeed the very same place where Count Müller, Prince Adonis, and I had exterminated the orcs. This was the site of my debut monster battle in the otherworld.

I was now gazing at it from a distance with Miss Natalie, since we'd spotted lookouts stationed around the entrance. They were all dressed as villagers, but there was no telling who they really were. *It's already pitch-black outside*, I thought. *What are they being so cautious about?*

"Miss Natalie," I said, "I'd like you to hide somewhere farther from the village."

"What?" she replied, astonished. "Surely you don't intend to go alone, my lord?"

"I'm only going to scope things out. I'll be back to get you soon."

"...I understand. Please be careful."

Once she'd left, I made my way around to the opposite side of the settlement. After thoroughly checking we were alone, I turned back to Peeps and said, "I want to save the prince as quickly as possible—even if we have to take him alone."

"Yes, *I believe that will best set the others' minds at ease*," the bird agreed. He was probably referring to the count and Mr. French.

With no objections from the distinguished sparrow, I decided to swiftly sneak into the village. I easily leaped over the flimsy fence surrounding it. Back when I first met Peeps, I'd have balked at the idea, but now I was able to proceed without hesitation.

I could see people around the settlement—men holding spears and swords. I guessed they were serving as lookouts, like the ones near the entrance. It seemed like they had the village completely under their control.

The area was dotted with houses where the villagers lived. Hiding in their shadows, I searched for the village chief's dwelling. Miss Natalie had told me what to look for; apparently that was where they were keeping the prince. It was the largest, fanciest house in the village.

Many of the structures still had their lights on, so I had no trouble getting around even without an illumination spell. There weren't too many buildings, either, so I located my destination with ease. Evading the watchful eyes of the guards, I crept into the shadow of a shed standing next to the building.

"I'd like to try to sneak in," I whispered to Peeps. "Is that all right?"

"*I'm concerned about this skilled magician they have with them*," he replied.

“Yes, exactly.” Though it seemed unlikely, if someone with abilities as incredible as Peeps showed up, things would quickly take a turn for the worse. In that case, we could forget about saving the prince—we might not even make it out alive. But hesitating wasn’t going to get me anywhere. “Can I leave that to you?”

“Yes, I will remain vigilant. You may focus on searching for Lewis.”

“Thanks. That’s really helpful of you, Peeps.”

With the sparrow’s approval, I finally stole into the chief’s dwelling, using flight magic to float up and into a second-story window.

Inside was an empty hallway. Doors lined the walls; I could see light leaking out from one of them. There was a staircase just ahead, and I could hear voices from below. I listened in but couldn’t make out Prince Lewis’s voice.

“Miss Natalie said he was being held on the second floor,” I whispered.

“*The room with the lights on, perhaps?*”

According to Miss Natalie, aside from the prince, others had been taken prisoner in this village, just like her. The majority were villagers, while the rest were from the merchant caravan. She also explained that most of them were young women. They must have been the ones who distracted the Imperial soldiers long enough for her to escape.

But it was unlikely the prince was among them. Miss Natalie said that as soon as they arrived at the building, he was taken to a separate room. *That means we should probably check the rooms with the lights off.*

“Should I just open them up?” I wondered aloud.

“*I see no problem with that.*”

I decided to start with the darkened rooms and reached for the door farthest from the stairs. It wasn’t locked. Careful not to make a sound, I cracked open the door to get a look inside through the gap.

“.....”

In the darkness, I could see someone tied to a thick support beam in the middle of the room. Rope was wrapped around her stomach and arms. She was slumped on the floor, her head hanging limp. She seemed to be another village girl like Miss Natalie. I could make out her wide skirt spread across the floor. Part of it had a large tear in it, revealing her leg and thigh; her undergarments had been lowered to her feet.

As I looked more closely through the dark, I could make out bruises on her arms and legs. I saw something white and clouded scattered about, among other signs of violence. A red liquid was pooling on the floor. Not good.

“.....”

I cast a glance to the bird on my shoulder and saw him give a little nod—his *go* sign. Several of those captured were from a merchant caravan heading to my barony. I was acutely aware that they were all traveling out of calculated self-interest. But I was still part of why this had happened, if indirectly, and it weighed on my conscience.

If this girl was alive, I wanted to at least cast some healing magic on her, though rescuing Prince Lewis was still my primary objective. I figured that if she made a fuss, I could simply have Peeps use a spell to put her to sleep. With these thoughts in mind, I stepped into the room.

I was greeted by a creaking of the floorboards under my feet. Ignoring them, I pressed on, shutting the door behind me. That caused the girl to respond. She pleaded, her voice weak, as though she was barely managing to form the words.

“...Ple...please help.”

“.....”

She turned to me and lifted her face. She looked like a teenager, and though she wore neat makeup, her cheeks bore bruises. I gestured for her to keep silent, and she answered with a slight nod. There would be no further talking; she simply looked up at me with desperation in her eyes.

Seeing that she had calmed down, I walked over to her side. If nothing else, I needed to heal her. Once there, I got a much better view of her face. *She’s extremely lovely*, I noted, giving her a closer look.

The light filtering in through the window illuminated her silhouette. She was gorgeous—and yet at the same time she seemed so ephemeral. She emanated sorrow. The scene before me defied my common sense—it was utterly unreal. I felt like I was gazing at a work of art, a photograph taken with some difficulty by a renowned photographer. And the subject of that photograph was here before me—a lovely young woman.

Since changing jobs, I’d been running into a lot more younger women, even at the workplace. But I felt my consciousness stolen by the one sitting in front of me, such that those other exchanges paled in comparison. Just looking at her made my heart beat uncontrollably.

I immediately squatted beside her and cut her ropes. To do so, I made use of a spell that created a gust of wind—the one I’d learned alongside the fire spell. Narrowing its effective scope to produce a local, sharp wind was a great substitute for a knife. I couldn’t let anything else wound her beautiful skin, so I took great care as I worked. A second later, I saw the bruises from the ropes, and

felt a dagger drive into my heart.

“.....”

It was at this point that I began to think something was strange. *How long has it been since I've been this conscious of the opposite sex?* The pounding in my chest was almost as bad as when I cooked that thirty thousand-yen-per-gram chateaubriand in my apartment kitchen. My heart had been racing that day; I'd been so worried I'd mess up the heat level and dry out the meat.

Something else occurred to me at the same time. I recalled a very similar feeling coming over me not long ago. It had happened in front of my apartment while I was talking to my neighbor. I remembered being so overcome with lust for her that I found it difficult to resist. I'd fled into my apartment and used healing magic on myself in the bathroom—the incident was still clear in my memory.

But my doubts came just a moment too late.

The girl, now freed, brought her face close to mine, and with a sweet, syrupy voice that sent a chill down my spine, she spoke into my ear.

“Thank you, Baron Sasaki.”

I shivered as her arms wrapped around my back, pulling me into a tight embrace. Somehow, my heart started racing even faster—so much so that the raw odor near my face didn't even register. My shoulders trembled; I wanted to reach my arms around her as well.

The words that followed were irrelevant to me.

“In return,” she whispered into my ear, “I will do you the honor of making you my pet for all eternity.”

A second later, I heard a sharp *clink* at my neck—the sound of metal on metal.

“.....”

Wondering what it was, I brought my hand to it. My fingertips touched something cold; there was now some kind of ring fixed around my neck.

“...What's this?” I asked.

“To come here searching without a single escort—it seems you're quite confident in your abilities, Baron Sasaki. It seems my father did indeed grant you lands and a title on account of your skills.”

Her face was so near mine our noses were almost touching. Even this close, she was stunning.

But not enough to blind me entirely. I could see her smug, confident smile—at odds with the ephemeral quality I'd sensed when we first met. Now her lips were curling upward, revealing her delight. Her eyes narrowed, taunting me.

Right then, I felt the pounding of my heart cease—like it had never been pounding at all.

“Let me guess,” I said. “Prince Lewis?”

“What an unprincipled man you are,” came the reply, “to have your heart stolen by a prince of your own kingdom.”

“.....”

I realized at this point that I’d been deceived.

And now that I thought of it, I remembered receiving a lecture from Peeps on a spell called Charm. It did just that—charmed a target and forced them to obey you. At its longest, it could last months. And when the charm wore off, the target retained all memory of what had happened. That fit perfectly with what had come over me.

That only raised more questions about the incident with my neighbor, however. Well, actually, whatever that was seemed to stoke my lust and nothing else—it hadn’t charmed me into obeying, it had only turned me on. Either way, I didn’t understand. And had the prince actually cast this spell himself, or was someone else nearby?

“Excuse me,” I said respectfully, “but what is this collar?”

“A slave collar, as you can see,” he replied. “But a very good one, able to force even powerful demonfolk into servitude. The requirement that one must place it on the target personally is rather troublesome. But luckily for me, you seem to be quite the lech, Baron Sasaki.”

“...I see.”

I’d never heard of slave collars before. Automatically wanting an explanation from Peeps, I looked to my shoulder, only to find that he wasn’t there. He must have flown off after the captive girl—actually Prince Lewis in disguise—had ensnared my mind. I quickly looked around the room but didn’t see him anywhere. I suspected he left right when the prince embraced me.

The fact that I’d been so enthralled by the person in front of me that I failed to notice the bird’s absence was terrifying. At the same time, my mind whirled with anxiety. *Where did he go, then?*

“I have another question, if you don’t mind, sir,” I said. “Are those bruises and stains real?”

“You’re curious about them?” he asked.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t, sir.”

“Anything I can use to my advantage, I will—including my own body.”

“.....”

I felt goosebumps rise on my skin at the thought of the mess now on my suit. I was immediately overcome with the desire to send it to the cleaners.

This man's initiative was something else—completely different from the other Herzian royals and nobles who were all focused on position and appearances. Or maybe he was simply a masochist with a penchant for cross-dressing. The way he did his hair alone looked so natural—and his makeup was *perfect*.

“Sir, what would drive you to go so far?” I asked.

“Getting right down to business,” he said flatly, “I have a task for you, Baron Sasaki.” He took a half step away from me. “Leave this room and put an end to all those downstairs.”

“What? Sir, I must refuse.”

“.....”

He ordered me to do something inhumane, and I immediately returned an honest reply. The prince looked flabbergasted. He clearly hadn't expected me to refuse.

Judging by his reaction, he'd given me the instruction because he was confident in the effects of this so-called slave collar.

At this point, I realized that the entire attack on the merchant caravan had been staged by the prince as bait to lure me in and capture me.

He rallied himself for another try, this time asking for confirmation. “Baron Sasaki, did you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. And like I said, I feel I must refuse.”

“.....”

This slave had understood and given an honest reply. Though I had disobeyed, it didn't seem like there was going to be any kind of punishment. *Aren't objects like these supposed to squeeze a person's neck if they talk back or something?*

“...Why do you not obey my commands?” he asked.

“I'm not sure I have an answer for that, sir...”

I was just as confused. I was pretty sure the collar was on just fine. Maybe he'd gotten a defective product.

My moment of levelheadedness was short-lived, however. All of a sudden, I once again began to think of the prince as very cute. Just being within arm's reach of him made me desperately want to embrace him and hold him tight. I could practically feel my fondness level skyrocketing, like some character in a laughably easy dating sim. The revulsion I felt at those stains being real and the raw odor assaulting my nostrils faded wholly into the background.

Prince Lewis's features were handsome—and closely resembled those of his

brother, Prince Adonis. That, combined with his youthful appearance, gave him an androgynous charm. And his longish hair tipped the scale even further toward femininity.

Seeing the change in my demeanor, the prince repeated his instruction. “Baron Sasaki,” he said, “kill the men downstairs.”

This time, I wanted to do as he asked—I just wanted to see him smile. I knew it was crazy, but I didn’t have control over my own heart.

But that sensation lasted only a few short seconds before dissipating again. Moments later, we heard an explosion outside the room. I could tell someone was fighting with magic.

“Wait,” said the prince. “There’s something happening outside.”

“.....”

I turned to look as well, wondering what on earth could be going on.

Not long after, a cute little sparrow flitted in through the window. It landed right on the frame and looked at us. *Guess Peeps got outside*, I thought.

The euphoria I felt toward Prince Lewis disappeared completely around the same time the bird arrived. At this point, I was pretty sure that the unexpected racing of my heart had been a magical effect caused by a spell. I hadn’t noticed the prince casting anything, though, so there was likely a third party handling it from the shadows.

And it seemed my distinguished Java sparrow had now dealt with them.

“.....”

Peeps said nothing; he simply stared straight at us.

He couldn’t speak in front of others, so I wasn’t able to confirm anything with him. I decided to assume my hypothesis was true and addressed the prince.

“It would seem your charm spell has run out, sir.”

“The familiar serving you is quite talented indeed, Baron Sasaki,” he responded, looking at the bird on the window frame.

Well, yeah, I thought. *He’s the Starsage*. I wondered how the prince would react if I simply told him that. Instead, I asked, “Was the attack on the caravan bound for the Rectan Plains done under your orders, sir?”

“What would you do if I said yes?”

“Prince Lewis was killed by Ohgen Empire soldiers who had sneaked into the kingdom. Prince Adonis, inheriting his elder brother’s will, takes the throne as the next king of Herz. It’s not hard to imagine such a thing happening in the near future, sir.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t expect the slave collar not to work,” he replied.

“Are you after the fortress on the plains?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Would you mind handing it over to me?” he asked indifferently; he must have figured it was pointless to lie any further.

“Depending on your conditions, I might be amenable to that.”

“Really, now? You sure are a strange one.”

The construction of the fortress on the Rectan Plains was always just a means for me to retreat from court and lead a life of leisure. As long as I could secure Count Müller and Mr. French’s agreement, I didn’t have an issue giving it to someone else in my capacity as baron.

What I was more interested in was the presence of Imperial soldiers here. “There is something else I’d like to ask you, sir.”

“It’s as you imagine,” he replied. “Hence why I’d like to silence the others.”

“Once again, sir, I must ask you to do that yourself.”

Now I was certain that the force attacking the caravan had been under the prince’s own command. The Imperial-looking gear must have been procured elsewhere. This didn’t completely blindside me, but now that I knew the truth, I felt keenly how much effort I’d just wasted. *His personality is the opposite of his younger brother’s in every way*, I thought.

“Now then, Baron Sasaki,” continued the prince. “What do you intend to do with me?”

“What do you mean, sir?” I asked.

“For example, will you kidnap me and make me your sex slave?”

“I’m rescuing you and bringing you back to the fortress, sir, as originally planned.”

“How very kind of you.”

I couldn’t simply dispose of the prince out here. Peeps wouldn’t want me to anyway. From the very beginning, I’d only ever had one choice. “I wouldn’t want to do anything that would cause Prince Adonis sadness, sir.”

“Would my brother be sad if I died?”

“As far as I can tell, sir, he is a deeply compassionate person.”

Back when orcs attacked this village, he tried to rush out alone to face them. Sure, it was probably a hasty decision on his part, considering we were in a pretty bad situation at the time. But even under such conditions, he still acted out of concern for others. I was pretty sure that counted as *deeply compassionate*.

Prince Lewis seemed to think this over. “Hmm.”

“Sir?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“In that case, I’ll go ahead and leave the village.” I didn’t want to be anywhere near all the slaughtering or silencing or whatever. Seeing Peeps return to my shoulder, I went ahead and exited the room.



Ultimately, Prince Lewis returned safely, resolving the matter of his kidnapping. He explained everything using his original story: Imperial soldiers had attacked the caravan, and he’d valiantly rode out to rescue them. Everything that happened at the village would remain between the two of us. *That’s the best way to clean things up and avoid causing stress for everyone else.*

As for my little contest with the prince, I figured we could call it a draw. I really hoped he learned his lesson from this—or at the very least that he would stop trying to challenge me head-on.

By safely rescuing him, I avoided criticism over the mishap in Baron Sasaki’s territory. The prince himself thanked me for my efforts in front of the others, and that was that. This, too, was something he’d promised me when we left the village.

Miss Natalie, my guide, had been telling the truth; she was simply mixed up in the prince’s big performance. The mastermind himself, however, said he purposely let her escape in order to lure me in. We brought her and the people being held at the village to the fortress as part of the prince’s rescue.

I felt bad for the people made to play the role of Imperial soldiers, though. From what the prince told me during our return trip, they were all dead by the time he arrived downstairs. He said he’d been relieved to be spared the effort. I figured the master magician or whoever had been operating behind the scenes. I ended up asking Peeps about them later.

“I want to know more about the charm spell,” I told the sparrow.

“*If you mean the spell that was affecting you,*” he replied, “*that was the doing of the magician in Lewis’s employ.*”

Now that I’d brought the prince back to the fortress, I was done being Baron Sasaki for the time being. We’d headed back to our lodgings in Baytrium, where Peeps could once again speak freely. He conducted his explanation from his usual spot: the perching tree on the low table. I sat in front of him on the sofa, taking a breather.

“I thought as much,” I said.

“*I’m sorry,*” he responded. “*The caster managed to slip through my grasp.*”

“If they were able to escape from the Starsage himself, they must be extremely powerful.”

“Extremely careful, more like. Once it was clear the slave collar’s effects hadn’t manifested, they probably gave up and made preparations to flee before I even arrived. Although, that did mean the effects of the spell were quickly undone.”

The bird was right; I’d been released from the second enthrallment almost immediately. I thought for sure Peeps had taken out the caster, but apparently it was merely cover for their escape—in other words, they intentionally abandoned Prince Lewis. Was that really going to work in their favor? *Or maybe, just maybe, they were confident I wouldn’t harm the prince?*

“I’m a little curious why they didn’t come to the prince’s aid,” I told the bird.

“Indeed. That has been on my mind as well.”

“Did you get a good look at their face?”

“They were completely hidden beneath a hooded robe.”

“I see.” From Peeps’s explanation, it seemed better to let the matter go for now. *I’ll just have to keep an eye out*, I thought. “Also, I wanted to know more about the slave collar.”

“It is exactly what it sounds like—a magic tool for forcing a target to obey you.”

“And it gets used for slaves and stuff?”

“Yes, that is what most people want it for.”

Peeps had removed the collar Prince Lewis placed on me before we exited the village. Bringing it back would have resulted in all sorts of questions, so I’d buried it there. It had seemed pretty valuable, but then again, I certainly wasn’t strapped for cash, so the decision had been easy.

“The charm spell hit me like a truck,” I explained. “But the collar did nothing.”

“I doubted the collar would have any major effects on you, given how much mana you possess. That was my reasoning for focusing on the magician. Ultimately, however, I used you as a distraction. I apologize. You must be upset.”

“No need to apologize. I’m sorry for being reckless and getting too close.” *I basically walked right into the enemy’s spell, after all.*

Peeps went on to explain that when using a slave collar, one had to choose an item of the appropriate grade—a distinction mainly determined by how much mana the target possessed. That must have been the logic behind Prince Lewis’s

remark about powerful demonfolk. That also helped explain why the magician in his employ had decided to flee so quickly—and why the prince had been so shocked.

The charm spell, on the other hand, had worked on me because the magician on the prince's side had been amazingly talented. In addition, I wasn't well versed in such magic. In fact, this was the first I'd ever seen it in action, so I hadn't been able to put up much resistance.

"Charm is a scary spell, huh, Peeps?"

"That's precisely what makes it so useful."

Come to think of it, I was pretty sure Peeps could use the same spell. In the past, he'd suggested it as a way to make money in Japan. I wondered if, before reincarnating as a Java sparrow, he'd used it to make everyone do what he said. I quickly reconsidered, however—his face had been extremely charming back then, so he probably had no need to resort to magic.

"By the way, might you have a preference for cross-dressing men?"

"Huh? Wait, why would you think that?"

"The effects of Charm are frequently dependent upon the target's own sexual preferences."

"...Really?"

"When twisting the mind of another, targeting what is already there is always easier."

"....."

Peeps almost never commented on such worldly, vulgar matters. He was so sharp, too. He'd thrown me such a curveball that I didn't know how to respond.

"You don't seem particularly interested in any of the women in your own world, either. Am I wrong?"

"No, no, that's not true. I'm definitely into the opposite sex."

"Is that so?"

I'd sent my dirty jacket straight to the wash when we got back, asking the room maid to scrub it down for me. Peeps hadn't said anything, but wearing it back to my own world would probably invite all kinds of unnecessary misunderstandings. I already felt bad for making the maid handle it.

"Yes," I told him. "I love girls."

"You seem to always act as though you're too old, too worn out for it all."

"Maybe you're just imagining things."

"Recently, we've been together almost constantly. I thought perhaps you could use some time alone."

“...I suppose you’re not wrong about that.” *So that’s what he was getting at*, I thought.

He was right—lately it seemed like there was *always* someone close at hand. When I was at work, it was Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki, and I was increasingly spending my home time with Peeps and Lady Elsa. Compared to the sparrow, who had total freedom in the hotel or villa while I was at work, I had almost no time to myself.

Everything had been so busy lately that the loneliness I’d felt before was like a distant dream. And Peeps was the one to give all that to me. *I’m so, so glad I decided to adopt him*, I thought with renewed feeling.

“*Should we decide on a particular day of the week to give you time to yourself?*”

“It’s fine,” I told him. “When I need a break, I’ll speak up.”

“*...All right.*”

“Anyway, about our plans...”

I was astonished at how thoughtful he was—even taking my more personal needs into consideration. But while I was grateful, I was also kind of embarrassed, so I changed the topic.

There was still a lot to figure out when it came to my relationship with this sharp-witted sparrow.

<The Giant Sea Monster>

After our short stay in the otherworld, we returned to my apartment. There had been no real issues following the incident with Prince Lewis, so we'd been able to relax for a few days before coming back. I was glad we had time to enjoy the foods and sights of the Republic of Lunge, like we'd originally planned—my body and mind felt refreshed.

My magic studies, on the other hand, hadn't progressed much, since I'd prioritized my little vacation and spent the remaining time working on the machine I'd brought to the Marc Trading Company. This was my punishment for introducing a complicated device to people who didn't even know about electromagnetic waves, much less radios. I'd had to go time and again to do battle with the amateur radio set.

On the bright side, everyone working there, including Mr. Marc, had been quick to pick it up, practically memorizing everything I told them. In the end, they reached the point where they could deliver a report at the same time every day. It was a lot more fun than trying to explain technology like the internet to an older person, that was for sure.

Once I'd gotten them to a good level of proficiency, we headed back to Japan. I checked the clock; it was a little past seven AM. Peeps went immediately to the desk and began using his golem to clack away at the computer keyboard, probably inputting the data from our latest visit. Doing checks and estimations on the difference in time flow between worlds had basically become his life's work.

I sat on the edge of the bed behind him and watched as I checked my bureau phone. No messages or missed calls to speak of. I checked my private phone, too, but while I'd received several spam emails, there was nothing I needed to respond to.

After a little while, Peeps said, *"Oh yes. What are your plans for today?"*

"I intend to deliver a report to the bureau on our investigation of the dragon subspecies that fell from the otherworld," I explained. "But I have something to

discuss with Ms. Futarishizuka before heading in to see the section chief.”

“Then let us go to her at once.”

“Thanks, Peeps.”

He had probably noticed I didn’t have anything to do and was being considerate. I agreed to his proposal, and we headed out right away.

As always, we used the sparrow’s teleportation magic to get there. I felt my feet begin to float, and then my vision winked out. A moment later, our previous surroundings had been replaced with the living room in Karuizawa where we’d been the night before.

The room, over fifty square meters of space, gave off a sense of elegant luxury—a feeling of repose, as it were. Outside the large windows, I could see a gorgeous, well-maintained garden. The morning sun shone down on it, causing the crisp air to glitter. The air-conditioning inside maintained a perfect temperature—not too hot, not too cold. It was a far cry from the cold patches of my own apartment. *I want to live in a place like this one day*, I thought sincerely.

“What do you think you’re doing, barging into someone’s else’s house so early in the morning?” came a familiar drawling voice.

“My apologies,” I replied. “I wanted to discuss today’s schedule with you.”

We could see Ms. Futarishizuka and Lady Elsa in the adjoining dining room. Apparently, the former had just been preparing breakfast. She wore an apron over her kimono, and the dining table was all set up with plates and utensils and the like. Lady Elsa seemed to be helping her and pattered about wearing an apron of her own.

They appeared to be getting along well, despite not speaking the same language. The sight warmed my heart.

“We’ve got no food for the likes of you, just so you know,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I won’t deny that’s a bit disappointing,” I said, “but even I wouldn’t demand that much of you.”

“So you say, but the sparrow on your shoulder looks quite hungry.”

“I can come back some other time, if you wish.”

“Oh? What an unusually commendable attitude, coming from you,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Take a seat right over there. I can at least make you some tea.”

“Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

“Birdie, do you want to eat together?” asked Lady Elsa. “I’ll share some of mine.”

“No, but thank you for the offer.”

At Ms. Futarishizuka's urging, I took a seat on one of the living room sofas. I could smell breakfast from here, and it smelled good. I took a peek at the table and saw a full, traditional Japanese meal, with rice, miso soup, and pickled vegetables along with salted salmon and fried, rolled *tamago-yaki*. I didn't get much chance to eat food like that in the otherworld—or in Japan, for that matter—and the sight filled me with nostalgia.

It's a good thing I ate in the otherworld, I thought. Otherwise, my stomach might be rumbling right now.

Once Ms. Futarishizuka was finished making breakfast, she brought over a Japanese-style teapot and cups for us.

"Now," she said, "about today's plans..."

At about the same time, the phone in my inside pocket began to buzz—my personal one. I took it out and looked at the screen. There was a message notification with my boss's name on it, forwarded from my bureau phone. Ms. Futarishizuka looked over at it as she poured the tea into our cups.

"It's from Mr. Akutsu," I told her.

"Leave it, leave it. He'll foul up breakfast."

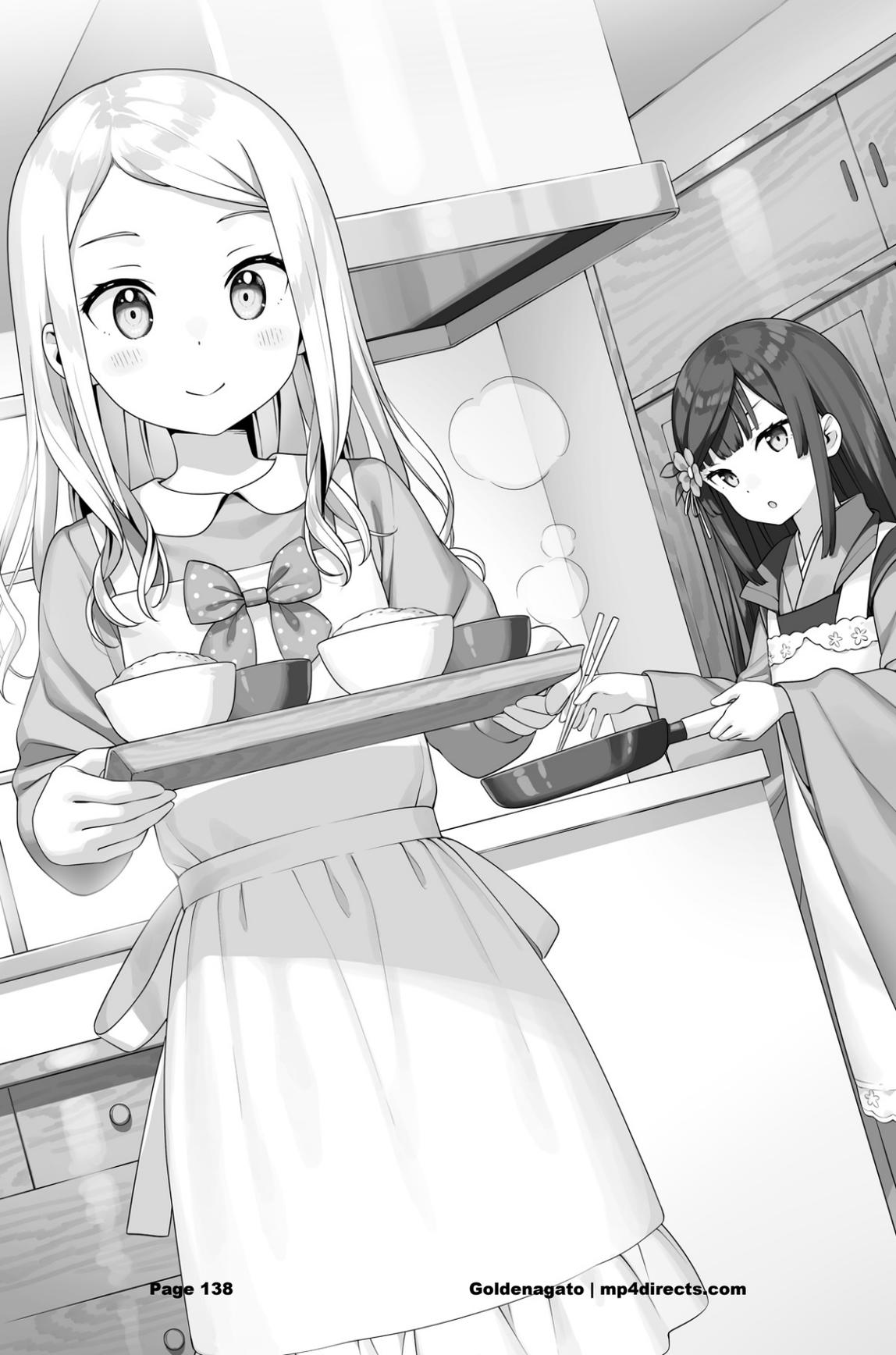
Right then, I heard a buzzing noise near Ms. Futarishizuka's chest as the opening theme to a recently popular anime started playing, its rhythm upbeat and lighthearted. Given the timing, I was pretty sure that was also Mr. Akutsu.

"Now me? Seriously?" muttered Ms. Futarishizuka, looking fed up. Left with no choice, the two of us took a look at his messages.

"It seems urgent," I noted.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," she said.

The message stated simply that he wanted us at the office as soon as possible. He would have heard about our return to Atsugi Base the day before, meaning he was well aware that we'd come in at some point that day regardless in order to deliver our report. And yet he'd contacted us anyway.



The message didn't touch on the specifics of what he wanted, but I saw that Ms. Futarishizuka had been copied, as I expected. I looked up from the screen, my eyes locking with hers.

"I thought you said you had a nice, *convincing* talk with our boss, hmm?" she remarked.

"I did, without a doubt," I told her.

"Then something must have happened with the big guy..." she said offhand, making me uneasy.

Hearing our conversation, Peeps chimed in as well. "*Are you going back to the apartment?*" he asked.

"I know you just brought me here," I replied, "but would you mind?"

"Oh, I'll come with you," added Ms. Futarishizuka. "This place is a little far from the bureau, you see."

"That is fine with me. Shall we leave right away?"

"I'd like to at least have a nice, relaxing breakfast," she replied, pathetically looking at the food arranged on the dining table. She gazed at the hot, steaming rice, as well as Lady Elsa, who was already seated and very politely waiting for Ms. Futarishizuka to join her.

I would have felt awful leaving our guest to eat breakfast alone. And if I wanted to maintain a favorable power balance with Mr. Akutsu, it wouldn't do to go rushing to his side whenever he asked. Not long had passed since our little talk, so I figured it'd be okay to take our time, at least.

"I guess we'll wait until after they eat," I told Peeps.

"All right, then."

He agreed immediately; he was probably thinking something along the same lines.

And so we enjoyed the morning for a little under an hour before setting out from the villa.



After breakfast, it was time to answer Chief Akutsu's summons. First, Peeps sent us back to my apartment using his magic. From there, we got into Ms. Futarishizuka's car and headed for the bureau. She'd parked it overnight in a paid parking lot in the neighborhood.

As we drove, she lectured me on the radio equipment I'd set up in the otherworld. She seemed curious how things were going over there and asked me

several questions, starting with whether communication had been successful. I'd brought back a few problems that needed solving, but thanks to her, I was pretty sure I could handle them during my next stay.

Once we arrived at the bureau, we immediately headed for our office. Mr. Akutsu flagged us down right away and called us to the nearby meeting space. Miss Hoshizaki was already there.

"You're late, Sasaki," she scolded as soon as we entered the conference room.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Hoshizaki," I replied politely. Apparently, she'd gotten here quite a bit earlier than we had. *Ever the workaholic*, I thought.

She was crossing her legs something fierce as she sat in her chair, with no thought to the miniskirt she was wearing. This struck me as very in character for her, and the sight reminded me of what Peeps said in the otherworld—about me possibly liking cross-dressing men. But compared to Prince Lewis, the person in front of me was much more to my taste.

On the surface, she was the picture of a female office worker. Back when I first met her, I'd mistaken her for an adult. But without her makeup, she looked just like what she was—a genuine high school girl. According to her, she was sixteen; if that was true, it put her well out of the running from a societal standpoint. Meanwhile, the person standing next to me was an adult on the inside, but a little girl on the outside.

The more I thought about it, the more I stopped wanting to bother. *Besides, my favorite moments are when I'm eating a delicious meal with Peeps.*

"...Wh-what?" stammered Miss Hoshizaki. "Why are you staring at me?"

"Nothing," I told her. "My apologies."

"If you've got something to say, I wish you'd say it to my face."

"I was just thinking I ought to start working harder, like you do."

"It's impressive how you can straight-up *lie* like that."

"I promise you those words came from my heart."

"Then would you like to commute with me on the train every morning?"

She asked me this question like a kid might ask someone if they wanted to start going to school together. *Is this how a high school girl thinks?* I wondered. This kind of invitation became very rare once you got into the real world and started working. When I thought back to my time in elementary school, I could remember waiting around on the street for classmates or taking little detours just to be with them as we made the very short walk to school. When had I lost that leeway?

"Well, not exactly..."

“See?” she retorted.

“All right, all right, enough,” chided Ms. Futarishizuka. “Would you please take a seat already?”

“Oh, right,” I said, sitting down in an empty chair at the conference table.

On one side of the six-person table were Miss Hoshizaki, myself, and Ms. Futarishizuka, all in a row. Mr. Akutsu sat alone on the other side, right in the middle. Apparently, it was one of my duties to serve as the fence keeping the two ladies apart.

The chief plugged a cable into his laptop, and an image appeared on the wall-mounted display at the head of the table. It showed the Kraken, the beast we investigated the previous day.

It had been captured on video writhing about in the ocean. This appeared to be new footage, different from what we saw previously, and the time stamp in the corner of the screen showed just after dawn that morning. Other than that, it was basically the same as before. Naturally, this wasn't the footage I shot, either.

“If a report is what you're after,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “would you mind waiting a moment? We just got back last night.”

“I'd like you to submit your reports as soon as possible, of course,” responded the chief, “but this is a separate matter.”

“Has something happened with the Kraken?” I asked.

“First, I'd like to show you the location where this video was taken.” The chief moved his hand, and a map appeared on the screen. You could see Japan in the upper left, with most of the remaining space taken up by the ocean. In the center was a horizontal series of dots labeled with dates, just like a typhoon forecast. Several of the points had been connected with a single line.

The date on the farthest dot to the right, if I recalled correctly, was when the Kraken had arrived in our world. The leftmost was from just a few hours ago. It was currently proceeding between the Ogasawara Islands and Guam, over a thousand kilometers south of Tokyo's coast. If it continued on its current path, it would make its way from the North Pacific Ocean to the Philippine Sea.

“It traveled that far in a single night, did it?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“We believe it may be circling along the subtropical gyre,” explained the chief.

“So it's traveling the same route as the Japanese eel,” she remarked.

I just realized I haven't eaten eel at all lately, I thought. Actually, I don't remember eating any for a few years now. Even the relatively cheap foreign kind had seen a huge leap in prices, and I couldn't rationalize the cost, even on

payday.

Now that my wages had increased at my new job, though, that was no longer the case. *Maybe we should have eel for dinner tonight. It's the perfect chance to show that meat-loving sparrow the merits of seafood.*

"Wait. You mean eels come from that far south?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Oh, it was all over the news not long ago," replied Ms. Futarishizuka. "They were saying how they'd finally solved the mystery of where they lay eggs."

"Not long ago?" I repeated. "It's been at least two *decades*."

"Really? Well, I suppose time does speed up as you grow older."

"If the Kraken does indeed follow the same route as the eels," continued the section chief, "it will ride the Kuroshio Current to the north—toward Japan. The reason I gathered you all on such short notice was to share information in preparation for that possibility."

The chief pressed a key on his laptop, and the Kraken's route extended out along its predicted paths. Several routes seemed to have been envisioned, but two of them went straight toward Japan. The other routes curled toward other nations along the Philippine Sea.

No matter which path it took, however, the octodragon was sure to make landfall in East Asia.

"Yesterday, it seemed to me this was a battle over resources," I said.

"The magical girls' one-sided defeat has caused most nations to change their response. Japan is already putting together plans, but I want to hear your opinions, since you were the ones in the field investigating the creature."

"I don't think we can rely on psychics for this, if that's what you're thinking," I said.

"You can say that again," agreed Ms. Futarishizuka. "We should just hit it with a missile or something. All that fuss yesterday happened because the people in charge thought it'd be cheaper to use magical girls, right? Nobody wants to make a huge investment on some big sea monster from who knows where."

"Your suggestion might well be adopted as a last resort," said the chief.

"Then I'd rather that happen while it's still in international waters," she finished.

Ms. Futarishizuka wasn't pulling her punches with the section chief—I could tell she never wanted to do fieldwork like that again.

Meanwhile, Miss Hoshizaki seemed to have enjoyed her first long distance business trip. "Couldn't you do something about it if you managed to touch it?" she asked.

“Why would you suggest something like that? Are you telling me to go out there and die?”

“We both know you won’t.”

“I could still end up drifting at sea for a very long time, you know.”

“I’ll make sure we put in a good effort to search for you.”

“I’d prefer we wait to try the crazy options until mankind has raised the white flag.”

Aside from Ms. Futarishizuka, the leader of her former group also had a psychic power that might be effective against the Kraken. He’d materialized that insta-kill merch while fighting Peeps, after all.

Actually, I thought, Peeps was able to reflect its effects. If the monster had similar magic, I got the feeling the nerd would be in trouble. Even a group of magical girls had suffered a one-sided defeat.

“Hoshizaki,” said the chief, “it seems these two are against using psychics. But what do you think? I can read your detailed report later, but for now I want to ask your honest opinion as someone who saw the real thing.”

“It wouldn’t work,” insisted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“He wasn’t asking *you*,” retorted Miss Hoshizaki.

“But it *wouldn’t*.”

“I mean,” Hoshizaki began, “I agree it’d be difficult to muster the necessary force using only bureau personnel...”

“I see,” said the chief.

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed uncharacteristically desperate, and I understood why. I knew well from my life as a corporate drone that whenever you took an ambivalent stance, you were practically asking to take on extra work. *When unpleasant tasks come up, you have to flatly refuse, just like she’s doing now.*

The chief nodded in response, before shifting his focus to the Magical Girl Alliance’s fight. He asked us specific, in-depth questions on how the monster withstood their Magical Beams, how Magical Blue wound up in a disastrous situation after making contact with it, and how we went about rescuing her. I could tell from Mr. Akutsu’s response that the higher-ups were genuinely frightened of the Kraken.

I spoke honestly on what I’d observed without departing from my false identity as a psychic. Though I naturally kept what Peeps had told me—about the creature being a dragon subspecies—to myself. I’d already combed through the video I took to make sure it didn’t show anything strange.

Once we’d finished telling him the whole story, the section chief straightened

up and turned to face us. “Forgive me for changing the topic,” he said, “but I have a matter to discuss with Sasaki and Futarishizuka.”

“Sir?” I replied.

“What is it?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Now that I think about it, we never held a welcome party for either of you.”

That’s a weird thing to bring up now, I thought. Is he suggesting a welcome party? I’m not sure I could come up with anything more suspicious-sounding. It hasn’t been long since our talk, either. I got the feeling I’d be better off following one of those people in Kabukicho or Akihabara who tried to pressure you into their shops than going along with this story.

“Planning to poison us, hmm?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka, apparently thinking along the same lines. She was watching our boss with a dubious gaze. *Seems a bit much to say it outright, though.*

“Oh, I’d never take such a roundabout route,” he assured us. “If that was my intention, I would have already planted a bomb or two in your car. Or are you implying, Ms. Futarishizuka, that a mere poisoned drink would do you in?”

“What? I’m in *shock*. Utter shock, I tell you.”

“I’ve already made reservations,” the chief went on, ignoring her. “We’ll head out after office hours are finished. Would you like to join us, Hoshizaki?”

He’s asking, I thought, but it’s probably already decided. Almost nobody would turn down their boss after a question like that. Also, I was privately curious what sort of restaurant he’d picked.

“I suppose I wouldn’t mind,” said Miss Hoshizaki, voicing her agreement without skipping a beat. She was essentially the archetypical meathead, so this kind of semi-compulsory after-work drinking session seemed right up her alley. Seeing her in a suit like this tended to make me forget she was still a minor.

“I’m happy to take you up on your offer,” I told the chief.

“Are you *serious*?” demanded Ms. Futarishizuka. “Isn’t it the trend now to refuse invitations to these stupid things?”

“For private companies, perhaps,” I said. “But I’ve heard government workers still hold fast to tradition.”

“I’m really not trying to force you,” Mr. Akutsu said.

I expected to have a long relationship with the man, so in my opinion, using opportunities like these to build up rapport was a good idea. We might not become *friends*, but deepening my understanding of him as a person would only benefit me in our future interactions. And he was probably thinking the same thing—though I doubted we’d be relaxing and enjoying our drinks.

“Fine, I’ll go. Are you happy now?” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Thank you,” replied the chief. “We’ll head out after work, then.”

“Understood, sir,” I said.

“By the way, do welcome parties count as working hours?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“...Go ahead and mark it down if you want,” he answered.

The meeting had taken a little under an hour. Afterward, as planned, I spent the time writing up a report at my desk and dealing with the administrative work that came with sudden business trips. For lunch, Ms. Futarishizuka and I—along with Miss Hoshizaki—went to a nearby restaurant. My senior appeared over the moon as we ate.

I couldn’t fault her for it, either. All that extra pay we’d gotten for our trip was certainly cause for good cheer.



After wrapping up work that day, we took a taxi to Ginza, a famous upscale shopping and dining area nestled in the eastern part of downtown Tokyo. We were on our way to hold a welcome party for Ms. Futarishizuka and myself, as the chief had suggested. Along with the chief and Miss Hoshizaki, we made a party of four. We kept the group small, since one of our number was a former enemy of the bureau.

Hiring her had resulted in workplace relationships that were more than a little messy. Depending on the person, Ms. Futarishizuka might be responsible for killing a close friend. I doubted anyone would have agreed to come with us even if they were invited. In fact, I almost couldn’t believe how gutsy Miss Hoshizaki was for coming along with zero qualms.

As for the restaurant, it had most definitely required Mr. Akutsu to make reservations. From before we even entered the place, I could tell it was a *very* expensive Japanese restaurant. Groups of guests were seated in individual rooms with tatami floors, which reduced the noise from other patrons to mere echoes.

These weren’t the quasi-private stalls of restaurants for the riffraff—these were all *actual* rooms built into the structure. Ours featured not only a low, traditional dining table but also a *tokonoma* alcove, *ranma* screens above the door, and an outside-facing *shoji* screen with a glass pane meant to provide a view of snowy weather. It felt like something out of a high-class Japanese-style inn.

The chief and I ended up on one side of the rectangular table, with Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka facing us across it. The latter matched the decor to a T in her kimono.

Miss Hoshizaki, on the other hand, was starting to fidget. She was clearly uncomfortable.

“Chief, um,” she stammered. “I don’t, um, have much on me at the moment...”

“It’ll be my treat today,” said Mr. Akutsu. “You can dine at ease, Hoshizaki.”

“Really? Thank you!” she exclaimed, her face immediately breaking into a sunny smile.

It was common sense that the section chief pay in situations like this. Miss Hoshizaki’s vivid expression of concern for her wallet betrayed how naive—and pure—she was. As an adult, jaded after many years of work, watching her was almost therapeutic.

“I believe the food here should be to your liking as well, Ms. Futarishizuka,” added the boss.

“I’m surprised you managed to reserve a table on such short notice,” she remarked.

“I gave it a shot and called,” he explained. “Apparently, someone canceled just yesterday.”

“That was quite fortunate indeed,” she replied.

I wasn’t sure whether he was telling the truth, but I was willing to let it slide. We had him to thank for this extravagant meal, after all. I felt bad for Peeps and Lady Elsa minding the villa in our absence, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me enjoying my welcome party. Besides, Ms. Futarishizuka had hired a helper to prepare their meals.

After a few moments, a waitress clad in traditional Japanese clothing arrived, and then it was time for dinner.

The meal was to be served over multiple courses, and once we split our chopsticks, we enjoyed a smooth, satisfying progression from appetizers to a palate-cleansing soup, sashimi, and then to a stewed dish, a seasonal flame-grilled fish, and a deep-fried dish. We received eel with our beverages, too; seeing the plates set down on the table felt like destiny.

The main dish was a steak of Matsusaka beef, one of the best kinds out there—and, to my astonishment, it was a chateaubriand. *I feel really bad for Peeps now.* I wondered if this was how the men at my previous workplace had felt about their wives whenever our company treated us to delicious food.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed the meat with gusto. They'd brought out various brands of sake as well.

"Sasaki," said the chief, "it would seem your glass is empty."

"I've already had three, sir," I replied.

"Hoshizaki has told me you quite like to drink."

Wait, what'd she tell him something like that for? I wondered, unsure of how to respond. Naturally, my attention turned to Miss Hoshizaki, who was sitting diagonally across from me.

She seemed confused about my hesitation. "I saw you drinking beer during the day once," she pointed out. "Don't you remember?"

"Ah..." It seemed that, as a high schooler, she'd taken the fact that I once indulged in a little day drinking with Ms. Futarishizuka and jumped to a rather drastic conclusion.

Then again, when adults enjoyed liquor before sunset, they *did* tend to come off as lovers of drink—or alcoholics. Though I'd been hearing the term *day drinking* more and more recently.

"I've been trying to cut back lately for health reasons, sir," I explained.

"Ah. My apologies, then," replied the chief.

Miss Hoshizaki, incidentally, was drinking tea instead of sake. It was a testament to how sensible she was. The rest of us paid this no heed and drank as we pleased.

"Chief, I notice you've been drinking from the same bottle for a while," I remarked. "Do you prefer a certain brand?"

"I'm not picky," he replied, "but I suppose I am more particular than most."

"I see." I'd asked the question simply to change the topic, but then something occurred to me. I knew nothing about Mr. Akutsu's personal life. Where did he live? Did any family live with him? Where was he from? Details like those tended to come up naturally while working with someone, but not a single fact about his personal life had drifted my way.

He, on the other hand, had quite a lot of information about me, thanks to those surveillance cameras he was so proud of. If we were going to keep interacting in the future, I wanted to balance those scales as much as I could.

With that in mind, I made light conversation with my new boss. He returned the favor, probably thinking the same thing, and asked questions about both Ms. Futarishizuka and myself—like what we did on the weekends, or if we went back to see our families during the year-end holidays. All of it was stuff I'd heard many times at my last job.

This made him feel like a normal boss—like this was just a typical drinking party. It was throwing me off a bit, honestly.

Time flew by as we chatted about this and that. Eventually, at around the two-hour mark by my estimation, the section chief glanced at his wristwatch and said, “All right. Let’s head to the next place.”

“Huh...?”

“What?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka, astonished.

Was this person really Mr. Akutsu? I never would have imagined him saying such a thing; I couldn’t stop my face from tensing in surprise. I’d pinned him as one of those bosses who just gave his subordinates some money to carry on the party by themselves—if that was the plan—and headed home.

“I’ve already reserved another place,” he explained. “Since Hoshizaki is with us today, I picked somewhere we can enjoy some sweets and karaoke. It’s a bit far on foot, so we’ll have to call a taxi. Anyone need to use the restroom?”

Did the booze change his personality? I wondered in shock. He certainly didn’t *look* drunk, and he was talking just like he did during meetings at the bureau.

“Are you serious?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I’m not sure why I’d be lying,” he replied.

Seeing Ms. Futarishizuka surprised was actually kind of funny. She stared wide-eyed in bafflement at him. If she hadn’t been sitting down, I bet she would have braced herself as though a magical girl had just appeared.

To make a long story short, we ended up moving elsewhere just as he’d suggested. Work was over for the day, and there was still plenty of time until the last train. I wasn’t sure I agreed with someone Miss Hoshizaki’s age deciding to come with us, but saying anything would probably prompt her to criticize *me* instead, so I kept my mouth shut.

As per the chief’s suggestion, we took a taxi to our destination. He then showed us into a little bar in the basement of a mixed-use building. Aside from the counter seating, there was one booth. The lighting was dim, too—it was a very stylish joint with a calm and authentic atmosphere. One of those places that would charge you a thousand yen sitting fee, plus a 10 percent service fee, and then another thousand for one glass of beer.

There was only one bartender working behind the counter. He looked to be around thirty and wore his black hair combed back. He was good-looking, and tall for an Asian man. His outfit consisted of slacks and a cummerbund over a button-down shirt, with a necktie to complete the look.

Even to another man, he looked very cool standing behind the bar, elegantly doing his job with all those expensive bottles nearby. I was amazed by the way his movements seemed so casual and yet precise.

We seemed to be the only patrons. *Actually, didn't I see a sign out front that said the place had been reserved for the day?*

We were shown to a cushioned booth all the way in the back where we took our seats and started off the after-party by raising our glasses.

"I've never been to a place like this," said Miss Hoshizaki. "They *do* serve parfaits and stuff, right?"

"Quite a few bars are expanding their services to cater to female patrons," explained the section chief.

Every few minutes, Miss Hoshizaki would look around, seeming impressed.

In front of her sat the gorgeous parfait she'd been asking about. It looked very fancy. My eyes dropped briefly to the menu—three *thousand* yen. She'd never have ordered it if the chief hadn't been paying for everything.

The rest of us, meanwhile, had each received a separate variety of alcohol. I'd settled on a whiskey older than Miss Hoshizaki. It was only a one-ounce glass, but it had cost about as much as her parfait. Ms. Futarishizuka and Mr. Akutsu were enjoying drinks of a similar price range. Incidentally, we were sitting in the same positions as we had at the restaurant in Ginza.

"Do you often bring women to such places before taking them home, I wonder?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka. *Great, the very first thing out of her mouth is sexual harassment.* She really had no qualms about speaking her mind—even with her boss.

"Chief's gay, you know," pointed out Miss Hoshizaki. "Maybe this is the kind of place two guys would go together."

"Oh, is he?"

"I'm happy for your interest in me, Futarishizuka," said the chief, "but unfortunately, I can't return the favor."

"Wow, that really pisses me off."

Was that his version of a joke? I wondered. He was always super serious, so it kind of threw me.

But since he was an attractive man, everything he said came off cool. The way he just accepted rude comments like that was so smooth. If I was in his shoes, I couldn't have pulled it off at all. Everyone around me would have cringed, and people would be whispering rumors about me at work the next day.

Ms. Futarishizuka took the lead in the conversation once again—she'd done

the same at the restaurant—so I was having a pretty easy time of it. I usually had to go around asking people all sorts of questions, so letting someone else do all the talking was really nice. *Dangerously nice*, I thought, *considering how much she's doing for me, even at a bar.*

“Then perhaps,” she said, “the *other* new recruit has a chance?”

“I’m sorry,” he replied, “but I don’t see Sasaki that way.”

Well, I didn't ask! And yet he’d one-sidedly rejected me *again*. This was the second time. *Whatever. I don't care.*

After some more meandering chitchat, Miss Hoshizaki began to fidget. She’d finished off her parfait and had nothing to do. She’d been nibbling away at it after looking at the price, but by the time the rest of us were on our second glass, it was gone. She wasn’t used to being in a place like this, either—she was very conspicuously sitting up straight in her chair.

Noticing this, Mr. Akutsu addressed her. “Why not sing some karaoke, Hoshizaki?”

“Huh...?”

“Apparently, if you get a high score, you’ll get a free coupon for a famous bakery.”

Wait, did he set that up with the staff here in advance? I wondered. But I didn’t want to be crude, so I didn’t ask. He was good at his job—now I knew that even included preparing for drinking parties.

Miss Hoshizaki, meanwhile, took him at face value and seemed interested in the karaoke. Her gaze flicked from her hands on the table to the machine set up near the booth. “I’ve never done karaoke before...,” she said.

“You don’t go with your friends from school?”

“...No,” she said after a pause. *Probably because she doesn't have any*, I thought, a twinge of sadness hitting me as I remembered how she’d been pestered by schoolmates on her way home before. You only had three years to spend in high school—three priceless years. *I wish she could enjoy them a little more.*

“I hope you don’t mind my asking,” I said, “but what year are you in?”

“Huh? Oh, um... I’m still a freshman...”

“Our boss is one thing,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “but you are quite another, aren’t you?”

“Am I?” replied Miss Hoshizaki. “I don’t think I stand out quite as much as you do, though.”

“Well then, I shall take up the vanguard and perform one of the songs from my

repertoire.”

Ms. Futarishizuka got up and energetically took the karaoke machine’s remote control.

With that, she kicked off a casual karaoke competition in the bar. Quickly grabbing the microphone, she sang the opening theme song to a famous anime everyone in the country probably knew. It was upbeat and had a fun chorus line that followed the melody. And she was weirdly good at it, too—I found myself listening closely, a little frustrated. Spurred on by her performance, perhaps, Miss Hoshizaki then began a song of her own.

Mr. Akutsu and I enjoyed our liquor as we watched the two of them cut loose. When their songs ran out, one of us would get up to fill in the empty space. The chief was an excellent singer, while I, with my more modest skills, played second fiddle.

Ms. Futarishizuka’s scores were far and away the best. *She’s such a little kid*, I thought. *Maybe she’s actually big into karaoke*. I’d heard of old people getting into it as a way to prevent dementia.

I guessed it had been a little under an hour when eventually, as one song ended, Mr. Akutsu got up to use the restroom. Once he was out of sight, I turned to face my senior. I’d been trying to find a moment to ask this since the restaurant in Ginza, but our boss’s bladder had been considerably steelier than I’d imagined, so it had taken me until now to broach the topic.

“Hey, Miss Hoshizaki,” I said. “Is Section Chief Akutsu usually like this at drinking parties?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure. I don’t have much to do with him after work hours.”

“Ah.”

“He’s acting strange,” insisted Ms. Futarishizuka, joining in. “In fact, he seems like an entirely different person.”

Unfortunately, not even Miss Hoshizaki could elucidate any of what was going on.

“If he *is* a different person,” I said, “what could be his aim here?”

“Perhaps he means to have us drink, then do something while we’re inebriated,” suggested Ms. Futarishizuka.

“He already denied he’s interested in either of you,” Miss Hoshizaki pointed out.

“That’s a separate matter, Miss Hoshizaki, so please forget about it,” I told her.

“Either way, I think we may want to make ourselves scarce, and soon,” said

Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Yeah...,” I replied. We still had some time to spare, but maybe she was right. If this welcome party really was his attempt to get to know us, I’d feel bad. That said, we’d come with him to not one, but two places, so I was pretty sure we’d cleared the minimum bar of politeness.

A short while later, Chief Akutsu emerged from the restroom, and our whispered conversation came to an end.

Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka went back to singing karaoke. The chief showed no change in demeanor; he sat down, looking relaxed, in the same spot as before. But moments later, I heard a buzzing from his inside pocket.

“Excuse me for a moment,” he said, remaining seated as he checked the screen on his phone. Apparently it was a call, so he put the phone up to his ear and answered.

The two girls, who had been excitedly picking their next song, quieted down when they noticed. As we watched, Mr. Akutsu carried on a short conversation that mostly consisted of him replying “Right” and “Okay.”

As I looked out over the quiet bar, I began to have doubts. Normally, he would have gotten up and exited before taking the call. *Is he drunk?* I wondered. *Maybe we just can’t tell—like with Peeps.*

I mulled over these thoughts as he finished his call and put away his phone. “It seems, Futarishizuka, that things have proceeded as you wished.”

“...What do you mean?” she asked.

“A short while ago, a nuclear attack was conducted against the Kraken out at sea.”

His tone of voice and behavior were exactly the same as before. He spoke casually, like he was simply chatting. The three of us, however, were shocked. Even Miss Hoshizaki raised her voice in confusion.

“Huh...?”

The same sort of sound nearly escaped my own throat before I managed to swallow it down. The atmosphere had up until this point been friendly and festive, at least on the surface. Now, it suddenly grew tense. I wondered if this was what it felt like when doctors received news of an emergency case while on vacation. I felt the booze-induced haze in my mind quickly clear away.

“They decided to act because the target was moving faster than anticipated,” the chief explained.

“What’s its course?” I asked.

“Currently, the same as I explained this morning.”

Should we even be talking about this in public? I wondered. Suddenly curious, I looked over to the bar. The bartender who had been standing there moments before was now nowhere to be seen. He'd been running a one-man operation ever since we arrived; from preparing the parfait to carrying the drinks, he'd done it all with impeccable skill. I looked around, but there was no one else here, either.

I suddenly understood the reason our boss proposed this welcome party.

"It's true what they say: You should never go along with invitations from suspicious men," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"...It seems so," I agreed. The sarcasm in her words was cutting.

If the chief was receiving this call now, that meant he knew about the attack on the Kraken, and he'd invited us out *anyway*. There was only one reason for him to go so far as suggesting a welcome party in order to set this up.

He'd wanted us chained to his side right up until this very moment.

Considering Ms. Futarishizuka's powers, he couldn't resort to force—I guessed that was why he'd done something so roundabout. But what was he after?

The section chief continued, answering my question. "Unfortunately, it seems the attack had no effect on the target."

"Well, now," said Ms. Futarishizuka deliberately, getting up from the sofa. "It's about time for me to head on home."

Mr. Akutsu ignored her and continued, his tone matter-of-fact. "According to reports, it probably used some method to cancel out the attack at the moment of impact, just as it did with the magical girls' beams. They're continuing to investigate how far the effects of the radiation will spread."

Ms. Futarishizuka groaned. "I haven't the foggiest what you're going on about. In fact, I'm having trouble hearing you."

"But, Chief," said Miss Hoshizaki, "didn't you say at the meeting this morning that hitting it with a nuke was our last resort?"

"I did, indeed," he replied. "It seems humanity is out of options."

"That sounds pretty dire..."

"If it makes landfall, the JSDF will be forced to fight it. The higher-ups are already forming teams for that contingency. Naturally, we will be aiding them in their response to the Kraken."

This was *really* starting to feel like a *kaiju* flick. I could see it now—the giant monster landing in Japan, whipping its tentacles around, mowing down JSDF tanks and aircraft, making its way toward population centers for some

incomprehensible reason. *Wish we had some kind of rival monster or a giant with a strong sense of justice.*

I expected the creature's sheer size would render information control virtually impossible. Since it originated in the otherworld, I very much hoped to avoid it making landfall. If the damage kept spreading, people would be even more keen on analyzing that leaked video of Peeps and Lady Elsa. It might spell the end to our newly equal relationship with Mr. Akutsu, as well. There was a good chance he'd sell us out.

As one bad premonition after another flashed through my mind, our boss finally made his big request.

"Sasaki, can't you do anything about it?" he asked me, as casually as if he were telling me to go swing by the convenience store to pick up some cigarettes.

Nodding and saying "Yeah, sure" wasn't an option—not by a long shot. But neither was staying silent, so I launched into a question and answer session with the chief.

"Did you know this attack would fail, sir?" I asked.

"I had considered it," he replied, "though, it certainly would have been nice if it worked out."

I had no idea what kind of instructions he was receiving from the higher-ups. I had a feeling, though, that he was now absolutely committed—otherwise he wouldn't have kept us here.

What's more, I had a feeling this information was all over the place by now. A lot of people were probably feeling the pressure—had the chief wanted to lock down the three of us before someone else got to us? We weren't exactly on good terms with him. I bet he could easily envision us being scouted by another organization. Or maybe he'd considered that, if we already knew what was going on, we might try to run.

Whatever the case, he clearly wanted to keep us within arm's reach. Learning the truth behind our "welcome party" made me a little sad.

"Chief," said Miss Hoshizaki, "this feels like it's a little above our pay grade."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me," the chief assured her. "I'm not asking Sasaki to use his psychic powers to deal with the Kraken. That said, he did get a close look at it during the investigation. So if he has any good ideas, I'm hoping he'll share them. Of course, that extends to you as well, Hoshizaki."

"...I see, sir," I said. He was trying to be smooth about it, but he was *definitely* asking for some on-site labor. He was hoping I'd eliminate this octodragon with a wave of my hand, using some mysterious power nobody had ever seen before.

I thought back. Had his sudden request for us to go on-site the other day been part of one big scheme leading up to this very moment? We were all happy we'd gotten some intel on the Kraken, but had we been dancing in the palm of his hand the whole time? It was a little frustrating.

"It's not all bad," he pointed out. "This means those in charge have high expectations for us."

"I guess that's one way to put it," replied Miss Hoshizaki, "All they're *really* doing is dropping everything on us."

"If things work out, though, I can guarantee a significant reward for all of you."

"Hmm. Is that so?"

To put it another way, Mr. Akutsu's career depended on how things went with the Kraken. He was one of those "promotions are everything" types, and if he couldn't manage to stay on that path, he might retaliate against *us* to vent his frustration. We may have had a grasp on his weakness, but that weakness was predicated on his current position in society.

What's more, the word reward has really put a fire in Miss Hoshizaki's eyes. This is bad.

"It seems," said Ms. Futarishizuka, her eyes narrowed and her gaze driving into my skull, "that you should have taken a page out of our senior coworker's book and put in for overtime, hmm?"

"....."

She could say what she wanted, but for once, I didn't think we had much choice. If we wanted to prioritize our positions as bureau members, we couldn't refuse the chief's invitation. The only difference between Futarishizuka and me was that the curse binding her had a visible mark.

And that giant sea monster was approaching by the second, regardless of what any of us thought or wanted.

"I don't know if I'll be able to meet those expectations," I told the chief, "but I can sleep on it."

"I'd like you all in the office bright and early, if there are no objections," he said.

"Understood, sir."

"And you can contact me at any time if you think of something, however trivial."

"I will, sir."

It was time to hasten back to Ms. Futarishizuka's villa and consult with Peeps.



The welcome party had ended with the news about the sea monster, though once Mr. Akutsu was finished explaining, he jokingly asked if we wanted to keep singing karaoke. Obviously, none of us were in the mood for that, so we decided to go ahead and call it a night. We left the section chief in the bar and said good-bye to Miss Hoshizaki out front. We said something about having to take different trains home and split up with her. Meanwhile, Ms. Futarishizuka procured a taxi in front of the bar.

The three of us left separately, but once Miss Hoshizaki was out of eyeshot, I met back up with Ms. Futarishizuka on the street. As I walked along, a car pulled up from behind and parked on the shoulder. Her head poked out of the rear window, and she ushered me inside.

“Come, hop in, already.”

“Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said, accepting her show of goodwill and climbing into the taxi.

The car’s GPS already displayed the route to my apartment. Very skillful on her part, as always. We hadn’t even figured this out in advance, and yet here she was. I felt like I was starting to get a glimpse of why she’d met with so much success in the world.

“What is *with* that man?” she complained. “I thought he was about to drag us all back to the office and confine us there.”

“I doubt he’d do anything so forceful with you around,” I told her.

“You never know. When someone’s backed into a corner, they tend to get shortsighted.”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t considered the possibility; in that sense, I was very glad to have her with me. I wondered in vague disbelief if she chose to participate in the welcome party for that express purpose. *If that’s true*, I thought, *she’s a wonderful woman*.

“It really isn’t all bad,” I said. “We did learn something about the current situation.”

“I feel like we would have heard all that by midnight either way,” she muttered.

“You think so?”

“You know, you may want to think about building a few more connections.”

“...I’ll keep that in mind.”

I could feel the taxi driver’s eyes on me through the rearview mirror. Ms.

Futarishizuka was probably freaking him out. I suspected we were being captured by a surveillance camera or two as well. So instead of getting too deep in the weeds on the Kraken, we just complained about our boss for a while. As we traded gripes, the trip home went by in a flash.

Soon we arrived on the street in front of my apartment. The next thing to do would be to return to my room, get in touch with Peeps, and have him bring us to the villa with his magic. Back in Karuizawa with Ms. Futarishizuka, we'd explain the situation, and then I'd head to the otherworld. I intended to use the difference in the flow of time between worlds to hold a strategy meeting and figure out how to take down the Kraken.

As I thought through my plans, I watched Ms. Futarishizuka pay the driver. Lately, I'd stopped feeling pangs of guilt whenever I saw her take out her wallet. I'd insisted on paying the taxi fare myself, but as I was counting out my thousands, she swiftly slipped him a bigger note.

As we got out of the parked taxi and stepped onto the street, my apartment complex exploded.

“What...?”

“Nwoohhh?!”

With a huge boom, my apartment on the first floor of the complex was blown away. It was like someone had used explosives to blow up the building from inside. The room lit up first, then the windowpanes shattered—and then the walls and pillars were blown apart. Pieces of glass and lumber even made it as far as where we were standing.

None of the adjacent rooms escaped the damage. About half of the long building was instantly reduced to rubble. Then, as fires started up, the neighbors came out to see what had happened.

“That explosion,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Did that come from the girl’s room? The one who came to the hotel?”

“...Yes, that’s what it looks like.”

My neighbor’s apartment had been at the center of the blast. Mine was in a terrible state, but *hers* was even worse. It had partially caved in under the weight of the upper floors. I couldn’t make out many details in the dark, but I didn’t see any movement inside.

Considering the late hour, it was hard to hold out hope. Even Ms. Futarishizuka had dropped her banter and was looking on in silence. She’d heard all about me and my neighbor’s relationship.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” I said. “I need to make sure she’s safe.”

“Can I come along?”

“Yes—whatever you prefer.”

Flames crackled as the apartment blazed. It was an old building made mostly of wood, so the fire spread quickly. And with the dense construction in this neighborhood, if it was left burning, it wouldn't be long before it jumped to another structure.

Neighbors began to gather outside on the road in front of the apartment. I ignored them and strode right up to it. Once I was inside the block fence, the fence itself and the nearby houses would create a lot of blind spots. The billowing flames and smoke would only help. Deploying a barrier spell as inconspicuously as I could manage, I pressed on, avoiding the fire.

What caused this? I wondered. *A gas leak? Or did someone involved in that angel-demon proxy war or whatever plant explosives?* Maybe someone with more experience would have been able to tell from the nature of the blast, but an amateur like me had no way to judge.

“.....”

Abaddon was always at the girl's side. As long as they were together, I had a feeling he'd be able to handle a situation like this. Praying she was safe, I made my way toward her apartment.



(The Neighbor's POV)

Late at night, an unexpected visitor comes to the apartment. I've just tucked myself under my blanket in the corner of the room, and I'm starting to doze off when the doorbell jolts me awake. My mother has been watching TV. She mutters something about how late it is before going over to the front door.

The visitor turns out to be the younger man she's been seeing lately; I can tell right away when I hear his voice from the living room. He's the one who tried to rape me before.

I hear my mother's voice change instantly from grumpy to cheerful. She speaks quickly, her pitch a little higher than when she talks to me. Her voice carries down the short hall into the living room.

“*Oh, huh,*” says Abaddon. “*Think we'll be sleeping outside tonight?*”

“.....”

Abaddon's dry joke irritates me. Despite my mother's actual behavior—in fact, because of it—she always makes a show of giving me the bare minimum of

care. I doubt she'll kick me out into the cold tonight, but there's a good chance my bed will get moved into the hallway.

As I grow more and more fed up with this idea, my mother's conversation with her boyfriend continues unabated. *Sorry for the sudden visit*, he says. *No, don't worry about it*, she replies. If he was a responsible adult, I doubt he'd come knocking unannounced this late at night.

Apparently, he was drinking nearby and missed the last train. That alone should ruin my mother's image of him, but she seems overjoyed as she invites him into the apartment.

Then, a casual remark mixed into their back-and-forth catches my attention.

"By the way, what's that box you're holding?" my mother asks.

"Oh, this?" her boyfriend replies.

"Could it be a present for me?"

"Actually, it's from your ex-husband. He handed it to me outside the apartment."

"What?"

"He said it's almost your daughter's birthday."

"Wait. What are you talking about?"

"Well, he saw me on my way here. He's not allowed to visit you, so he gave this to me instead and asked me to pass it along. Said he wanted to at least celebrate her birthday."

This is something I can't ignore. I glance out into the hallway. The man near the front door is holding a square box in one hand. It's wrapped very neatly, and at a glance, it looks just like a birthday present.

But it's nowhere near my birthday. Plus, my father started a new family after divorcing my mother, and he hasn't sent me a birthday gift in years. And now he's coming all the way to our apartment to deliver one? I have my doubts.

Just then, something dawns on me, and my thoughts turn to the death game I've recently become involved with.

"Abaddon, we're getting out of here," I inform him.

"*What? Why?*"

"Just run! And get my things!"

Until a month ago, something like this probably wouldn't have bothered me that much. I'd figure it was a practical joke, or a misunderstanding—and this late at night, I'd have ignored it and gone to sleep.

But now, alarms are blaring in my head. With only the clothes on my back, I hurry to the living room window. Undoing the lock seems to take an eternity. As

I drop down into the yard, pebbles poke into the soles of my feet, but I can barely feel them. The only thing on my mind is getting as far away from the apartment as possible.

Just recently, I was reading a book in the library—a suspense story that started with a scene exactly like this one.

Abaddon flies up behind me a moment later, carrying my things in one hand. *“I don’t mind running,”* he says, *“but could you at least explain—”*

Just then, a huge booming noise interrupts him. A moment later, I feel my body lift into the air. The blast hits me from behind as I run, sending me tumbling forward, and I immediately lose my sense of balance. After that, I roll until my body hits the block fence surrounding the building; I’m now at the far edge of the rectangular apartment complex.

“.....”

It’s a good thing my apartment was on the ground floor. Otherwise, I’d have hesitated to jump out the window and died.

Sitting on the ground as these thoughts churn through my head, I turn back to see the blasted remains. My apartment was the epicenter, so it’s obviously toast, and the rooms on either side of it are destroyed as well. Parts of the second story have fallen into the area below, making the building barely recognizable. Flames are starting to rise, too. They’ll burn the whole place down if no one puts them out.

“Wow, I’m surprised you caught on to that,” says Abaddon. *“And you acted right away, too. That was really something.”*

“My mother’s friend was acting strange.”

“Really?” Abaddon comes over to me, still holding my things. It’s not every day he gives me a frank compliment like that. *“Personally, I’m worried about your neighbor.”*

“It’s fine. He hasn’t gotten home yet.” I’d been listening through the wall the whole time, so I’m sure. I’m grateful the apartment walls were so thin. Otherwise, I think I would have rushed toward my mother’s boyfriend, snatched the package and run out onto the street. It would have been worth it to me to save my neighbor, but I don’t want to die just yet.

After all, there have been a *lot* of other women around him lately. I would hate to take myself out of the running now.

“But are you sure that was the right move?”

“Why?”

“Your mother won’t come out of this unharmed.”

“Now that the apartment is wrecked, I doubt he and I will be neighbors anymore. In that case, I don’t really care where I end up. My living situation can only get better at this point.”

“You know, your logic is even scarier than a demon’s sometimes.”

“Really?” Surely anyone would think the same way in my situation. There’s nothing weird about it. Still, this place was full of memories of time spent with my neighbor, and now it’s gone. That hurts. I’m furious. So furious that I’ll gladly send Abaddon to take care of the culprit if I ever find out who did this.



“You probably shouldn’t assume what’s normal for you is normal for everyone else.”

“...Maybe you’re right.” The way Abaddon seems to read my mind is a little irritating.

Right near where I’m sitting is a path leading out the back of the building. In contrast to the road out front used for car traffic, this one is more of an alley, just wide enough for pedestrians to pass through, and surrounded on both sides by block fences and other residences.

I catch sight of someone in the alley, hiding behind a building. But as I turn around to get a better look, they dart away. My mother’s boyfriend said he received the birthday present in front of the apartment building. Here I was, a child fallen over in my pajamas. You’d expect anyone who saw me to be concerned, and yet this person is fleeing at full speed. Considering the situation, nothing could be more suspicious. If they know my identity and address, I need to chase them down. Even more importantly, they’re now my sworn enemy—the one who destroyed my neighbor’s and my apartment.

“Abaddon, we’re chasing them.”

“Good idea. I really hate being on the back foot all the time.”

I immediately stand up and take off after the suspect. It’s a man, about the same height as my neighbor. He’s wearing a coat over a suit, the hem of which flaps madly behind him as he runs. On his head is a fedora. Between his clothing and the darkness, I can’t make out any of his features.

As I run, Abaddon heals my wounds from the explosion. When I got up, my whole body throbbed with pain, but it only lasted for a few seconds. He’d healed my nose in the same way after my mother’s boyfriend bit it.

Unfortunately, he can’t do anything about my bare feet pounding against the ground. I endure it, continuing to run over the asphalt.

“He’s fast,” I say. “I might not be able to catch up.”

“I think it’s more that you’re slow, don’t you?”

It sounds like he’s suggesting I get more regular exercise. He’s right—I’m not very athletic. After all, moving around makes me hungry. Plus, it’s almost winter, the harshest season of all. I’ve accumulated a good amount of fat; I can’t just burn it for no reason. Whenever I recall that hopeless sensation of waking up in the morning unable to move, I know I have no choice but to sit out gym class.

“If you’d brought me some shoes, I might be able to go a little faster,” I say.

“In that case, I ask that you be more specific with your requests in the future.”

“Please run ahead and catch him.”

“Gotcha!” Abaddon zooms through the air at my instruction.

He’s told me before that he isn’t permitted to kill anyone. But just grabbing and binding someone who wants to hurt me doesn’t seem to be much of an issue. I already know this from the time he helped out back when my mother’s boyfriend attacked me.

Abaddon closes in on the man in the suit in the blink of an eye, reaching out for his neck. Unfortunately, the moment his fingers are about to touch skin, the man vanishes. He disappears in an instant, without warning—and without leaving a trace.

A second later, I realize that the sounds of cars in the distance, of families in their homes, and of air conditioners running—all the noises I’ve been hearing—are gone.

I’m now in an isolated space.

“Aw, darn,” says Abaddon. *“I was so close, too.”*

“Friends of the man who disappeared?” I suggest.

“That’s probably the right assumption, but we can’t say anything just yet.”

Abaddon stops near where the man disappeared, and I immediately run over to him. Whoever this guy is, he doesn’t only know my address—he knows my family situation and even about the man my mother is seeing. The enemy probably knows what I look like and my daily schedule.

We, on the other hand, have no idea what sort of people are after us. I feel hopeless at the prospect of more explosives in my future. I need to catch the culprits to recover my peace of mind.

“If only we’d finished negotiating with the others before this happened,” Abaddon remarks.

He’s referring to my neighbor and his work colleagues. Now I know firsthand why he was so anxious.

But I’m not about to let him complain. *“Could you stop crying over something that’s already happened?”* I say. *“If you hadn’t decided to speak to me, my apartment wouldn’t have been blown up. My neighbor would probably still be my neighbor, too.”*

“I see,” he replies. *“I suppose you’re right about that.”*

“But I see now what you’ve been so concerned about,” I tell him. *It’s a good thing Abaddon and I are the only ones wrapped up in this. If I’d lost my neighbor in this ridiculous explosion, I’d have regretted it for the rest of my life.*

“But what a stroke of bad luck to get attacked before we could move to a safe location.”

“I doubt my neighbor and the others imagined someone would send a bomb to my apartment.”

I can't help giving Abaddon a little attitude. I'm still sour over losing a place I treasured, after all. I know taking it out on him isn't going to get me anywhere, but my emotions are running high.

Knowing I should stop, I ask him a question to try to distract myself.

“Should we wait here until the isolated space vanishes?”

“That would be the best move if we want to capture the man from before. But we'd be letting the angel and Disciple escape. And even if that man was the one pretending to be your father, he could still be the lowest rung on the ladder and have no grasp on what's really going on. In that case, he won't be much help to us.”

“If the isolated space disappears while we're searching for the angel and their Disciple, they'll *both* get away,” I point out. “I'm sure you've already noticed, but I can't feel any angels around right now. It'll probably take a long time to root them out.”

“Yeah, I can't sense a thing, either.”

“If they had to ask someone else to send a bomb to my apartment, I think it's safe to assume they don't have the strength to fight us directly. I bet they're already pretty far away.”

“So what'll it be?”

“We'll leave the actual culprit and look for the angel and their Disciple.”

“That was fast. What convinced you?”

“You're right—I doubt the man from before will know who the angel or Disciple are. And since you were practically asking to go after them, I have faith you'll find them before they escape.”

“Hey, if I got your hopes up, I guess I gotta take responsibility!”

Abaddon nods and smiles. It seems like he got the answer he wanted.



It happened just as I set off toward my flaming apartment building. All the sounds around me were sucked away. The chattering of onlookers out front, the crackling of the flames, even the screams of the other residents all fell silent. I felt like I'd just gone deaf.

The flames, too, instantly vanished. Without all the smoke, I could see what it was like inside my destroyed apartment.

“What was it you called this? A proxy war pitting angels against demons?”

“Yes. It would seem we’ve been pulled into another battle.”

Ms. Futarishizuka was here as well, standing right next to me. I’d put a barrier spell around her, so she was pulled in along with me.

We’d entered an isolated space—a soundless world serving as the stage for the proxy war. Once before, the magical girl wrapped herself in a Magical Barrier and wound up joining us. Apparently, surrounding yourself with any kind of magic “wall” would allow you to get inside one of these things.

“I’m quite concerned about how this relates to that explosion,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Do you think the explosion could be an accident, and they just came to check things out?” I asked.

“We’ll have to ask the girl for the answers.”

Personally, I considered the start of this death game good news. If an isolated space had appeared, that meant Disciples of angels and demons had come within a certain distance of one another. And if one had appeared near the apartment, it seemed highly likely my neighbor was alive.

I hastened into the building. The living room next door had been half destroyed when the second floor caved in on top of it. I wasn’t able to get inside. Instead, I peered in from between the support beams and walls using the ever-handy illumination spell from the otherworld.

“Nobody’s inside,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” I replied. I looked around for a bit longer, but I didn’t see my neighbor anywhere. From what I observed of the explosion, she’d have died instantly if she was here. In that case, the death game wouldn’t have begun, and no isolated space would have appeared. With that in mind, I figured it was likely she’d been outside.

“This building’s done for,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “It’ll have to be rebuilt from the ground up.”

“Looks like I’m in for some hotel living for the foreseeable future,” I agreed.

My own apartment, right next door, was in a similar state of ruin. My household belongings were history. Judging from the state of the fire, my bankbook and signature stamp would be irretrievable now. I could grab them in the isolated space, but as soon as we were back in reality, everything would revert to its original state.

That said, I’d been making good money off my trade in the otherworld recently, so this might not hit me so hard. The bureau would handle the cleanup,

and if they decided to pass it off as a gas explosion or something, I'd probably be able to get insurance to cover a lot of it.

My neighbor's safety was the bigger concern right now.

"I want to check the surrounding area," I told Ms. Futarishizuka.

"Mm," she hummed in agreement. "We should find the girl and get out of here."

With her assent, we left the grounds of the apartment. According to Abaddon, this empty world appeared whenever a demon's Disciple and an angel's Disciple got within a certain distance. He also said they could feel out each other's location. Unfortunately, outsiders like us had no way of finding them.

Instead, I decided to fly up into the sky and get a bird's-eye view. Naturally, that would make us visible to the enemy as well—but I cared more about my neighbor's survival at the moment, so I decided the risk was worth it.

"Oh, how many years has it been since I was last held by a man?" said Ms. Futarishizuka. "I think I might fall for you."

"You're giving me the creeps."

In the end, I had to pick up Futarishizuka and carry her in my arms, since she didn't have the ability to fly. And of course, she got in a little harassment. A mean-spirited grin appeared on her lips as she poked my arms and chest. Since we hadn't found my neighbor in the apartment, her usual banter had begun to resurface.

Ignoring her, I fixed my gaze on the ground. Not much was moving, so the search went quickly. Ms. Futarishizuka was the first to notice something. She pointed to a spot on the ground.

"I see someone down by that intersection," she said.

"...Yes, I think I do as well." Two people, in fact, hiding behind a building facing into the intersection.

One of them had immaculate white wings coming out of their back—this pair must be the angel and Disciple who created this isolated space. They were pretty far away, so it was hard to make out anything more specific.

They hadn't yet noticed us floating in the air. Presumably, the nighttime darkness was doing a good job of concealing us. They glanced about from their place on the ground, keeping an eye on their surroundings, probably wary of the demon and his Disciple.

"So now what?" asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

"If we can, I'd like to get a look at the angel's face."

"Why?"

“Depending on who they are, we may need to get out of here immediately.”

Angels ran the entire gamut, from trivially weak to incredibly strong. If this one tended toward the latter, even we could be in danger. The image of little Mika chopping off part of my body with her sword was still fresh in my memory. If there was even a slight chance we might encounter her again, we needed to run for our lives. In order to avoid that, I wanted to meet up with my neighbor and Abaddon as quickly as possible.

“If it’s that dangerous, I’d rather not risk it,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Then we’ll focus on searching for my neighbor.”

“Actually, it looks like someone’s coming right at us. Over there.”

“Huh?” Following Ms. Futarishizuka’s gaze, I spun around, surprised.

She was right—a figure was approaching from below us, heading up into the air and rapidly closing in. *An attack?* I wondered, bracing myself before they came into view, and I realized my caution was uncalled for. It was precisely who we’d been looking for this whole time.

“*Oh? How did you two get into the isolated space?*”

Looking at them from afar, I’d thought *That’s a strange shape for a human.* But as I blinked to focus my vision, I realized Abaddon was carrying my neighbor in his arms. He was shorter than she was, making for an odd picture. The boy didn’t seem to be having any trouble with her, though. In this way, we matched—both of us were carrying a girl bridal-style in our arms.

“We saw the apartment explode right when we got back,” I explained to him.

“*Oh, I see. You used that barrier magic or whatever, right?*” said Abaddon, nodding. “*So you ended up here the same way as before.*” It seemed to make sense to him; the last time this happened, I briefly explained how we were ending up inside the isolated spaces. Plus, this one had sprang up right near my apartment building.

“I’m really sorry for causing you all this trouble, mister,” said my neighbor.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured her. “Insurance should cover any losses.”

“Can you get insurance money for bomb damages?” she asked.

“Er, no. I was thinking we’d pass it off as a gas explosion or something.”

“Bomb?” repeated Ms. Futarishizuka. “So they *were* after the girl.”

Well, now we know why the apartment blew up, I thought. The angels versus demons proxy war must have finally strayed from the isolated spaces and began to encroach on reality. Belatedly, I realized why Abaddon had seemed more interested in what we could provide him outside, rather than inside the isolated spaces. I’d never dreamed the other side would start sending bombs.

But if that was true, what had happened to her mother? Most people were home at this time of night.

“Could I ask something?” I said, trying to broach the topic. “About your family—”

“Mister,” she said before I could finish, “before, you told me that woman was a coworker of yours.”

She delivered this implicit question with a much more detached expression than usual. It was easy to guess why. *Can't very well force her to answer my question*, I thought, deciding to respond to her instead. “Yes, she's my coworker. What about it?”

“Oh, have I done something?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Little old me?”

“...No, you didn't do anything,” replied my neighbor. “It's just...” Her gaze was on the kimono-clad girl in my arms. Was she suspicious of us? *I thought we secured their cooperation the last time we saw each other.*

“Well,” said Abaddon, “*you do seem a little closer than coworkers. I'm sure that's what she's worried about.*”

“Abaddon, don't tell them things like that,” insisted my neighbor.

“*You want us to switch?*” Abaddon asked her. “*They'd have to agree, but I can always ask.*”

“Please keep your mouth shut. That's an order, Abaddon.”

“*Ack! You sure do know my weakness.*”

Was she uncomfortable with the sight of me, a washed-up middle-aged man, carrying someone who, at the very least, appeared to be a young girl? Considering recent social trends, I couldn't say my neighbor's feelings on the matter were surprising. *We should probably land before she gets a bad impression of me.*

“I suppose this means I must hasten preparations for your living quarters,” noted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“*How's it looking so far?*”

“I've procured the building, but I've yet to have the furniture brought in.”

“*That should be fine, to be honest.*”

“But it's empty—completely empty.”

“*My partner can sleep anywhere as long as she has a blanket.*”

“.....”

I wasn't surprised, but it still hurt to hear how bad my neighbor must have had it. Judging by Abaddon's nonchalant tone, she probably dealt with things like that on a daily basis. My neighbor pressed her lips together, looking

embarrassed. I felt bad for her—though there was no way I could have given her an entire bed.

Wanting to change the topic, I took the initiative and turned to Abaddon.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but have you found your opponent in this death game yet?”

“About that,” he responded. “*Have you seen any angels or Disciples around? They seem to be concealing their presence, making them hard to find. On the other hand, it probably means they’re not very strong.*”

“I just saw a couple of people like that on the ground below,” I told him.

“Right down there,” pointed Ms. Futarishizuka. “That building facing the intersection... Wait. They’re gone.”

“They’re a bit farther away,” I said. “They seem to be moving.”

“*Hey, you’re right!*”

The pair had moved a few dozen meters from the place we last spotted them. I watched them moving from building to building, staying hidden, keeping an eye on their surroundings. I couldn’t tell what they were thinking from here—they could have been waiting for friends, or searching for my neighbor and Abaddon, or trying to escape the isolated space after detecting them.

There was one thing of which I was certain, however. They hadn’t noticed us up here in the air.

“*Just one team? That’s a little concerning,*” remarked Abaddon. “*They came with so many last time.*”

“They would have sent more if they meant to take you down, Abaddon,” my neighbor agreed. “If the man from before sent the bomb at an angel’s or Disciple’s instructions, then finding these two in the direction he was headed probably means they were supervising him.”

“*Yeah, I think that’s pretty likely, too.*”

It seemed like my neighbor and Abaddon had an idea of who was behind the bombing. As one of the people who would be cleaning up the aftermath in the real world, I was curious about the culprit. For now, though, I’d focus on listening; it seemed the wrong time to ask for an explanation.

“That means these two are nothing special, right?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“*That’s what I think anyway,*” said Abaddon.

“In that case, let’s catch them, dispose of them however we see fit, and then head back to the real world.”

“Shouldn’t we question them first?” I said.

“*Regardless, we’ll need to catch them before they get away,*” said Abaddon.

“Would you two mind helping out? Just to make doubly sure we get them. We’ll do all the dirty work.”

“Abaddon, that’s not their job,” said my neighbor.

“Actually, I don’t mind at all,” I replied.

I didn’t want to be an accessory to homicide; if I was being honest, I was pretty opposed. But I didn’t want to sit by and leave everything to my neighbor, either. Last time, she’d almost been killed by these people; she and Abaddon couldn’t afford to remain on the defensive. That was why I agreed, despite my mixed feelings.

Whether or not he knew how I really felt, the self-proclaimed demon replied energetically.

“Great! Let’s wrap up this little game, then, shall we?”



Now that we’d met up with my neighbor and Abaddon, we all headed down to the ground. For starters, I came down right in front of the angel and their Disciple, Ms. Futarishizuka still in my arms. From their point of view, we’d suddenly dropped out of the sky. Upon seeing us, they immediately tried to escape. The angel was carrying their Disciple in their arms and attempting to launch into the sky in the opposite direction.

As soon as they turned tail, though, Abaddon—carrying my neighbor—alighted on the ground. We’d discussed this pincer maneuver in advance, and it played out perfectly. That was what Abaddon had wanted our help with.

The buildings were quite close together here, and we were on a tiny lane too narrow for a car to pass. Even from above, dense urban clutter frequently blocked our view.

“Stop right there,” said Abaddon. *“This is game over for you.”*

“Would you mind putting me down now that we’re back on the ground?”

My neighbor, still in Abaddon’s arms, descended onto the street. I quickly released Ms. Futarishizuka as well. Her scent had been tickling my nostrils as I carried her, and even parted, I could still sense it on my clothing—that mixture of sweat and perfume. The fact that I felt a little happy about it frustrated me somewhat.

I soon heard sounds of distress from the angel and their Disciple.

“Ugh. They caught us, Eriel.”

“I apologize. This is all my fault. I just had to make that suggestion.”

“You’re weak, and you’ve got the worst luck. Could you be any more useless?”

“...I’m sincerely sorry for not being able to help.”

“Well, I guess we’d be in the same boat even if we’d gone with my idea.”

One was a boy, one a girl, and both looked like teenagers. The girl had white wings protruding from her back. And when I looked closer, I recognized her.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but have we met before?”

“Ah...!”

Surprise colored the boy’s face at my question. Apparently, they remembered me as well.

“Who are they?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Acquaintances of yours?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then what *are* they, hmm?”

“Remember when I told you about my neighbor being attacked by angels? Before I met up with them, I ran into these two in an isolated space. We talked for a bit but went our separate ways pretty quickly.”

“*They wouldn’t happen to be the ones who fed you the false information, would they?*” asked Abaddon.

“Oh, um. Yeah,” I replied.

The angel and her Disciple tensed up when they heard this. They had *We messed up* written all over their faces.

At the time, I promised to let them go in exchange for information about the conditions that created an isolated space. They told me at least ten angels and demons needed to be in a specific area, which Abaddon later informed me wasn’t exactly true.

The Disciple was a young man in jeans and a parka. The parka had the same design as last time, and he had the same, somewhat long black hair parted in the middle. He looked like a student.

The angel girl accompanying him had pale-white skin and blond hair. Shorter than the boy, she was still a little taller than Ms. Futarishizuka, with an average build. Her clothing was all white, draped like a chiton or a robe.

“You’re friends with the man who blew up my apartment, aren’t you?” demanded my neighbor, taking a step forward. Her tone was a lot firmer than I was used to. It was obvious she was asking the question fully confident she knew the truth.

“If we answer honestly,” said the boy, offering an ingratiating smile, “will you let us go?”

“If you’d prefer to suffer right up until your last breath,” answered my neighbor sharply, “then I certainly won’t force you to talk.”

“.....”

The boy fell silent, his face tensing.

My neighbor seemed like a completely different person. Her face was the same—impassive and detached. But her tone was forceful, and her words were *brutal*, just like Peeps’s when he was faced with an enemy. She seemed to have a quiet anger raging within her.

I thought of the apartment next door to mine, devastated in the explosion. I doubted she had many happy memories there with her family, but I supposed that, to her, even that home was irreplaceable.

It wasn’t easy for a child to let go of their parent. And if that time had to come, it should have been much further in the future. *She may seem mature, but until just last year, she was wearing an elementary schooler’s backpack*, I thought.

Despite my age, I could feel warmth at the corners of my eyes.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

There’s little doubt in my mind that the angel and Disciple in front of me are linked to whoever blew up my apartment. The thought sends anger whirling through my chest.

“You’re friends with the man who blew up my apartment, aren’t you?”

“If we answer honestly, will you let us go?”

“If you’d prefer to suffer right up until your last breath, then I certainly won’t force you to talk.”

“.....”

That place was precious to me. It was filled with memories of the man next door. And these people took that from me without even giving me a chance to fight back. I’d love to set Abaddon on them right now and have him rip them to pieces. I already know my partner is a pro at grotesque murders. I’m sure he’d put on a show that’d make my hair stand on end.

But *he’s* right here, watching us. If I did what I want to do, I’m sure it would put him off. That much I understand—and that’s precisely why this is so vexing.

In the meantime, the Disciple continues. “It’s true that the angels and their Disciples targeted your apartment,” he tells me. “But we weren’t the ones who decided on it. The others did that, and then they forced me to make sure you

were dead. I didn't have a choice."

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that?" I ask.

"Well, that old guy there knows how weak this angel is, doesn't he? She's been no help whatsoever, even during the games. Now, in order to get some use out of me, they sent me here as a disposable pawn. And as you can see, I've already been captured."

"....."

"At this point, every angel knows there's a really strong demon in this area," he explained. "Nobody wants to go anywhere *near* your apartment. So when they started arguing about who to send to check that the job was done, Eriel and I got singled out."

The Disciple is desperately appealing not only to me, but to my neighbor. He's already lied once. How dare he try to worm his way out of this.

But my neighbor is a good person, so he just waits and listens in silence.

"Then you made this so-called isolated space appear in order to check?" says the phony little girl.

"Right. If it showed up, that would mean we failed, and if it didn't, we succeeded."

"It sounds like you are indeed disposable."

I'm also curious why my neighbor is suddenly sniffing at his suit and shirt. I don't want to believe it, but could he be enjoying the smell left behind by his coworker? She *was* hugging him excessively while he was carrying her.

Maybe I should have gone along with Abaddon's idea. No, wait. I don't take regular baths, so I might be a little smelly. That's worrying. Thinking about this depresses me, making my responses to the Disciple harsher and harsher.

"Even if what you're saying is true, that's no reason for me to let an angel and her Disciple escape."

"W-well then, how about this," he suggests. "We'll join up with you. We'll switch sides."

"First you cause this isolated space for no reason, and now this? What are you plotting?"

"I'm not plotting anything! I'm saying I'll become a spy for the demons. If I see the angels planning anything big, I'll let you know ahead of time. What do you think? Doesn't that sound way better than just killing some small fries like us?"

If I'd had information about the bombing in advance, I might have been able to deal with it before it happened. The Disciple has a point. And the angel

accompanying him is very weak, which would work to our advantage.

Personally, though, I want to kill them.

“Every time we hold this game, a few Disciples always end up as spies,” Abaddon interjects.

“See?” says the boy. “Even your demon agrees.”

“.....”

It seems Abaddon is interested in what the Disciple has to say. Judging by the smirk on his face, he may even be in favor of this idea. It seems he’s not lying about spies playing a role in the proxy wars of the past. The angel the boy called Eriel doesn’t raise any objections, either.

If only he hadn’t blown up my apartment. Then I might have considered it.

“Was this your plan from the beginning?” I demand. “To pretend to switch sides in order to get information on us?”

“No, no! We wouldn’t risk our lives to pull something like that. We’re desperate here, you know.”

“Even if he’s lying,” Abaddon says to me, *“if we can get information from him without giving him any in return, there aren’t any downsides to his proposal. Aside from your own feelings, that is. What do you think?”*

“.....”

The demon is politely telling me not to be selfish, and I know he’s right.

He doesn’t stop with me, either—he asks my neighbor, too.

“Hey, I’d like your opinion as well, if you don’t mind.”

“My opinion,” he says gently, “is that people are made up of both reason *and* emotion.”

“Mister...”

Ah, he’s being considerate of me. That fact seeps deep into my heart, warming my chest. I’m so happy.

I’m starting to feel hesitant about selfishly clinging to my emotions. Even if this was Abaddon’s aim, I don’t want to sully my dear neighbor’s thoughtfulness right in front of him.

I turn back to face the angel’s Disciple and begin again.

“All right. We’ll go with your idea.”

“Really? You’ll make good use of us, then?”

“Yes, but if you betray us, we’ll deal with you on the spot. That’s fine with you, right, Abaddon?”

“Of course!”

“Betray you? We’d never. We’ll deceive them for sure, you’ll see.” The

Disciple offers another ingratiating smile and a firm nod.

The angel with him bows slightly. Doesn't she have qualms about casting her lot in with demons? *No, wait.* Angels and demons both have to obey their Disciple's orders no matter what. It doesn't matter what she thinks—once her Disciple makes a decision, she can't complain.

Just then, I see something come over my neighbor as he's watching our exchange. As he stares at the angel's Disciple, he draws in a sudden breath, as if he just realized something. A moment later, he turns to us with an apologetic look on his face and hesitantly poses a question.

"...Would you mind if I said something?"



As I watched my neighbor talk things over with the Disciple boy, something dawned on me. I remembered the task the section chief had given us at the welcome party—the problem I'd planned to consult on with Peeps at Futarishizuka's villa. Yes, how to deal with the Kraken, still on its way to east Asia across the Philippine Sea like a young Japanese eel.

It was possible the person standing in front of me was the very savior we needed.

Making up my mind, I spoke up.

"...Would you mind if I said something?"

My neighbor and Abaddon immediately reacted; but it wasn't only them—everyone present turned to look at me.

"*What's up?*" asked Abaddon.

"What is it, mister?"

Unfortunately, this would be difficult to explain. The only other person here who knew of the Kraken's existence was Ms. Futarishizuka. I figured the others, embroiled as they were in a demons versus angels proxy war, would be somewhat amenable to believing crazy, unrealistic things. But what about a giant sea monster? After all, I wasn't in a position to give them any detailed information.

"I know this is sudden, but there's something I'd like to ask the angel and her Disciple to help me with."

"Already putting us to use as spies?" asked the Disciple.

"Not spies exactly, no," I told him. "More like a planetary defense force, I suppose."

“Uh, what?”

I knew I sounded crazy. The creatures of the otherworld were truly frightening in their diversity. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like you to come help exterminate a giant sea monster with us.”

“...Is this old man right in the head?” asked the Disciple, turning back to my neighbor and Abaddon, his face serious.

I didn’t blame him. If I were in his shoes, I’d have had the same doubts. At the Disciple’s frank question, Abaddon and my neighbor turned to me with confused expressions.

Ms. Futarishizuka, however, understood. “Oh. You want to use this isolated space thing to avoid people seeing, don’t you?”

“If we can manage it,” I told her, “I think we can get Peeps to help.”

“But will we be able to bring that monster inside one of these things?” she asked.

“I’m not sure—we’d have to discuss it with him. It’s just... Leaving aside what the boss told us, if worse does come to worst, we won’t be able to stay on the sidelines. If there’s anything we can do to prepare for what’s coming, I’d like to do it while we still have the chance.”

My magic wasn’t yet powerful enough to create a barrier as big as the Kraken. But with Peeps’s help, it was probably possible. He *was* the Lord Starsage, after all. In a worst-case scenario, we could travel to his homeland and ask them for help as well.

“I suppose if the beast makes landfall, it will be quite a bit more troublesome than a typhoon,” muttered Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Like you said, it all depends on where it decides to go,” I replied.

If the monster decided to turn right around and head for a different country, we’d have the option of just sitting back and observing. I didn’t have the passion or sense of duty to mold myself into some kind of superhero. But since the Kraken was a product of the otherworld, I couldn’t help feeling some responsibility. Peeps was probably the same.

“Um, mister, what do you mean, *giant sea monster*?”

“I’d prefer to leave a detailed explanation for a later date,” I told her.

“...Oh.”

“*I wonder if that means it has something to do with the two of you?*” ventured Abaddon.

“I’m very sorry, but I’m not at liberty to discuss the matter further.”

“*Oh, is that so?*”

We could talk it over until the cows came home, and even then I wasn't sure I'd be able to convince them. *I mean, I wouldn't believe me.*

"Seriously, is this guy okay?" the Disciple asked my neighbor again. "I'm starting to get some bad vibes."

"Would you please stop disrespecting him?" my neighbor replied.

"Well, I mean... He's kind of acting like a weirdo, right?"

I am, aren't I? I thought. *That's the correct reaction. Exactly how a young person should respond.* I'd grown desensitized by all the abnormal things that were happening around me lately.

Eventually, however, the Disciple appeared to give up. He turned back to look at me. "Well, I'm good with whatever. Not like we have much room to refuse, right?"

"If it's all right," I said, "could we trade contact information?"

"Would an email address work?"

"I'd prefer to have your phone number, if possible."

"....."

Once I had the boy's contact information, our business here was essentially over. I figured that if I put his number into my phone now, leaving the isolated space would erase it, so I said it several times to myself to make sure I remembered. As soon as we got back to reality, I'd call up the bureau and have them look into the kid's personal information. By the next day, I'd know where he lived and what his family makeup looked like.

My neighbor didn't have a phone, so I'd be acting as mediator between her and the other Disciple. It looked like I'd now be overseeing his spy activities in the proxy war, on top of everything else.

I told the angel and her Disciple I'd contact them the following day, and then we parted ways. Just as Abaddon had said, once the Disciple and my neighbor were far enough apart, the isolated space disappeared, and we returned to reality.

Now that we'd returned, we had to deal with the aftermath of the apartment blowing up. The flames were still licking at the sky as I produced my police badge and began responding to the situation.

Mr. Akutsu called me up as well, and I asked him to mobilize the other bureau members. As I worked, I continued to wonder whether someone with better eyes would be able to tell this had been caused by a bomb. I really didn't want my home being all over the news.

When speaking to my boss, I implied psychics had been involved and managed to secure full command over the site.

When the other bureau employees arrived in a helicopter, I asked them to write everything off as a gas explosion, just as I'd originally planned. In the meantime, the neighborhood was bustling as ambulances arrived with first responders and police officers.

As for my neighbor's mother, we received some bad news—as I'd assumed, she'd died immediately when the bomb went off. A man was also confirmed to have died in the same unit. I guessed he was her mother's boyfriend. The remains were reportedly in a terrible state, and it was going to take time to identify them properly.

Several other people in nearby apartments had been wounded, but they were the only two deceased.

While I was working on-site, I had my neighbor and Abaddon retreat to a nearby hotel and asked Ms. Futarishizuka to look after them. If that would-be spy boy had lied, it was possible more assassins could come out of the woodwork at any time.

I steeled myself for the work, but overseeing the cleanup at my ruined apartment proved quite emotional.

<Collaboration>

There was already a faint light in the sky when I finished dealing with the explosion at my apartment and returned to Ms. Futarishizuka's villa. The police officers and firefighters I'd left behind were probably still up to their necks in work. Personally, I'd have been willing to stick with them for the whole thing, if not for the early-morning meeting with my boss regarding Kraken countermeasures.

I escaped the scene by telling the others I had things to take care of at the bureau—this way, I could make time to consult with Peeps. I'd already explained how I wanted the explosion camouflaged, so I figured they could handle the rest on their own.

I tossed my bureau phone in Ms. Futarishizuka's car and parked in a lot near the apartment—that would serve as my alibi for the chief. From our hotel room, I prevailed upon my distinguished Java sparrow to bring us to Karuizawa with his magic. Finally, we arrived back at the villa where Lady Elsa was staying.

"I see," remarked Peeps. *"So that's what happened."*

"Sorry for taking so long to contact you," I apologized.

"Don't worry. I'm just glad you're all safe."

We all settled down on the sofas in the spacious living room. My neighbor and Abaddon were here as well. After the shocking events of the previous night, my neighbor no longer had a home, and I balked at plopping her down in a hotel and leaving her there. I also needed to secure Abaddon's and her cooperation with regards to the Kraken.

I wasn't sure whether I'd end up contacting a child consultation center or negotiating with the bureau on her behalf, but either way, she consented to staying with the rest of us for the next few days. She remained courageously cheerful throughout the conversation, a fact that almost moved me to tears.

Ms. Futarishizuka and I sat side by side on one couch across from my neighbor and Abaddon on the other. Peeps was on his perching tree on the low table in between. Given the early hour, I wasn't surprised that Lady Elsa was

nowhere in sight—she was probably fast asleep in her bedroom.

“*You seem quite busy,*” Peeps pointed out. “*Are you sure you have the time to be talking to me?*”

“Actually,” I said, “there was something I wanted to discuss with you specifically.”

“*What is it?*”

“It has to do with the Kraken—that monster we were discussing last night...”

With all eyes on me, I explained my idea to the sparrow. I’d already told him about the proxy war and isolated spaces the day before, so he quickly caught on to what I was thinking. Apparently, he’d been considering something similar. When I was done explaining, he offered a very optimistic response.

“*I see,*” he said. “*That you’ve gained the cooperation of a so-called Disciple is fortunate, indeed.*”

“What I’m concerned about is the Kraken’s size,” I explained. “Would you be able to cover the entire thing with your magic? I’m not confident I could manage it. Actually, I’m one hundred percent certain I can’t.”

“*Yes. At that size, I believe it should work.*”

Peeps’s reassuring answer made me hopeful at last. If the Lord Starsage himself said so, I figured our chances were pretty high. And if we could drag the creature into an isolated space, Peeps would be invincible. It wouldn’t matter how powerful his spells were—nobody would see, so he could fight the Kraken to his heart’s content.

Afterward, I would have my neighbor and the angel’s Disciple separate. According to Abaddon’s explanation, most deaths that occurred inside an isolated space were reflected in the real world. It would depend on how well Peeps did, but if everything went smoothly, the monster would appear to instantly vanish.

I’d have to think up some excuses for why it had happened. But the thing *had* appeared out of nowhere to begin with. I doubted its sudden disappearance would pose much of a problem. After all, if this job had fallen to us, that meant everyone else had already thrown in the towel. So if we independently fought the Kraken and dealt with it, we shouldn’t have to report the details to any third parties. Probably.

While the magical girls, assembled by a certain foreign nation, had used their Magical Beams and Magical Barriers, they hadn’t used any of their more specific Magical abilities. Why, then, should we have to reveal our hand? Dealing with all that would be up to Mr. Akutsu.

“Where is the creature now?” asked Peeps. “I heard it has moved quite far.”

“I’ll find out from my boss when we head to the office after this,” I told him.

“Then would you like to get a full night’s rest over there before you go?” he asked. “You’ve had very little respite since yesterday.”

“Over there” probably meant the otherworld. Compared to our first visit, the difference in time flow had decreased. But an hour here was still over ten hours there. That seemed like plenty of time to get a good night’s rest. I was struck by how kindhearted my pet sparrow was—he even deigned to consider the physical condition of his owner.

“I’d like that. Could I trouble you?”

“Yes, very well.”

With a small nod, Peeps flapped his wings and rose from his little tree to land on my shoulder. I then turned to my coworker to announce my plans. “Ms. Futarishizuka, I do apologize, but I’ll be—”

“You know, I did pull an all-nighter myself,” she interrupted, a very sincere look on her face.

She was right—she hadn’t slept since the previous day. And the night before that, we’d worked really late.

“And I didn’t get much sleep the night before, you know,” she continued.

“.....”

She looked at me with upturned eyes and a pathetic expression. She wasn’t able to travel to the otherworld like we could, so she had to be incredibly sleep-deprived. Her body might be ultra-tough, but she still suffered, and she still needed to sleep—at least, that was what her gaze was telling me.

The strain of keeping up with us world hoppers was really starting to hit her. And I didn’t need to be reminded of all the *other* times she’d been with us late into the night.

“Must I truly drive you all the way to the bureau and go to work in this state?”

“Um, well...”

“.....”

Her argument really tugged at my heartstrings, especially considering she looked like a little girl. Even Peeps, who was always so harsh with her, kept his mouth shut this time.

While we could cure hangovers with healing magic, we couldn’t do anything about a lack of sleep. We could alleviate the symptoms, like heavy limbs or tired eyes, but we couldn’t solve the root problem. It didn’t matter what we tried—when we got sleepy, we just had to accept it.

“I’m so tired,” she repeated. “I *really* want a good night’s sleep.”

“*What, then, would you have us do?*” asked Peeps.

“Couldn’t you please take me with you?” she pleaded.

“*Plot anything untoward, and the bruise on your hand will grow again.*”

“Then put a collar on me, or tie me to the bed, or whatever. I don’t care.”

“.....”

I empathized keenly with the pain of forcing yourself to go into work without much sleep. Depending on how things shook out, we might even have to stage our assault on the Kraken this very day. I doubted she would have to fight it directly, but work at the bureau was unpredictable. We needed her to be rested.

“Peeps,” I ventured, “if you’re willing to hear me out...”

“*What is it?*”

“I feel like, as long as she stays inside the inn, it’ll be no different than Lady Elsa’s situation here.”

“*Are you being serious?*”

“I know it sounds crazy, but... Maybe?”

I felt greatly indebted to her on account of everything she’d been doing for us—and naturally, I was rewarding her in proportion to the help she provided. In terms of our transactions, everything evened out. To be honest, I had the sneaking suspicion we were being taken advantage of somehow, and we simply hadn’t figured it out. Nevertheless, I didn’t think a little bit of sleep was too much for her to ask.

“...*Very well,*” said Peeps. “*If you wish it, I shall yield.*”

“Thanks so much, Peeps,” I said, feeling a bit selfish.

There was nothing worse than being up all night and still having to go to work in the morning. It hit too close to home—I couldn’t refuse her. My heart filled with gratitude at the Starsage’s benevolent understanding.

“*Just this once,*” the bird said to Ms. Futarishizuka, “*we will bring you with us.*”

“Wait, really?” she replied, shocked. The sparrow’s agreement had probably thrown her for a loop. She always complained about things on the off chance she’d get her way; in all likelihood, she’d simply decided to ask, knowing we’d say no. I knew this, but her appeal had really gotten to me this time.

“*However,*” continued Peeps, “*should you make any odd moves, I shall not wait for the curse to progress—I will pass judgment upon you immediately.*”

“All you have to do is throw me into a bed,” she assured him, as if to emphasize her utter exhaustion.

Meanwhile, the living room door opened with a *click*, and Lady Elsa came in from the hallway dressed in her pajamas. When she saw us in the room, she rubbed her eyes and said, “You’re all up very early. I believe the sun has only just risen.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Did we wake you?”

“I had to go to the bathroom. I heard you all talking, so I came to see what was happening.”

“Oh. I apologize for disrupting your rest.”

She paused, looking at my neighbor and Abaddon. “Did you just get back?” she asked.

Despite her youth, the girl was very perceptive. I found this insightfulness fitting of a noblewoman and Count Müller’s daughter. Knowing she’d see through any lies, I chose the honest route and nodded. “Work has been a little busy,” I explained.

“What is she saying?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“She wanted to know if we’d just gotten back,” I told her.

“Oh? Yes, that’s quite right,” she replied emphatically. “Our evil boss and colleague have been forcing us to do hard labor into the wee hours! And now that we’re finally home, we received a message calling us back to work. I fear I may faint straightaway if this continues.”

“*Did we not give you the promise of repose but moments ago?*” remarked Peeps.

“Um, Sasaki, what did Futarishizuka say?” asked Lady Elsa.

“She says she’s a little tired after working nonstop since yesterday,” I explained.

“Would you mind terribly conveying what I *actually* just said?” complained Ms. Futarishizuka, speaking in a very exaggerated manner, and using gestures and body language to try to get her point across. I guessed she was trying to draw Lady Elsa’s attention and concern. Peeps and I, as mediators, felt a little like we were under siege.

Lady Elsa watched her, seeming troubled. Her worried look concerned me.

A moment later, she hesitantly asked, “Is there anything I can do to help, Sasaki?”

“I know we’ve talked about this before,” I said, “but you’re our guest.”

“But you and Futarishizuka are working so hard while I do nothing but relax. I feel bad. I don’t know what sort of work you’re doing outside this mansion, but if there is anything at all I can help with, I’d very much like to try.”

“Come on,” urged Futarishizuka. “Translate for me.”

Maybe she was starting to feel that peculiar rush you sometimes get after pulling an all-nighter. All of a sudden, Ms. Futarishizuka seemed a lot closer—physically—to me. She ground her elbow into my side, which actually sort of hurt, and I wished she’d give it a rest. It was the sort of gesture that belonged in the realm of manga or anime.

My neighbor kept a close eye on our exchange. Considering she was still grieving, I felt kind of bad about all this. I needed to wrap up this conversation and get her someplace calmer.

“She says she feels bad that we’ve been so busy,” I explained. “She wants to help, if there’s anything she can do.”

“Ah, if only a certain sparrow were around to hear such a praiseworthy comment,” she remarked.

“I heard well what she said, thank you,” said Peeps.

“Sasaki, what did Futarishizuka say?” asked Lady Elsa.

“She’s waiting for your answer, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I said.

“I’m being paid rent, so there’s no need for her to do anything but relax. We may seem busy lately, but things should calm down soon. And then we’ll be able to take it easy just like her for a while.”

That was half an admonishment toward me. *Hey, I want to relax as much as you do,* I thought. She’d be better off saying that to Mr. Akutsu instead. *Of course, he works so much I have no idea when he sleeps, either.*

“She says that while we may seem slightly busy at the moment, things should settle down soon, and you don’t need to let it bother you,” I said to Lady Elsa, subtracting some of the sarcasm from Ms. Futarishizuka’s words. “I agree with her. Please spend this time relaxing.”

The young lady, ever pure and earnest, didn’t like that answer, though. “But then I’ll keep feeling guilty,” she insisted, refusing to give up.

I’m a little scared of what she’ll do if we let her be, I thought. *She’s already shown she can take drastic action, like when she hid in our luggage and hitched a ride to Japan.* “In that case,” I said, “I may have something to ask of you later. I can’t guarantee anything right now, but could I ask for your help when I’m ready? It would be something you could do here at the mansion, of course.”

“Really?” she asked, suspicious.

“Yes, I promise.”

“Then I’ll patiently wait for your request.”

“Thank you so much for understanding, Lady Elsa.”

Despite her stubbornness, she wasn't unreasonable, and she agreed to my suggestion without further objection. Peeps and Ms. Futarishizuka looked at me dubiously but didn't ask any questions. They probably understood that I'd only said it to convince her.



After Lady Elsa went back to her bedroom, we crossed from modern times into the otherworld as planned. Since we had so little time to spare, I had to really put the pedal to the metal, so to speak. First, we transported our goods into the Lunge warehouse and transferred them to Mr. Joseph, leaving verification and payment for a later date.

Next, we paid a visit to Count Müller, with whom we watched Lady Elsa's video letter and recorded a reply. Then we went to the Baytrium branch of the Marc Trading Company and deposited about the same amount of funds as last time to be spent on my territory's development.

Finally, we headed back to Japan to bring Ms. Futarishizuka into the otherworld. The Karuizawa villa winked out, and when our vision returned, we were in our luxurious Baytrium inn—the same room we'd been using since our first visit.

"Well, you two sure know how to live it up," remarked Ms. Futarishizuka upon arriving and taking a look around.

She was right. This room and my apartment back home were like night and day. The suite was spacious, and all its fixtures and furnishings were of the highest quality. You could even ring a bell to summon a private maid. Ever since I began living here, I'd bid farewell to cooking and cleaning.

"Well, compared to our world," I said, "this one's systems are a little more lax."

"Oh, you naughty man."

"What? Just so you're aware, I'm fairly certain I haven't broken any local rules."

"But you've been having the time of your life, I'm sure—bending the rules, and all that."

"Nothing of the sort."

Ms. Futarishizuka went over to the window, grabbed the curtain, and flung it aside, letting sunlight stream into the room. It had been daybreak in Japan, but here it was around noon. In the distance, beyond the land used by the inn, you

could see the townscape—a scene that didn't bear the slightest resemblance to our own world. I'd witnessed it plenty myself, and it was still striking.

"What *is* this?" breathed Ms. Futarishizuka. "It's like I'm inside one of those videos with god-tier graphics and ray tracing or something."

"I had a similar thought the first time I came here," I told her.

"Well, I'm glad I lived long enough to see this."

Coming from her, that sentence held a lot of weight. *How old is she anyway?*

"Since I've come all this way," she said, "I'd like to take a quick constitutional."

"*What happened to that exhaustion you complained so much about?*" remarked Peeps.

"Oh, how am I supposed to just lie down and sleep after seeing all this?" she complained.

I sympathized with her, but unfortunately, we didn't have that kind of time at the moment. Not to mention, we'd brought her along on the condition that she wouldn't leave the inn.

"Our schedule is a little too tight for that," I told her. "Carry that energy forward and use it to fall asleep."

"What? That doesn't even make sense."

"*Yours is the door near the entrance,*" said the sparrow. "*Go get some sleep.*"

Chased out of the room, Ms. Futarishizuka disappeared into the hallway. I thought she'd be a little more insistent, but she agreed without much objection.

Her absence only lasted a few moments, however. Soon, we heard the clapping of her geta heading right back into the living room. She stood there in the entryway, looking like she had something to say.

The maid prepared the room, didn't she? "What's wrong?" I asked. "I thought all the bedding was ready for you."

"I can't get out through the window," she explained sullenly. "There's some sort of invisible wall blocking me."

"*What did you expect?*" asked Peeps. "*We cannot let you do whatever you wish.*"

"Grrrr..."

Peeps was using barrier magic to seal off all the exits to the suite—it was impossible for her to get out. It was critical that we maintain our business venture between the two worlds so that we could make that carefree life we'd envisioned a reality. We couldn't let anyone get in our way, not even Ms. Futarishizuka. This was a line we couldn't let anyone cross.

We simply wished to retire. Though perhaps, in the end, our efforts had resulted in even more work.

“Go to sleep,” the bird said to her. *“Now.”*

“Fine, fine. I’ll do as you say, I suppose.” She turned to me. “Oh, but would you like to join me?”

“We have a separate room,” I explained.

“So cold,” she said, turning around and disappearing back down the hallway.

We waited a little while, but she didn’t reappear. The guest room had been hastily arranged. It was normally used by the maid while she waited for requests. When we inquired about having a guest over, she specially rearranged the room just for the occasion. I was beyond grateful for her flexibility. As for the maid, we had her wait in a different room, lest Ms. Futarishizuka start bothering her.

“You should sleep as well,” Peeps said to me. *“I will keep watch over her.”*

“Huh? Are you sure?” I asked.

“You’ve been carrying the lion’s share of the burden as of late, both here and over there. Please let me handle things this time. I feel frustrated that this is the only thing I can do to help.”

“Maybe, but once we get back, I’ll be asking you for all sorts of things.”

“That will not be a problem. I have been quite bored in that one’s mansion. I am more than ready to act.”

“Okay, well, if you’re sure.”

“I am. You may leave this to me,” he said with a firm nod, fluttering off my shoulder and perching on the tree set atop the low table.

He hasn’t had anything to drink, I thought, so I suppose it’s safe to take him up on the offer.

With that decided, the sparrow came out with a very rational, very impressive, very Peeps-like proposition. *“In fact, I could put her to sleep with magic,”* he offered. *“It wouldn’t do for either of you to let a lack of sleep get in the way of your job over there.”*

“Oh, um,” I said. “If you could do it without alerting her, that would be great.”

“Understood.”

After agreeing to his suggestion, I headed for my own bedroom. Compared to Lady Elsa’s first visit to Japan, Ms. Futarishizuka’s trip to the otherworld was looking to be uneventful. Relieved, I went to lie down in peace.



After catching a few winks in the otherworld, we returned to modern times as originally planned. About an hour had gone by in Japan, placing our arrival exactly where Peeps had predicted. Nothing had gone wrong in the otherworld, either; Ms. Futarishizuka remained obedient, and we simply left upon waking up—no fantasy world sightseeing for us.

Then, once again prevailing upon the Java sparrow's magic, we returned to the hotel room near my apartment. I planned to use this location as a temporary base of operations in lieu of my now-exploded apartment building, so I'd put in a reservation for a month's stay.

The adjoining room was occupied by my neighbor and Abaddon; I'd sent them back before heading to the otherworld. They agreed to stay and rest while Futarishizuka and I met with our boss.

Leaving Peeps behind in the hotel room, I hopped into Ms. Futarishizuka's car and headed for our bright and early meeting with the section chief, just as promised. The trip there was uneventful, and the driver—perhaps on cloud nine after scoring a visit to the otherworld—was unusually talkative. The time went by in a flash. Thanks to Peeps's magic, she seemed to have gotten plenty of sleep, so her driving was impeccable.

We headed into our office at the bureau and made our way to the meeting space, where Section Chief Akutsu and Miss Hoshizaki were already present. There, we took up the same positions around the table as usual, with the chief on one side and the three of us on the other—Futarishizuka and Hoshizaki on either side of me. The chief had a laptop open in front of him hooked up to an external display.

"Jumping straight in," Mr. Akutsu said as soon as we sat down, "I have some important news." He looked at all three of us in turn.

"Have we figured out where the Kraken is going?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Yes, that's exactly it." He used his laptop to bring up a map on the display.

The image was zoomed in further than last time and showed the Japanese archipelago and the Philippine Sea. Right in the center of it, heading from east to west, was the same line connecting several dots, like those charts showing the predicted path of a typhoon.

The Kraken had initially been advancing toward the Philippines, but just as we'd feared, it was now traveling north along the Kuroshio Current from the Pacific Ocean toward the East China Sea. At this rate, it could make landfall in Japan at any time. In fact, it was already dangerously close to Ishigaki Island.

"Oh," said Ms. Futarishizuka. "That's well within Japan's exclusive economic

zone.”

“It could make landfall anywhere along the nation’s Pacific coast,” the chief explained. “The most likely route leads toward the Sanriku Coast in Iwate Prefecture, at the junction between the Kuroshio Current and the Oyashio Current. Based on statistical analysis of garbage and other jetsam, the higher-ups have determined several points with high probability.”

The chief pressed some buttons, and a handful of marks appeared over the Japanese mainland. The marks were made to look like tiny cartoon versions of the Kraken. *Hey, those are actually kind of cute*, I thought. These icons appeared one after another, first on the coast of Iwate Prefecture, then Tanegashima in Kagoshima, Aichi’s Mikawa Bay, the coast of Ibaraki, and so on.

“Do they truly intend to keep watch over all those areas?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The SDF will be traveling north along with the Kraken, preparing for its arrival,” replied the chief.

“That sounds like quite the affair,” she said. “The travel expenses alone will be monumental.”

“Any chance it’ll head back out into the ocean?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“It’s certainly possible, but the higher-ups are operating under the assumption that it will make landfall in Japan. The bureau has received an official request for support, so we’ll be cooperating with forces on-site.”

Red lines appeared between the icons on the map showing major roads, railroads, and sky routes. *That must be how they’ll get around*. A label reading COMPLETE was displayed near part of Kyushu. The SDF must have already gotten there. The reality of this giant sea monster attack was finally starting to sink in.

After that, we asked the chief several questions, until eventually he turned back around to face me.

“So, Sasaki,” he said, staring straight at me with a very serious expression, “to continue our conversation from yesterday... What do you think?”

“Right. Well...”

I was determined now, and I’d already promised Peeps. But the thought of just nodding and telling him I had a plan irritated me. I decided I might as well show off a little. After all, it was rare for Mr. Akutsu to go to this much trouble, like with the previous night’s party. *What’s wrong with lording it over him a little, huh?*

“May I have a little more time to prepare?” I asked.

“How much time?” he said.

“I should be ready within the day.”

“Before sunset?”

“That’s the plan, sir.”

Depending on how it shook out, I could see this coming down to the wire. The chief probably knew that, and he kept his comments brief, a troubled look on his face.

It seemed this was his only choice, though, and he accepted my terms without complaint.

“You said you wanted to contribute to this nation as a member of the bureau,” he told me. “I will trust those words.”

“I understand perfectly, sir.”

The man was probably up to his eyeballs in complaints and instructions from the higher-ups. The way he’d slyly reminded me of our little deal just now made me wonder if his future advancement, too, was riding on our success.



Once our meeting with the chief was finished, I got straight to work on my plans to take on the Kraken. First, I had to join up with the Disciple who had promised his cooperation the night before. With Ms. Futarishizuka in tow, I practically ran out of the bureau. We headed for our destination in her car. We already knew the Disciple’s identity, so we relied on the car’s navigation system for directions.

Unfortunately, he had been lying; the phone number he gave us in the isolated space was a fake. I attempted to contact him as soon as the space dissipated only to hear an automated voice declare that the number was not currently in service.

When that didn’t work, we had bureau members check all the neighborhood camera feeds under the guise of investigating the explosion. We spotted the boy shopping at a nearby convenience store and were able to verify him using Ms. Futarishizuka’s sketch.

Fortunately, he paid electronically. Using that info, the relevant department was able to get his personal information. From there, they speedily obtained his address, contact info, the name of his school, and even his family composition.

“All right, we’re here,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, parking the car on the shoulder.

“Thank you,” I replied, looking out the window. I could see the front gates of the high school facing out toward the road. Classes seemed to be in session; it wasn’t lively enough to be break time. I could hear students’ voices from the

grounds—they were probably in the middle of gym class. The noise echoed in between the school buildings.

“Do you intend to waltz right in, grab him by the scruff of his neck, and bring him back out?” she asked.

“That’s my plan. I’ve already informed the school.”

“And I’m to mind the car, hmm?”

“No, actually. You can come with me this time.”

“They won’t look down on me because of my appearance?”

“I called in some support—partly to prevent that from happening.”

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

She and I were the only ones in the car; Miss Hoshizaki was acting separately and was on her way to Atsugi Base on the chief’s instructions. Apparently, she was to link up with our SDF contact there—as well as the other bureau members—to prepare for the operation that night. She was already familiar with the SDF personnel due to our field investigation the other day, and Mr. Akutsu had asked her to mediate between the SDF and the bureau. This was probably out of consideration for me and Ms. Futarishizuka, who tended to keep everything we were doing a secret.

In the meantime, I caught sight of someone approaching the side of the car. I rolled down the passenger seat window, and they immediately called out to me.

“Excuse me, but would you happen to be Chief Inspector Sasaki?”

“Yes, that’s me. Thank you for your help today, sir.” I took out my police badge and showed it to the man standing on the road—a sharply dressed patrol officer.

In order to secure the Disciple, I’d used my authority as a bureau employee to borrow some personnel from a nearby police department. The middle-aged, well-built man wore a navy police uniform and saluted us when he saw my badge.

Behind him were more uniformed police officers—enough to fill several patrol cars.

“This is a rather nasty method to use on a poor, helpless boy,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“He could really screw things up if he bailed on us at the last moment,” I explained. “So I made an exception.”

I thought maybe the kid would straighten out if we surrounded him with this many officers—or, at least, stop thinking about running away from us. It’d be great if he would apply himself to his spy activities in the proxy war. Plus, I

thought he might serve to contain and intercept the other angels and their Disciples. *I'm thinking about my neighbor's safety, here— You can't blame me for getting a little rough.*

“Aren't you worried the boss will find out about all this?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“We've used the bureau to collect information on Disciples before,” I pointed out. “He probably already knows about the game. Given his position, even if he doesn't, he'll find out sooner or later.”

“I suppose you're right.”

Now wasn't the time to hold back—it was vital that we fully prepare ourselves as quickly as possible.

As we discussed the matter, the two of us climbed out of the car. And then, along with our band of police officers, we headed into the school.

We'd contacted a representative in advance through the police. Once we announced our arrival at the front desk, we were shuffled quickly into a reception room. Our pretext was that we were investigating the apartment bombing the day before, so all the teachers around us were very tense.

The principal and the Disciple were already in the room; they sat side by side on one of a pair of sofas near the center. The young man had his legs together and his spine straight, clearly nervous. He was probably had no idea why he'd been called here.

I didn't see the angel, but perhaps she was there and I simply couldn't see her. We entered the room and boldly strode inside. The bevy of police officers filed in after us.

“...Are you serious?” groaned the young man as he saw us entering the reception room.

I had the officers position themselves around the perimeter as a deterrent. All of them wore stern, forbidding expressions, and just as we'd arranged beforehand, they stood along the walls, surrounding the sofa set. I'd asked the department for the most intimidating people they had, and they'd certainly delivered on that front. Even *my* heart was beating a little faster at how huge and scary they all were.

Naturally, it made a big impression on the teenage boy.

After exchanging greetings with the principal, I turned to the Disciple and got straight to the point. “Mr. Himegami,” I declared, “you are suspected of being involved in yesterday's apartment explosion.”

“.....”

I remained standing for this exchange, looking down at him the whole time. I focused on making my tone several degrees harsher than usual. *This really doesn't suit me*, I thought, but right now I needed to prioritize putting pressure on the kid.

“As reported in the news, two people, including a resident of the apartment, were pronounced dead last night. Many others were declared wounded and taken to the hospital. In addition, the resulting fire caused no small amount of property damage to nearby homes.”

“Sir, what do you mean I’m a suspect?” he asked. “I’m pretty sure I was somewhere else yesterday.”

“We got your name, Mr. Himegami, from the suspected perpetrator.”

“What do you mean *perpetrator*? D-didn’t they say it was a g-gas explosion on the news?”

“Publicly, yes. However, we are actively investigating other possibilities.”

“Urk... Th-then I must have been framed, right? I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Yes, that’s exactly what’s happening.

With my neighbor’s and Abaddon’s help, we’d arrested the person we believed delivered the bomb the night before. Around the time the isolated space appeared, the two of them were already on his trail, so we caught him as soon as the space dissipated.

According to him, he didn’t know much about the people who hired him, much less the existence of angels and demons. Some elaborate string-pulling had been involved, it seemed, and the man hadn’t even realized what he was carrying. The methodology was a lot like how drugs were sold on the streets. His testimony was conveyed to me by the one in charge of questioning him at the bureau.

But while I couldn’t speak for the other detectives involved, *we*, at least, were total fakes. I hadn’t the slightest intention of performing an official investigation. In fact, I doubted there would even be a respectable trial. I’d do whatever it took, including framing him, so long as it got the kid in our custody posthaste.

“I hear it’s your eighteenth birthday next month,” I said.

“Yes, sir. So what?”

“Considering the damages and the subsequent effect on society brought about by yesterday’s incident, it’s highly likely your treatment will be *very* severe. Though it will depend on what role you played, it’s possible the prosecution will demand capital punishment.”

“Hgh...”

I doubted anyone in the police force would ever say such a thing so overtly. The principal looked shocked. But our priority now was to make an impression on the kid, so I was choosing the most intimidating phrasing I could think of. Essentially, I wanted him to believe that if he picked a fight with us, it'd be game over for him with or without the proxy war.

“I-it wasn't me!” he cried. “I haven't done anything wrong!”

“It's our job to verify that.”

Oh, this is bad, I thought. *Misusing state authority and throwing my weight around feels really good*. This was the kind of thing that could ruin people who overdid it. No, it was *certain* to ruin them. Was there a single person on this earth who could live their whole life honestly? Saint or no, everyone falls to the dark side in the end, if you ask me.

“Um, then, what the hell do you want from me...?”

Apparently, he was nearing his limit; his tone was growing desperate. I, the big mean adult in the room, immediately interrupted him, saying, “Mr. Himegami, would you please come with us?”

“...Yes, sir.” The boy nodded, resigned.

It looked like we'd be bringing the angel's Disciple back with us, just as planned.



With the Disciple in tow, we plotted a course straight for the SDF's Atsugi Base. To get there, we once again took Ms. Futarishizuka's car. We'd dismissed the police officers I asked to help us back at the school.

The angel girl who acted as the Disciple's partner showed herself once the police were gone, as we were climbing into the car. Just like with Abaddon, she protected her Disciple while keeping herself hidden around others. She valiantly tried to prevent us from taking the boy, but Ms. Futarishizuka intercepted—a touch of her psychic power, and the angel's energy was drained. We now had her in the car as well.

“Are you okay, Eriel?” asked her Disciple. “You look like you're in a lot of pain.”

“I'm sorry for not being able to help.”

“I mean, it's fine. But...”

Ms. Futarishizuka was in the driver's seat, with me riding shotgun and the

Disciple and his angel in the back. The angel sat there, limp, her back up against the seat. The boy was acting very concerned about her. As her Disciple kept saying, Eriel appeared to be pretty weak for an angel.

“Hey, old dude,” the boy said to me. “Are you guys even real police?”

“Yes, we are,” I replied.

“How is that even fair?”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t allying yourself with the demons an abuse of authority? I bet you’d be in trouble if people knew. I could put you all over social media and get you canceled. Even you wouldn’t slip out of that unharmed.”

“It’s likely something would happen to *you* before that, so you might want to stop right there.”

Seriously, come on now. I doubted the section chief would have any mercy regardless of how young the kid was. He put Miss Hoshizaki through the wringer at work with no regard to her age.

“...Are you threatening me?” he asked.

“As the proxy war develops,” I explained, “people in influential positions are bound to use it to their advantage. I know you’re recording our conversation right now, but *you’ll* be the one in danger if it gets out. Not us.”

That’s right, I’ve long since noticed you fiddling with that concealed smartphone. He probably thought it wasn’t visible from the front seats.

“You can’t even get a signal from a cell tower, can you?” taunted Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Huh? Ah...” The boy’s expression changed; I saw his eyes widen through the rearview mirror. A moment later, he glanced out through the car window. He seemed shocked as his eyes began darting between the scenery outside and the phone in his hands. I could tell he was baffled over why he couldn’t get service in the middle of a city.

“I thought you might try something like this,” said the girl at the wheel, “so I installed a cell phone jammer in the car!”

“You’re really into that high-tech stuff, huh?” I commented. In the past, she’d tried to use a specialized microphone and thermal imaging camera to spy on Peeps and me. That had ended in failure, but this time, her hobbies were really coming in handy.

“Actually, it was to keep our boss from contacting us,” she told me.

“I thought as much.”

Out of options, the boy quieted down, still holding his smartphone. He didn’t

speak anymore after that—he just sat there in a daze.

“Wanna listen to some music?” offered Ms. Futarishizuka. “There’s a hot tune I’ve been especially fond of lately.”

“Can I take a rain check?” I replied.

She continued to interject, demanding attention, and we passed the rest of the drive as I tried to keep up.

We arrived at our destination in a little under an hour. The base had already been informed of our arrival, and once I flashed my police badge, we were allowed through the front gates. We then headed for the Fleet Air Wing 4 office building, where we came on our last visit.

I got out of the car in front of the building and made my way inside. A familiar face was there to greet me.

“Thank you for coming all the way here, Mr. Sasaki,” said Miss Inukai of the JMSDF. This was the woman who had served as our guide while we conducted our investigation of the Kraken the other day.

“Thank you for coming out to meet us,” I replied.

The woman was an ensign and appeared to be in her midtwenties. Her short black hair had a nice sheen to it, and her sharp uniform suited her well.

“That took you a while. What were you and Futarishizuka doing anyway?”

Next to Miss Inukai was Miss Hoshizaki. Dressed in her usual suit, she had her arms folded as she glared at me—classic Miss Hoshizaki. She looked every bit as gallant and mature as the ensign standing beside her. And yet she was still a high school student. Modern makeup technology was truly impressive.

“My apologies for the delay, Miss Hoshizaki. Preparations took a bit longer than expected.”

“Preparations? And where’s your companion?”

“She had a separate task to attend to, so I sent her on her way,” I explained.

“Mind being a little more specific? I *am* your partner, here.”

“It’s really nothing special. I simply asked her to transport our collaborators.”

“...Collaborators?”

As I just described, I’d parted ways with Ms. Futarishizuka in front of the office building. She was in charge of moving the angel and her Disciple. Though word would get out eventually, for the moment, I wanted to avoid exposing anything unnecessary—including the existence of demons. We were already surrounded by the ridiculous, with psychic powers at the head of the list. Even just explaining things felt like more trouble than it was worth.

Instead, I’d entrusted the two of them entirely to Ms. Futarishizuka. From here

on, we'd be acting separately, leaving me to work with Miss Hoshizaki. Additionally, I'd be the one handling my neighbor and Abaddon. Splitting up our responsibilities this way would prevent any isolated spaces from appearing by accident.

It was possible one might form unintentionally as we moved around, but I couldn't do much about that except pray.

Miss Hoshizaki looked at me, dissatisfied. But just as I was worrying over how to answer her, Miss Inukai issued an instruction.

"I do apologize," she said, "but I've been told to show Mr. Sasaki in immediately."

"Understood, ma'am," I replied. "I appreciate your leading the way."

Apparently, they were quite busy—this worked in my favor, though, so I nodded and let her show me in.

We soon arrived at the reception room we used last time. As the ensign had suggested, I saw an SDF member there as well—another familiar face. It was Captain Yoshikawa.

As soon as I stepped into the room, he gestured to the sofa across from him. "I apologize for the rush," he explained, "but we don't have much time. I need to speak with you immediately."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, taking up a position across from him over the low table. Miss Hoshizaki immediately sat down beside me, while the captain's subordinate moved to stand behind him.

"Akutsu sent a request yesterday asking us to work with you," said the captain.

"Thank you for responding so quickly," I answered.

"We do, however, have our own tasks to attend to, so I can't babysit you for very long. I've heard pieces of what's going on, but we have our own way of doing things—a way that seems far more reliable than working with all of you."

"I see, sir."

From the way he spoke, I could tell that Mr. Yoshikawa—who was likely in a pretty important position within his organization—was being jerked around by his superiors. That spoke all the more to how pressing and tense the situation had become. I wondered who would end up shouldering the blame if our plan failed.

"But you were a big help to us the other day," he went on. "And I'd like to repay that debt, if possible."

"I don't plan on asking too much of you, sir," I assured him.

"Let me hear the details, then."

“We’d like you to lend us some of your time once AO4 has gotten closer to land.” If we caused an isolated space to occur, we’d only need an instant, really. After all, whatever time passed in those spaces got rolled back once we left. “If you give us approximately one minute, just before you make your final attack, I’ll be able to judge whether we can deal with the creature.”

“One minute?” he repeated. “You mean you want one minute to elapse after it closes in on us?”

“No, sir. In fact, we only need it to be visible from the shoreline. I understand time is of the essence, but while we’re working, could you refrain from approaching AO4 for any reason?”

“I think we can be flexible enough to give you a minute.”

Knowing I’d have Peeps’s assistance gave me the confidence to negotiate. We shouldn’t have any problems reaching the creature, either, since so many of us could fly. And as long as we were in an isolated space, no one would see us. That was fortunate, because even walking around with Peeps in a cage would be too risky under the SDF’s watchful eye.

“Thank you so much for your understanding, Mr. Yoshikawa.”

“I won’t ask what it is you all plan to do,” he told me. “But will it really be any more effective than the attack we conducted last night? Depending on the situation, even a single minute could be extremely valuable.”

“Forgive me for being rude, but I could ask you the very same question.”

The captain paused. “...I suppose you’re right.”

I was *really* curious about how Mr. Yoshikawa and the rest of the SDF were planning on dealing with the creature. How would the soldiers confront a giant monster like that? I wouldn’t have another chance to watch their strategy unfold from the front lines. But Mr. Akutsu had asked us to deal with this before anyone else had the chance.

“Speaking of last night, sir,” I said, “what can you tell me of its current condition?”

“Something invisible is covering AO4, blocking all heat, impact, and radiation. It appears to be working against the nuclear fallout as well, and radiation is currently low. Which is lucky, because otherwise we’d have a disaster on our hands when it made landfall.”

Peeps had explained that the Kraken could use magic. *This one’s probably using a barrier spell*, I thought, though I was surprised it could block even radiation.

“Still,” the captain continued, “you should probably avoid coming into direct

contact with it.”

“I understand, sir,” I said. “I’ll do my best not to.”

If a group of elite creatures from the otherworld with powerful magic decided to make their way here all at once, I got the feeling they’d have a real shot at taking over the world by force. When I thought about it like that, Peeps’s own existence was a rather serious threat to modern society.

“Sasaki, is this about that plan you and Futarishizuka came up with?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“Essentially, yes,” I responded.

Even she was asking me questions now. It was true I hadn’t explained any of what was going on to her. Mr. Akutsu was covering for me, so the rest of my colleagues still saw me as a normal psychic, and Miss Hoshizaki was no exception. She probably had questions about Lady Elsa and my neighbor, but she didn’t know anything about the otherworld. I was hesitant to volunteer the information, and that had led us to the current situation.

“I’m a little concerned,” she said. “I haven’t been contacted at all.”

“I didn’t want to bother you with it.”

That was what worried me. What on earth was I supposed to do about her? I was still her bottomless water bottle, as far as the bureau was concerned.

“If you can’t tell me now, you can explain later,” she told me.

“...All right, I will.”

I couldn’t exactly refuse—not in front of Mr. Yoshikawa—so I agreed. I supposed I could potentially contact the chief in secret and have him put her on a different job. She would definitely find out about that, however. I’d used the same trick already when she found Lady Elsa and my neighbor in that hotel room. Out of consideration for my future as a public servant, I really wanted to stay on her good side.

Just then, we heard someone running down the hallway, followed by a knock at the door. Mr. Yoshikawa barked “Enter,” and the door opened to reveal another member of the SDF. Based on his uniform, the man was an officer. He hesitated for a moment after seeing us in the room, but when his boss made a gesture for him to go ahead, he began his report in a loud voice.

“Captain Yoshikawa, sir, we’ve detected a change in AO4’s course.”

“Where’s it headed?” asked the captain.

“It’s moving toward the coastline of Mie Prefecture; we expect it to continue toward Hamamatsu, Suruga Bay, or Sagami Bay.”

The seaborne octodragon’s landfall now seemed imminent.



Once word reached Atsugi Base, we moved out, boarding a JMSDF helicopter and heading straight for the coast. Ultimately, we arrived in the Shizuura district of Numazu City in Shizuoka. Although it bordered the Suruga Bay, this area was a ways back from the shore.

The Kraken had passed by the Kansai region not long after our departure from the base. Now it was advancing through the waters off Aichi Prefecture, inching ever closer to land and heading right toward Suruga Bay. We'd already moved a few times following its path.

If the creature entered the bay directly, it would be facing Tagonoura head-on; our current position was aimed at attacking its flank. Furthermore, Osezaki—a cape protruding into the bay—would serve as our cover. Partly due to this advantageous location, an SDF outpost had already been set up in the area.

Camouflage-patterned tents and armored vehicles were lined up on the road along the coastline. The west side of Suruga Bay consisted of several relatively populous coastal cities such as Shizuoka and Yaizu. That was going to make the evacuation of civilians extremely difficult—and should the Kraken attack, casualties would be high. The JGSDF had fanned out along the Izu Peninsula, planning to sweep in from the east. In addition, multiple missile boats were positioned in Sagami Bay on the other side of the peninsula.

“Well, isn't that a beautiful sunset?” commented Miss Hoshizaki.

“You're right,” I replied.

After alighting from the helicopter, we moved to a seawall constructed along the beach. We now stood on top of it, staring out at the sea. The water glittered in the western sun, making for a very pretty sight. It made me want to take a walk down to the water's edge—if only we weren't on the clock.

The beautiful scenery seemed to cleanse my soul—but that only lasted for a moment.

“It's been years since I looked out at the ocean like this,” said my senior. It was a strange comment for someone still enrolled in high school.

That was the kind of line you expected from a washed-up, world-weary office worker. And yet her youth was palpable, clipping at the edges of her words. It gave me the creepy-crawlies.

“Weren't you doing this same thing at Chichijima just the other day?” I asked.

“...Now that you mention it, you're right.”

Still, she must have had a few beachless years in her recent past. Wasn't that a

little sad, considering her age?

“You never go to the beach with friends or family?” I asked.

“I think the last time was when I was in elementary school.”

“Oh.”

I’d had an equally lonely youth. Having recently caught a few glimpses of Hoshizaki’s private life, I started to feel bad for bringing it up. It was great that she was gung ho about her job, but I didn’t think anyone would mind if she enjoyed high school life a little more. Wasn’t being a high school girl in Japan the best excuse in human history to go out and have fun?

“It would have made for a nice change of pace if it were a little quieter,” she remarked.

“Then how about coming here sometime in the future for a break?” I suggested.

“Oh, are you inviting me on a date?”

“No, I’d never...”

The SDF’s engagement with the Kraken in Suruga Bay had already begun. From time to time, the sound would travel across the water, and we’d hear thumps and bursts in the distance.

However, they didn’t seem to be throwing missiles or bombs at the creature to try to kill it. After it withstood a direct attack from a thermonuclear weapon, the SDF appeared to have come to the conclusion that conventional weapons would be meaningless against it.

Instead, they were simply trying to steer it away from the coast. Their attacks, which used mainly aircraft, were meant to harass the Kraken more than anything else. The strategy was to drive it off before it made landfall, hopefully sending it right back into the Pacific Ocean where it came from.

Miss Inukai, who had remained with us, was providing us intermittent updates on the operation’s status. As we gazed out over the bay, she hopped out of an armored vehicle parked on the road below and ran up to us.

“Mr. Sasaki, it appears our fighters have failed to divert the creature,” she said, her expression glum. She looked worse and worse every time she came to deliver a report.

Until just a little while ago, the two of us had been inside the armored vehicle ourselves, watching live video of the attack with Ms. Inukai providing commentary. *The fighter planes have just dropped such and such type of bomb; the missile boats are about to fire a volley of such and such missiles*—that sort of thing. Unfortunately, none of them had so much as scratched the Kraken; it

hadn't even seemed to notice. Unable to sit and watch any longer, I'd come out with Miss Hoshizaki to get a view of the sea.

"Failed?" I repeated. "In what way?"

"After using up all their ammunition, they returned to the base," the ensign explained.

"I see."

I assumed the fighters had been staying at a safe distance to conduct their diversion. The Kraken must have gauged how far away they were and decided no response was needed. A very intellectual judgment, in my opinion. This was no mere wild animal chasing around its prey based on instinct.

"It's not yet visible from here," I commented. "How far has it gotten?"

"The target has entered the bay and is now advancing in a straight line."

According to Mr. Yoshikawa, civilian evacuations were going very smoothly. It seemed all the training over the last fifty years for that eternally imminent Toukai earthquake was bearing fruit. The town near our location, too, was broadcasting a constant stream of disaster warnings, repeatedly urging the evacuation of areas along the coast. The pretext was the removal of unexploded ordinance.

The SDF had already taken control of the coastline, seizing nearby vantage points and tall buildings. The Kraken was massive, and it wasn't clear how much we'd be able to cover up, but the bureau was lending a hand, with Mr. Akutsu at the lead.

"By the way," continued Miss Inukai, "Captain Yoshikawa wants to know the status of your mission."

"Tell him it's proceeding as planned," I said.

"Understood."

Now that we knew for certain where the creature would make landfall, I contacted Peeps via the phone Ms. Futarishizuka had lent my neighbor. I sent a message to the associated email address and received a response a few minutes later. My neighbor was serving as our go-between, since the sparrow was still voluntarily restricting his own access to the internet. I sent him the latitude and longitude of our current position and received word that they'd move out immediately.

After that, Mr. Yoshikawa and the other SDF members arrived and explained their subsequent plans to us. As we were listening, I received another email from my neighbor, saying that they were waiting within eyeshot of the Kraken.

I was slightly worried that the SDF might spot them, but it seemed Abaddon

was doing a good job of avoiding the soldiers. According to my neighbor, he was able to turn them invisible temporarily.

Around the same time, my private phone began to vibrate; someone was calling me. The screen said it was Ms. Futarishizuka, so I apologized to Miss Inukai and picked up immediately. “Yes, this is Sasaki.”

“They’re not letting anyone else on the highways,” came the girl’s elderly drawl. She sounded thrilled. *“I can drive as fast as I want! It’s incredible!”*

“I’m happy to hear it.”

Just as she said, the highways were all blockaded due to the emergency. The only people allowed on them were the SDF and a handful of exceptions, like us. What’s more, we’d been authorized to drive as fast as we wanted with blatant disregard for speed limits.

“No amount of money can buy an experience like this,” she went on. *“I don’t know how many years it’s been since I had this much fun on the road. I must say, it was a real stroke of luck that I transferred to the bureau. Of course, around the time I passed Nagoya, they told me I had to go back to Shizuoka. Rather deflating, indeed.”*

“The demon group is in position,” I explained, “so hurry back, please.”

“Will do. With my driving skills, I’ll be there in twenty minutes—no, ten!”

I could hear the Disciple’s voice in the background, pleading with her to drive a little slower. Based on the time she gave me, she’d probably already gotten off the highway and was zooming through local roads on her way here.

Once she’d given me the pertinent information, she quickly hung up. *I should probably put up a defensive barrier now,* I thought. I trusted Peeps could handle things if I missed the timing for the isolated space, but I didn’t really want to burden him like that.

“Miss Inukai,” I said, “I’d like to know your current plans.”

“At the suggestion of the local fishing union, we’re currently feeding the target,” she explained.

“Feeding it?” repeated Miss Hoshizaki. “That doesn’t sound very reassuring.”

I understood where she was coming from—in fact, I felt much the same way.

“Previous investigations have caught AO4 eating aquatic creatures,” replied the ensign.

“I guess it must need a whole lot of food to support that enormous body,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“As it was explained to me, we’re loading up boats with fish caught in the bay and sending them toward AO4 on autopilot. Each time, we stop the boats a little

farther out to sea to try to adjust its trajectory and divert its route.”

The fact that the government was taking advice from the local fishing union really showed how desperate they’d become. The creature had nullified every weapon they’d thrown at it, and the people in charge were probably at a total loss as to what to try next.

That said, my pet sparrow was from the otherworld, too. And given how enthralled he was with this world’s food, there was a possibility, however slim, that the Kraken would be drawn in by Suruga Bay’s impressive array of seafood and follow it away, smacking its lips over the fresh-caught ocean bounty.

“I see,” I said. “Your strategy is to lure it with a life-size sushi boat.”

“You’re really good at coming up with weird analogies, Sasaki,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki.

“...Was it that weird?” I figured any man my age would have drawn the same connection. I hadn’t had a chance to eat lunch today, so naturally I was hungry. We’d come all the way to the Numazu area, and I was hoping that if we wrapped things up nice and quick, I could get a fresh whitebait rice bowl or something. I bet a nice bowl with wasabi, soy sauce, and perilla leaves would be out of this world. Young fish fry caught fresh locally was just delicious, and didn’t have that fishy smell.

“But shouldn’t you have tried that first?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“I apologize, ma’am,” replied Miss Inukai, bowing in place of whoever was responsible. “This operation wasn’t part of our initial plans...”

Just then, as we were trading words atop the seawall, I saw something flying toward us from the sky. It was coming from farther inland, passing over the mountains. It was going fast, too—it remained a speck in the distance for only a moment before quickly resolving into a larger silhouette.

The silhouette of a person.

At the same time, the SDF soldiers began to raise a commotion. I heard voices discussing what I’d just seen—someone flying in the sky. Other soldiers rushed out of their armored vehicles and tents, immediately angling their guns up at the figure. *Well, that’s a terrifying sight*, I thought, frightened even though no weapons were pointed at me.

“Wait, Sasaki, is that—?”

“Yes. It seems the magical girl is here.”

It was easy to tell—her vivid-pink hair and clothes gave her away. She eventually came to a stop a few meters above us, her staff at the ready. “What are you doing here, magical middle-aged man?” she asked.

“I’m working, just like last time,” I explained. “But what are you doing here?”

“That big thing in the ocean is dangerous. I need to do something about it,” she replied, glancing offshore.

The rest of us turned to look in the same direction. And there it was: a long silhouette in the distance that definitely wasn’t a boat. We hadn’t been able to see it until just now. Apparently, the Kraken had already made its way deep into the bay. It seemed it was able to move very quickly; it was now in the final stage before making landfall.

And that meant it was time for us to act, just like we’d promised Mr. Yoshikawa.

“If we can see it from here, it must be pretty close,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Yes, I believe you’re right.”

The magical girl had fought the Kraken the other day, too. She’d come here because she knew exactly how big a threat it was. And once she’d reached the shore, she probably spotted the SDF and descended.

This sort of peacekeeping operation usually went hand in hand with psychics. A moment’s thought would have told her that where there were armored vehicles and tents all over the place, there were probably also psychics nearby.

“But I won’t let any psychics get away, either,” she said.

“Wait just a moment,” I said quickly. “This isn’t the time to be fighting one another.”

Her magical staff was pointed at Miss Hoshizaki. I quickly deployed my barrier spell around the two of us. The scariest thing about this magical girl was how she could literally blast us to bits at any moment. Lately, she and I had been slowly developing a modest rapport. Unfortunately, Miss Hoshizaki was definitely, beyond any doubt, a psychic. I wasn’t sure how much consideration I could convince her to show my partner.

“The one standing next to you is a psychic. Right?” she asked flatly.

“... You’re right. She’s a psychic,” I replied.

Just as she promised me before, she remembered to make sure her target was a psychic before doing anything. She seemed like an earnest girl at heart, willing to be polite and follow directions.

I glanced over at Miss Hoshizaki. Without me realizing, she’d pulled out her gun and aimed it right at the magical girl with no hesitation. Tension marred her face. She must be panicking—she knew her gun would have no effect against the girl’s Magical Barrier.

“Sasaki, give me water!” she demanded.

“I need you to calm down as well, Miss Hoshizaki. We need to focus on the Kraken right now.”

“But we can’t let our guard down when she’s waving that staff of hers at us!” she continued, inching away, probably aiming for the water past the seawall. Even now, she refused to let herself get pessimistic. Instead, she was preparing to fight the magical girl. The sight filled me with awe. She was like the protagonist of a shounen manga.

But just as things were getting dicey, the world around us changed. Instantly, all sound vanished.

Miss Inukai and the SDF soldiers that had been causing a commotion behind her all disappeared. Even the rows of armored vehicles and tents were gone. The distant roar of aircraft had been silenced, too.

The only sound we could hear was that of the waves breaking. And in the middle of it all were myself, the magical girl, and...

“H-hey, wait, what the hell’s going on...?!”

Oh god, what do I do now? I accidentally pulled Miss Hoshizaki into the isolated space.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

Following the instructions in the man next door’s email, we leave the hotel and fly through the air to Suruga Bay. According to him, an enormous creature called a Kraken is approaching Japan, and he wants to take advantage of the proxy war to deal with it. More specifically, he wants to make use of the death game’s main mechanism—isolated spaces. He’s already secured collaborators on the angels’ side and is now transporting them to the site.

“*How do you feel?*” asks Abaddon. “*Getting used to flying yet?*”

“It’s much harder to keep my balance than I imagined,” I say.

“*Well, it’d be no joke if you died and lost the game by crashing into a building. So be careful, okay?*”

“I think I’m pretty clear on that.”

Previously, Abaddon and I drove back the angelic forces with my neighbor’s help. Before we left, I finally claimed my reward and had the demon grant me the power to fly. I’d been deferring this prize ever since the day I stormed that luxury hotel.

I can fly on my own now—I don’t need anyone to carry me. This way, I’ll

never need to let another man to touch my body in front of *him* ever again.

“A world with its own rules, totally separate from everything I know. Utterly fascinating.”

“I could basically say the same about you, you know.”

My neighbor’s pet Java sparrow is hovering next to Abaddon and me. Seeing him frozen in the air like that, not even flapping his wings, is an awfully weird sight. Though compared to how he can understand human language and communicate with us, I suppose this isn’t that big of a deal.

Usually, he stays perched on the man’s shoulder. But my neighbor isn’t here right now, and the bird shows no signs of touching Abaddon or me. Maybe he’s just attached to his owner.

If he wanted to buy a pet, he could have taken me instead. I imagine myself wearing a collar, my neighbor leading me around with a leash. *Yeah, that sounds pretty nice.*

“Also, that thing is enormous!” Abaddon continues. *“The description we were given really didn’t do it justice.”*

“It is just as he said—a subspecies of dragon has strayed from the otherworld.”

It’s true. The three of us are now gazing at a strange, enormous creature as it writhes across the ocean’s surface. Lots of tentacles sprout from its cylindrical body. My neighbor was right—it’s like an octopus and a dragon fused together.

Aircraft, probably belonging to the SDF, are endlessly flitting around nearby. They’d have detected us if not for Abaddon using his powers to fool them, the same way he did at the hotel. As long as none of us actively interfere with them, neither the Kraken nor the SDF will ever know we’re here.

“As he instructed,” says the bird, *“I shall create a barrier around the target.”*

“The SDF is still attacking it. Does that matter?” I point out.

“What I am about to attempt is not much different from what the creature is already doing to defend itself. They will not be able to tell the difference without a detailed investigation, and as things stand, I do not believe they will get close enough to do so.”

“In that case, if we leave it alone, it should enter the isolated space on its own.”

“If we leave things up to the creature, I cannot predict when it will disengage its barrier. If we want to be certain, it is best that I handle things. I believe he thinks so as well, which is why he has instructed me to do this.”

“...I see.”

The way the bird speaks, as if he and his owner share some bond of understanding, irritates me. I know far more about my neighbor than he does. What is this sparrow's relationship with him anyway? A pet? That seems unhealthy. In my opinion, people can only make up for what they lack by being with other *people*.

“.....”

No. It's time for me to stop beating around the bush. I'm jealous. I'm so jealous of this talking bird I can barely think straight. I've known my neighbor for years, and yet he's never invited me into his room. And now, just because this stupid bird was put up for sale at a pet shop, he gets to be in my neighbor's room and go everywhere with him.

I wish I could have been sold in that pet shop for him to buy. I wish he would have purchased me instead.

“I'm detecting a hint of something concerning in your eyes when you look at that bird. What's the deal?”

“You must be imagining things, Abaddon.”

The SDF aircraft, now in formation, fire missile after missile. These projectiles fly in a precise path toward the Kraken and collide with their target, one after another. We hear a series of booms as they explode.

At the same time, a magic circle emerges just below the sparrow's feet. A moment later, a light flashes around the Kraken. But I can't make out very much of what's happening, since the explosions and smoke from the missiles obscure my view of the creature. I'm guessing it's a change brought on by the barrier spell. He must have timed it in order to use the SDF's attacks as a smokescreen.

“Excellent,” says the bird. *“Now we need only wait for the others to arrive.”*

For some time, the aircraft fly around just out of range of the Kraken's tentacles and pump missiles into its body, trying to draw its attention. Unfortunately, the creature doesn't respond at all to the diversions, instead continuing its slow approach toward land. *I guess the SDF's plan isn't going so well.*

A little while later, the aircraft withdraw. Then, as if replacing them, several boats appear on the water and head straight for the creature. They're totally normal fishing boats; I can't even see any weapons on them.

And for whatever reason, the boats are piled high with as much seafood as they can hold. They're too far away for me to be sure, but it looks like all the fish, which would normally be stored below deck, have been piled high up top.

“Are they trying to feed the thing or something?” asks Abaddon.

“That doesn’t seem like a good plan right after shooting it with missiles.”

After leaving the harbor, the fishing boats move past the Kraken and head out into the sea. In response, the giant creature slows its advance somewhat and stares at the vessels floating toward it. Its tentacles begin to undulate. Apparently, the fish-laden boats have drawn its interest.

“I suppose I should let those pass...,” the bird murmurs to himself as he watches all this take place. *He’s probably adjusting his barrier spell.*

Eventually, the Kraken’s tentacles reach for the boats. One coils around the lead vessel, easily lifting it from the water’s surface. The creature skillfully carries the boat to its mouth and pours all the seafood inside like a human might drink a glass of water.

With the boat now empty, the creature tosses it back into the water and begins chewing the fish in its mouth.

“Well, well! Our friend certainly seems to be enjoying the meal,” remarks Abaddon.

“...You think so?” I reply. I often find it hard to understand what’s going through Abaddon’s head.

The sparrow, for his part, seems busy with his barrier spell. Another magic circle appears at his feet as he focuses on the fishing boats making their way out toward the open sea. He seems to be responding to the Kraken’s movements, but I don’t notice any changes down on the water’s surface.

“Is it all right to open holes in the barrier?” I ask.

“No, it is not,” he replies. *“Instead, I’m creating a second barrier on the outside that will include the ships approaching the target. I then shrink that barrier’s scope as they approach, and when the ships are close enough, I disengage the interior barrier. If I keep that up, the Kraken will always be fully inside at least one barrier.”*

“...You’re very smart, Mr. Sparrow,” I say, impressed.

“I’m sorry,” Abaddon chimes in apologetically. *“My partner here isn’t that great at using her head.”*

He makes it sound like I’m some stupid, ignorant child.

“.....”

No, that’s exactly what I am. I consistently score low enough on school exams that it’s better to count from the bottom when finding my rank. That’s my own fault, though. My situation at home might seem like a good excuse, but I can’t afford to let that stop me.

I always thought the man next door was just like me. But now he seems to be

having so much fun with other women. It will likely take some time to reverse that situation, and if I want to play the long game, maybe it's a good idea to apply myself more to my studies going forward. I have to at least get into high school, or I'll be at even more of a disadvantage.

"What's up?" asks Abaddon. "That's quite a look on your face."

"It's nothing," I say, fleeing from the conversation by taking my eyes off the Kraken and looking to the side.

That's when I notice a car racing along the road down below.

It appears the lanes leading this way have been closed, and for the most part, they're quiet and empty of traffic. This car, however, is blazing across the asphalt. From up in the sky, it's no longer than my thumbnail, so I can't even make out what kind of car it is. What I do know, however, is that it's going *extremely* fast.

"Oh? Something's really moving down there."

"You noticed it, too, Abaddon?"

While the opposite lane is packed with evacuating vehicles, the car in question speeds smoothly down the other side. This piques my curiosity—why is it heading from the city toward the shoreline? It's already pretty close to the water.

"Could that be the ones we have been waiting for?" asks the bird. "The collaborators he spoke of?"

"I suppose it's possible," replies Abaddon.

"Should we go down to meet them?" I ask. Then the sound around us vanishes.

All the noise we've been hearing—the rotors of helicopters keeping watch on the Kraken, the engines of the fishing boats traveling out to sea—all of it is gone. The people and cars down below disappear at the same time. But the white-crested waves, rising and falling out in the ocean, remain.

And there, amid the water's motions, is the giant sea monster.

"So this is the isolated space I've heard you speak of," the bird says with fascination, gazing at the soundless world.

The car we'd been watching down below disappeared along with all the others. If the angel and her Disciple were really inside it, as we assumed, we should be able to see them down there where the vehicle was a moment ago.

"I am curious about what determines which things disappear and which do not," the bird remarks.

"Well, this space is created for the proxy war between angels and demons," explains Abaddon. *"You can think of it as hypothetical—or imaginary. I*

wouldn't get too fixated on real space here if I were you—it often happens that something you expect to find is simply gone.”

“Hmm...”

“But if I were to try to give a rule, I suppose things you can see moving around don't usually get replicated here. The main purpose of these spaces is to allow the angels, demons, and Disciples to battle. Gotta get rid of any external actors, right?”

“Then it would be better to regard what we see here as duplicates created for the express purpose of the war, rather than everything else having disappeared.”

“Yeah, pretty much. They're identical inside and out, but yeah—think of them all as fakes.”

As Abaddon and the sparrow go on about this and that, I look down at the soundless world far below and catch a glimpse of something moving this way from the surface. Two figures have taken off from the beach and are now speeding up toward us.

One of them has a big, blocky-looking silhouette, so at first I don't believe it's human. Once it gets a little closer, though, I realize why. It's a person carrying someone else as they fly. Eventually, they reach us. Seeing a certain someone among their number fills me with relief.

“I see you managed to get them all here, Peeps.”

“I did. And I am glad that matters seem to have gone smoothly on your end as well.”

I agree with the bird—I'm happy we've been able to meet up as planned. And thankfully, the sea monster raging about in the water was caught inside as well.

But right now, my mind is focused on something else.

“Mister, who is that you're carrying?” I ask.

“I'm Sasaki's colleague!” cries the lady in his arms. “G-got a problem with that?”



“I’m not sure how to respond to a woman threatening me while a man is carrying her.”

“Urk...”

Why is there yet another woman in his arms?



Once the isolated space appeared, we joined up with the others; they’d been watching the Kraken from a higher vantage point. I both resolved the matter of Miss Hoshizaki’s safety and respected her wishes by having her accompany me. It was either that or ask that she wait on the ground and risk her being squished by a rampaging Kraken.

“I see you managed to get them all here, Peeps.”

“I did. And I am glad that matters seem to have gone smoothly on your end as well.”

Seeing the sparrow filled me with relief. Out in the water, we could see the Kraken as well—all according to plan. It had suddenly halted its advance, seeming confused at the sudden disappearance of the aircraft flitting around in the sky and the boats drifting along the water’s surface. *It definitely has some level of intelligence*, I thought.

“Mister, who is that you’re carrying?”

“I’m Sasaki’s colleague! G-got a problem with that?”

“I’m not sure how to respond to a woman threatening me while a man is carrying her.”

“Urk...”

My neighbor immediately fired off a comeback. Aesthetically speaking, a middle-aged man like me carrying a high school girl wasn’t something anyone wanted to see. From a woman’s point of view, even having to see something like this was sexual harassment. In fact, Miss Hoshizaki was acting strangely—why was she tolerating it? When I said I was going up, she even directly suggested I carry her.

I told her not to ask about the isolated space or my ability to fly and insisted I’d explain once we were back at the bureau. I was a little forceful, but it had worked. When I’d told her it was all part of my plan to take care of the Kraken, she accepted.

“It seems a little strange that you would have a colleague carry you around like that,” my neighbor remarked.

“I—I didn’t have a choice!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki. “I can’t fly like all of you!”

“*I’m actually more curious about her,*” chimed in Abaddon, interrupting the other two.

He was looking at the magical girl, who had been following us, using Magical Flight to float in midair.

“...What?” she said.

“*You’re the girl we met before, aren’t you?*” said Abaddon.

He was right. We had now gathered everyone who was at the hotel the other day, aside from Ms. Futarishizuka and Lady Elsa. *No wonder the atmosphere’s so tense.* Their only mutual connection was me—otherwise, most of them were basically strangers.

Nevertheless, I’d formed a temporary truce with the magical girl and secured her cooperation in dealing with the Kraken. She’d promised not to attack the other psychics while inside this space, at any rate.

“I’m sorry I shot at your friend,” she said to the demon.

“*Hey, no worries. More importantly, I’ve been curious about you.*”

“Maybe worry a little, Abaddon,” chided my neighbor.

Now the demon was even making a pass at the magical girl—so soon after Ms. Futarishizuka, too. He and my neighbor must have really been desperate to win these death games. As long as it helped my neighbor gain an advantage, though, I was more than willing to help.

If I left them alone, however, the situation would probably descend into chaos. Unfortunately, I needed them to focus on the Kraken.

“I’m sorry to trouble you,” I told them. “But could the two of you go down and get the angel and her Disciple?”

“*Hmm. Can we, partner?*”

“We can’t exactly leave them to their own devices. Let’s do as he says and pick them up.”

“*Yeah. If they leave, and the isolated space disappears, things will fall apart, and all our secrets will be revealed.*”

I’d already been lied to twice by that Disciple. *I should be ready for anything, at least while we’re working together like this. They could be plotting to use the Kraken to threaten us somehow.*

“Let’s go, then, Abaddon.”

“*Right!*”

My neighbor took the lead, and Abaddon followed after her. They grew

smaller and smaller as they neared the surface until we couldn't see them anymore.

Then I turned back to face the Starsage. "Peeps, your turn. Are you ready?"

"Yes," he replied. "*I shall deal with this as swiftly as possible.*"

"Sasaki, why the hell is that bird talking?!" demanded Miss Hoshizaki.

"Some Java sparrows are very good at talking," I told her.

"Yeah, right! I knew it! That video before, that was..."

As expected, Miss Hoshizaki had reacted to Peeps. I had no time to introduce them, though. The Kraken had begun to advance toward us, whether due to the noise we were making or through the use of some detection spell, I wasn't sure.

It opened its giant, gaping jaw, and a magic circle appeared in front of it. This was the lead-up to the big attack the creature had used to scatter the Magical Girl Alliance last time.

"Hey, wait—"

Evidently, the Kraken had noticed us. I had a barrier up, but I didn't know how far it would go to protect us. Even Peeps had acknowledged the monster as a powerful opponent. With intermediate-level magic the best I could muster, the thing would probably tear my spell apart as easily as little Mika's sword.

Immediately, I looked to the bird. A magic circle was at his feet. In the blink of an eye, the Kraken's spell fired, and my vision went white.

A moment later, I felt something hard beneath my feet.

From right next to me, I heard Peeps say quietly, "*You may leave this to me.*"

"Peeps?"

When my vision returned, I was on the shore facing the bay. Peeps's teleportation magic had instantly sent us all down here. Miss Hoshizaki was still in my arms, and the magical girl was nearby, too. But Peeps was gone; I assumed he'd doubled back into the sky above the water.

Everyone was unharmed, most likely because of the barrier spell the bird had placed around the Kraken beforehand. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to dodge that thing's attack without warning.

"Wh-what just happened?" breathed Miss Hoshizaki.

"The sparrow's gone," the magical girl pointed out.

Both of their gazes fell on me—but they only stayed a moment, because soon booms began to sound over the water.

From the beach, our focus shifted out toward the ocean. And there, I could see countless spells blossoming in vivid color all around the Kraken. One moment, an immense firestorm thrashed about, the next, a series of lightning bolts

crackled down from the sky in a fury of light and sound. I could also make out the laser beams the Kraken had used before. It reminded me of when Peeps fought that purple person in the otherworld.

“Wait,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “No, don’t tell me. Is the sparrow doing all that?”

“He’s so strong...”

We couldn’t make out Peeps from where we were standing. But I could imagine him there as I watched the Kraken—still stopped in the water—fighting against something we couldn’t see. The monster must indeed be a powerful foe, considering the sparrow generally defeated his enemies with a single blow.

Our presence here is making more work for him, I thought. Whenever the Kraken’s attacks started to veer in our direction, Peeps would slam it with even fiercer offensive magic. He was protecting us from stray magic blasts.

“He’s *amazing*. He just knocked off one of those huge tentacles at the root!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

“Is that your fairy, magical middle-aged man?” asked the magical girl.

“Something like that, yes.”

“Wait, ‘magical middle-aged man?’” repeated Miss Hoshizaki. “I asked you about that before, during the investigation. What does that even mean?”

“Miss Hoshizaki, would you mind getting down at some point?”

“Uh... R-right!”

My senior had remained in my arms even after landing, entranced by Peeps’s battle. She started when I reminded her, then reached her legs back down to the ground. She lost her balance for a moment when her heels shifted in the sand but quickly caught herself.

“Hey, Sasaki,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Would the section chief happen to know about any of this?” she asked, a meaningful grin on her face.

Is she threatening me? I wondered. Her water supply had been prioritizing his own tasks lately; I could easily imagine her trying to steal back the reins, as it were. Lately, she’d been taking the back seat to Ms. Futarishizuka, but perhaps she’d decided to try to regain the upper hand.

“Should you speak of this to anyone else,” I said, “it may affect your wages.”

“What...?!”

I’m really glad I got the boss under control beforehand, I thought. Miss Hoshizaki had gone totally silent.

Obviously, I had no say in the bureau's pay and hiring practices; I was just bluffing. Still, the section chief had taken it upon himself to prevent her from prying during the mess the other day, so I'd expected the lie would sound persuasive enough.

But when I actually said it, she believed me so easily that I felt a little bad. *Unlike Ms. Futarishizuka, Miss Hoshizaki seems to wear her heart on her sleeve.*

"I—I won't say anything!" she stammered. "I don't really know what's going on anyway!"

Bringing up her pay had caused her to shrink back immediately. She took a few steps toward the water's edge, to get away from her bullshitting colleague.

Finally, she turned back to me and said sourly, "But we *are* a team, so couldn't you be a little more—?"

Just then, as I watched Peeps fighting out in the distance, I saw a change in the sea along the beach where we were standing.

As my eyes took in the choppy white waves caused by the far-off struggle, a giant tentacle launched out from the water's surface. Every inch of it was covered in scales—we could tell at once that it belonged to the Kraken. Peeps was steadily severing the monster's appendages with magic, sending them flying, and one had apparently drifted toward us. Worse yet, it seemed to move with a mind of its own.

"Miss Hoshizaki, run away!" I shouted.

"Behind you! Tentacle!" called out the magical girl.

"Huh?"

Though it was just one tentacle, it was enormous compared to a person. The part we could see above the water alone was probably over ten meters long and as thick as an 18-wheeler. Its body expanded and contracted like an inchworm, quickly closing the distance between us.

"Whaaat?!" Miss Hoshizaki turned around and froze in astonishment, her shriek echoing across the water.

A moment later, the tentacle reared up like a snake ready to strike. Then it swung itself toward my partner on the water's edge, sweeping horizontally from right to left.

"Tch..."

In response, this magical middle-aged man simultaneously put up a barrier and lifted himself off the ground with a flight spell, zipping straight for her. She'd gotten herself tangled up attempting to flee and had fallen onto her rear end on the sand. I shot past her, putting myself in the line of fire.

Not an instant later, there was a loud booming as the tentacle rammed into my barrier spell. The impact stirred up the water, and seawater spray scattered behind me.

“Sasaki, I’ll freeze the water and stop its movement!” yelled Miss Hoshizaki.

“Understood!” I called back.

The girl picked herself right back up and touched the edge of a wave that the tentacle’s motions had sent lapping up to her feet. Starting from her hand, the seawater began to crackle and freeze, eventually reaching the area surrounding the tentacle.

She turned the entire patch of sea to ice, aiming to freeze the thing solid. The water gradually rose toward the target and enveloped it whole, locking it in inside. The amount of water my partner was moving all at once had to be several times the tentacle’s volume. I was impressed by her ability to move quickly under pressure—she didn’t have seniority over me for nothing. Within a few short seconds, her psychic power had fully encased the tentacle in ice.

“I guess...,” said Miss Hoshizaki, looking at the frozen tentacle, her shoulders heaving up and down with every breath, “we managed, somehow.” My partner seemed utterly exhausted, probably from moving all that water in such a short period of time.

“We should finish it off,” suggested the magical girl.

“That does seem like the best idea,” I agreed.

The magical girl aimed her staff at the tentacle—but just then, the appendage moved. Its tip began to pulse within the thick layer of ice. And then, all of a sudden, the scales covering it split open to reveal a huge, gaping maw. Sharp teeth densely lined its mouth—the sight was positively grotesque. What’s more, it was all covered in a strange, viscous fluid. I didn’t want to get anywhere near it. At the same time, a pair of bulging eyes emerged a little above the mouth.

Its transformation caused the ice covering it to shatter, giving the tentacle full freedom of motion once again.

“I’ll finish it!” said the magical girl. Her eyes were wide with shock, but she still managed to fire her Magical Beam. It sped straight toward the newly born tentacle head.

But the moment it struck, it was repelled by some invisible force.

“It’s the same as the main body!” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Looks like it,” I agreed.

Ever since we conducted our field investigation, something had been bothering me. How did something so colossal reproduce? Well, now I knew. It

worked the same way as when you grew a new plant from a cutting.

If Ms. Futarishizuka had been there, she probably would have made some wry comment about how part of the main creature splitting off and attacking us was a *must* in *kaiju* flicks. It was the kind of gimmick that drove up toy sales.

“Sasaki, look at its mouth!” exclaimed Miss Hoshizaki.

When I looked, I saw a magic circle forming. Recalling the main body’s actions, I assumed a laser beam would quickly surge from the circle. I used flight magic to try to escape the line of fire, remembering to sweep up my colleague as I went. With my back to the tentacle, I soared up into the sky as fast as I could.

“Ugh...”

A moment later, the tentacle’s attack came at me from behind, grazing right past my side. Its laser beam had penetrated my best barrier spell, instantly nullifying it like it was nothing. First little Mika’s sword, now the Kraken’s tentacle—my otherworld barrier had more losses than wins at this point. I was really hoping to learn a more advanced version soon.

As we zoomed up into the air, the tentacle fired off a quick series of attacks. The magical girl had risen up alongside us and, not to be outdone, shot her own barrage of Magical Beams.

The tentacle’s strike had penetrated my barrier spell, but it simply bounced off her Magical Barrier. Was it a compatibility thing, or was hers just that much stronger? It looked like she was frequently having to put it back up, but either way, it seemed she had a slight advantage over me when it came to defense.

The tentacle appeared to understand this, too, and began a relentless assault on the magical girl. I assumed it had registered her as a threat.

“Can you keep its attention for a little while?” I asked her.

“Okay.”

The tentacle launched volleys of beams at the magical girl. After requesting the diversion, I brought Miss Hoshizaki far away from the tentacle. We soared from the ocean over the beach and the seawall, and when we reached the road on the other side, I let Miss Hoshizaki down from my arms. Fortunately, the tentacle hadn’t tried to pursue us. Now that it was clear my barrier spell wasn’t up to snuff, I couldn’t put my colleague in any more danger.

“I want you to retreat,” I told her.

“B-but what about you?!” she stammered.

“There are a few more things I want to try.”

She looked at me like she wanted to say something else. But I ignored her, instead hurrying back to the water’s edge.

The tentacle's attention was completely diverted as it frantically tried to shoot down the magical girl. Grateful for this, I used flight magic to circle around the battle, flying to a spot close to the water and diagonally behind the creature, where I figured it couldn't see me. Then I readied the same spell I'd fired at the angels, aiming at the tentacle's head.

Now that I'd practiced it with Peeps, I could change its output at will. It seemed to me I had a good chance of taking out the tentacle alone with a focused strike.

"Get out of the way!"

I thrust out my palm, and a magic circle appeared a few centimeters in front of it. I waited for the magical girl to dart out of my line of fire and took the shot. I wasn't sure if she'd heard me yell, but at least I tried.

The beam roared, vibrating the air, its pure-white light plunging straight for the tentacle. It arrived at its target in an instant, a perfect strike. It passed through the tentacle's head, vaporizing most of it. Its job finished, the beam soared off into the sky before eventually dissipating.

The headless tentacle lost its balance, then collapsed into the shallows with a splash. I waited a few moments, but it didn't so much as twitch after that. Apparently, I'd managed to take the thing out in one hit.

"That was amazing, magical middle-aged man..."

Well, I really feel like I've accomplished something here, I thought. And it felt good to work alongside everyone else.

But apparently, I'd let myself relax a little too soon.

"Sasaki! B-behind you!"

"Miss Hoshizaki?"

I saw my senior scrambling down the seawall toward me, her face pure desperation. *Didn't we just have this conversation?* Confused at her frantic behavior, I took a look behind me...

...and saw an enormous mouth about to swallow me whole.

"Whoa..."

In the dark of the night, a giant tentacle had emerged and now towered over the water. Its gaping maw filled my vision—a scene right out of a horror film. I certainly hadn't expected there to be a second one.

At the sight of its tightly packed fangs, I froze. I felt like I'd come face-to-face with a real-life jump scare. You know, like when a shark suddenly bursts out from the water to attack. The fact that we were on the sea at night only made things worse, and the whole scene terrified me.

I tried to use flight magic to back away, but the tentacle was faster.

“Magical man!”

“Sasaki!”

As a chill ran down my spine, it devoured me. The last thing I heard as my vision turned black were Miss Hoshizaki and the magical girl screaming.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

At my neighbor’s command, Abaddon and I secure the angel and her Disciple. We were right about the car from before—the two of them had been inside, though the vehicle itself vanished when the isolated space appeared. According to the Disciple, it disappeared along with their driver—that Futarishizuka woman. We spotted them walking along the road from the sky.

“Let’s get back to my neighbor, Abaddon.”

“Right, right. You don’t have to tell me twice!”

Now that I’ve accomplished my objective, I head straight back into the air. Abaddon follows obediently, as do the angel and Disciple, though they seem reluctant.

We’ve just turned toward the water and are gaining altitude when I notice something. The waves on the nighttime shore are awfully tumultuous. Something big is writhing around, and I see streaks of light flying here and there before dissipating.

Curious, I look out past the coast. There I see the same tempests of flames and storms of thunder and lightning as before. Apparently another fight is taking place apart from the bird’s bout with the Kraken.

“What’s going on? Things seem a little too exciting down there—that’s not where the fight is.”

“Let’s hurry,” I tell Abaddon. “There may be some sort of problem.”

The image of my neighbor sliced through the waist by an angel’s sword comes back to me. I don’t want to see something like that a second time. I’m so worried I can’t think straight.

And yet, from behind me, I can hear the Disciple’s unenthusiastic voice.

“In that case, shouldn’t the two of us wait here?”

“Be quiet and come with us,” I reply. “If you try to run... Abaddon, show them no mercy. There are plenty of other Disciples we can make use of.”

“A-all right, I get it...”

“Sure,” says Abaddon. “*I just wish you had this kind of drive all the time.*”

I hurry for the shore with Abaddon, the angel, and her Disciple trailing in my wake. A few moments later, I can make out the details of what’s going on.

One of the Kraken’s tentacles, like the ones we saw in the bay, is blustering around by the coastline. I can see another one as well, lying dead on the ground. That one’s long, narrow body has been cleaved in half, and it appears to be missing a chunk.

I can see the magical girl putting up a fight, with Makeup right nearby. But I don’t see the person most important to me anywhere.

“Abaddon, please do something about that rampaging tentacle,” I command, still floating above the beach.

“*Right! Leave it to me!*”

A moment later, I hear a woman’s voice crying out below. When I look down, I see Makeup is staring up at me, yelling. Her suit is wrinkled, and she’s taken off her shoes to stand barefoot on the beach.

“Hey! Hold on a second!” she screams. “Can’t you hear me?!”

“Why should I wait?” I ask.

“That thing ate Sasaki! It swallowed him whole!”

“What...?!” My heart begins to pound madly. That’s not possible. I look around, but I still can’t see him anywhere. Fear presses in on me again.

Perhaps sensing my consternation, Abaddon speaks to me, his tone lighthearted. “*Hey, calm down, okay? He won’t go down that easy.*”

“I know. I have faith in him.”

“*Instead, could you give me an order like always?*”

“Please reveal thyself or whatever—just hurry up and save him!”

“*Hmm... That wasn’t very specific. Do you think you could be a little clearer?*”

“Just do it already!” I insist, my voice rough.

“*Okay, you got it!*” Abaddon’s body begins to change. It seems to melt, shifting into a huge mass of flesh.

Makeup backs way up when she catches sight of my partner’s grotesque metamorphosis. Then the floating, pulsating ball of meat suddenly expands. It’s just as gross as the tentacle flailing about on the shore.

“Wh-what the hell is that?! It’s disgusting!” Makeup shrieks.

“Just be quiet and watch,” I tell her.

I can’t blame her—it’s her first time seeing this. Even the magical girl seems to cringe as she continues fighting the tentacle. Next to us, the angel and

Disciple let out frightened yelps.

Ignoring the others' reactions, Abaddon speeds toward his target. Having roughly matched its size, he swiftly unfolds in midair. To give a cuter comparison, he looks a bit like a flying squirrel gliding through the air. Well, if a drunk person vomited all over it.

The tentacle fires some kind of magic laser beam to fight off the demon. It punches a hole straight through Abaddon's fleshy mass, but it doesn't slow him down. Finally, just as he's done to angels and Disciples before, he attaches himself to the tentacle and causes his flesh to crawl over his enemy, covering it.

The tentacle begins to writhe and squirm like an earthworm cooking on hot summer asphalt. Cracks and pops—most likely from the chewing—mix with the sound of the waves. Eventually, the wriggling mass of flesh ejects something, like it's spitting.

“Magical man!”

“Sasaki!”

Makeup and the so-called magical girl immediately rush forward. *I won't lose to them. Abaddon can handle the tentacle.* I take flight as well and speed toward my neighbor.



The tentacle only had me inside its mouth for a moment or two. I used a barrier to protect myself from the immediate threats—its fangs and bodily fluids. Still, it was flailing around so roughly that I couldn't get my bearings. I felt like I was riding a roller coaster. It shook and jolted me in every direction, and soon I was ready to hurl out the contents of my own stomach.

I could probably use my beam spell to destroy it from the inside, but I didn't want to hit Miss Hoshizaki or the magical girl. Then again, if they were killed while I hesitated, it wouldn't matter much anyway.

But then, a few moments later, the physical structure of the tentacle surrounding me began to collapse, almost like it was melting. I used illumination magic to brighten up my surroundings and noticed writhing chunks of flesh squeezing their way through the interior walls of the tentacle, oozing inside toward me.

One bloodcurdling sight after another, I thought. I had a good idea who these fleshy chunks belonged to, though.

“Hey, found ya!”

“Is that you, Abaddon?”

My suspicion turned to certainty the moment I heard his voice. I didn't see his human form anywhere—I could only hear him. It was probably coming from the flesh oozing into the tentacle's body. It seemed the demon could see me, though I wasn't sure how. Maybe one or two of the fleshy chunks had eyeballs coming out of them or something.

“You seem awfully calm despite your predicament,” the demon remarked.

“No, this is pretty much me panicking,” I assured him. “Much longer and I'm liable to lose my lunch.”

“Then you'd better get out of there quick, huh?”

“I was worried using a spell from in here might injure someone outside,” I explained.

“In that case, I'll just have to save you!”

That was when I noticed a big change. The inside of the tentacle's body that had surrounded me before was suddenly replaced by a wall of flesh that must have belonged to the demon. A moment later, something pushed on my lower back, shoving me upward and outward.

As I moved, a tiny hole opened up for me in the wall of flesh, and I rode the momentum back outside. It felt kind of like I was a watermelon seed being spit out of someone's mouth.

“Whoa, there...”

By the time I righted myself using flight magic, I was outside the tentacle again. The sight of the moon shining above me was a relief. I turned around to find the mass of flesh devouring its prey.

“Magical man!”

“Sasaki!”

“I'm so happy you're safe, mister!”

The three girls ran toward me; the magical girl and my neighbor flew, while Miss Hoshizaki ran across the beach. The last had lost her shoes at some point. Driftwood and pieces of trash were plentiful in this area, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for her; I descended to the ground immediately.

I could see the angel and her Disciple on the seawall a little farther away. My neighbor and Abaddon must have gotten back to the shore after picking them up and decided to deal with the tentacle. Thanks to them, I'd been able to escape safely.

“Thank you all for saving me,” I said, bowing to the others.

In the meantime, the tentacle had grown still inside the mass of flesh. The

meat covering it oozed away and gathered into a single point. As we watched, it rapidly shrunk and eventually took on the form of a human. Just like that, Abaddon was back to normal, complete with his usual outfit, crown and cape. *The physiology of angels and demons is even more bizarre than the otherworld's magic*, I thought.

Having regained his human form, he began to speak with an air of importance to nobody in particular. *“Well, I’ve gotta say—that was a pretty worthwhile meal!”*

As this implied, the second tentacle had, at some point, vanished. He must have devoured it. It seemed it hadn't simply gone quiet; underneath the writhing mass of flesh, it had been eaten, scales and all. Abaddon possessed incredible power, even compared to myself or the magical girl. *I wonder what would happen if you pitted him against Peeps.*

“You sure like to eat weird stuff, Abaddon,” my neighbor commented.

“Hey, humans eat strange things all the time, don't they?”

The two of them bantered like good buddies. I knew they'd met only recently, but they came off more like old friends. Maybe Peeps and I would have been like that if I were as young as my neighbor. The thought turned my mind back to Peeps's fight.

How had his confrontation with the Kraken turned out? Curious, I looked out to the sea.

Right then, I saw a particularly intense flash in the distance. A monumental pillar of light rose from the water and shot up into the sky. It almost looked like the sun had fallen. While it only lasted a moment, it lit up the night enough to make it seem like midday. A few moments later, the impact reached us with a boom, shaking the ground under our feet. This must be the result of some spell, either from Peeps or the Kraken.

“Is that sparrow gonna be all right? Sh-shouldn't we go help him?” stammered Miss Hoshizaki. She was the weakest person here, and yet she was the first to suggest going to the bird's aid. I really appreciated her straightforward attitude, and I was grateful she was concerned for Peeps.

Unfortunately, we didn't have time to worry about him. The brilliant, glowing pillar vanished after a few seconds, but once the light and impact had faded, something else appeared, this time in the sea. Under the night sky, once again dark, a huge wave rose up from the black ocean, rushing toward us at an incredible speed.

“A tsunami?” murmured the magical girl, her tone casual.

“Seems like it,” said Miss Hoshizaki. She was considerably more tense. She was in the most danger here, as the only one who couldn’t fly.

“Hey! W-wait a second...,” she stammered.

“I’m sorry to keep doing this to you, Miss Hoshizaki, but—,” I began.

“Please calm down,” interrupted my neighbor. “I’ll carry you.”

But before I could go over to my colleague, my neighbor picked her up instead.

We all launched into the sky. The angel and her Disciple followed suit, meeting us in the air above the seawall. The wave, probably several meters high, passed by underneath us. The first tentacle, still lying on the beach, was carried up and over the seawall. Had this not occurred inside an isolated space, there would have been a lot of damage. I was once again grateful that those involved in the proxy war had allowed us to rent out their space.

“The Kraken’s gone,” pointed out Miss Hoshizaki.

“Did the bird win?” asked the magical girl.

At my senior’s remark, everyone looked out toward the ocean. I couldn’t see the creature, either. Instead, we heard a *vwrrr* as a magic circle appeared right next to us. I tensed, wondering what was happening, but then a familiar Java sparrow spawned right in the center.

“I apologize,” he said. *“That took more time than I anticipated.”*

“Welcome back, Peeps.”

He must have spotted us and teleported here. I’d had full faith in him—when he said to leave matters to him, I’d known beyond a shadow of a doubt he’d pull it off. But seeing him return safe and sound was still a relief. He looked and spoke exactly the same as always.

“Should I assume you finished up as planned?” asked Abaddon.

“Indeed,” replied the bird. *“I have disposed of the Kraken. We may now collapse the isolated space.”*

“Glad to hear it! I’m honored we were able to help.”

“And help you did. I would like to thank you properly, but this is neither the time nor the place.”

“Yup! Those are just the words I was waiting to hear.”

It was only right that the demon and his Disciple receive a reward for their assistance, separate from our promise with Ms. Futarishizuka. Though I figured we’d simply have her procure them something using gold ingots from the otherworld. Come to think of it, I was curious how much she’d been making as an intermediary lately.

“You’re being very greedy right now, Abaddon,” said my neighbor.

“Oh, come on now. It’s only right we get a reward, don’t you think?”

“Maybe, but you don’t have to be like that about it.”

“When you do something for someone else, they’re supposed to thank you. That’s how things work, isn’t it? I think you’re the odd one out here. This is one of the basic tenets of successful communication. Neglecting these things will only get you bullied at school.”

“...I’m aware.”

Abaddon spoke without any reservation. For a girl with so many family issues, having someone to act as her friend and raise questions like this must be pretty valuable. The demon seemed like a sensible person, too, and I had a feeling he’d serve as a good partner for her.

From what I’d heard during our doorstep conversations, she—like Miss Hoshizaki—was isolated at school. Not that I was one to talk. I’d only recently been saved from the same kind of existence by Peeps. There was nothing more precious than a friendship free from competition, though I supposed most people got that kind of thing from their family.

In light of what Abaddon had just said, my neighbor turned to look at the magical girl.

“He called you a magical girl, right?” she asked.

“What?” the girl in question replied.

“Thank you for doing your best to help him,” she said in a more respectful tone, although she could only lower her head a little as she was still carrying Miss Hoshizaki in both arms.

Her arms are shaking quite a bit, I thought. Is she going to be okay? I put some levitation magic on standby, just in case. I couldn’t help her fly, but I could at least support her.

“...Okay,” said the magical girl, looking away a little.

“It almost sounds like you think your neighbor belongs to you,” chimed in Abaddon.

“Please be quiet, Abaddon. I didn’t mean that at all.”

“You’ve really started whipping out those orders whenever you don’t like what I’m saying, huh. How disappointing.”

“Abaddon!”

With a shrug and a sigh, the demon backed off.

I’d heard the orders a Disciple gave their angel or demon were absolute. That allowed the proxy war system to function, like an irreplaceable cog in the

system. What standards did they use to choose their partners, I wondered.

“In that case, I think I worked pretty hard myself,” Miss Hoshizaki said after watching my neighbor’s exchange with the magical girl. Her eyes were on the person carrying her. Was she jealous that my neighbor and the magical girl seemed to be getting along?

“You only made a lot of noise. You didn’t *do* anything.”

“Hey, I was fighting right alongside Sasaki before the tentacle swallowed him!”

“I hear you can control water. But that’s all, right? What did you accomplish?”

“Well, a lot! Like, um, holding the thing in place! I can do stuff like that, you know!”

Compared to the magical girl’s beams and barriers, Miss Hoshizaki’s repertoire seemed a bit...lacking. Maybe that bothered her, too, because I saw a little panic creep into her expression as she argued with my neighbor.

“You were watching, weren’t you?” said Miss Hoshizaki, now speaking to the magical girl. “Can’t you explain things to her?”

“You’re a psychic,” the magical girl replied. “That means I have to kill you.”

“.....”

Her statement actually contained something of a concession; normally she outright declared that she *would* kill all psychics. Her conclusion was the same, though. Her issues must run pretty deep. Miss Hoshizaki quit looking for assistance and closed her mouth.

“So did you actually help?” continued my neighbor.

“Tch...”

I’d heard about when they first met, along with the magical girl and Lady Elsa, from Ms. Futarishizuka. Back then, they’d all been pointing their weapons at each other, but maybe they’d made some progress. After all, my neighbor *had* taken it upon herself to carry Miss Hoshizaki, who couldn’t fly, and she still held other girl in her arms.

“B-but all *you* did was rely on someone else!” insisted Miss Hoshizaki. “You didn’t do anything yourself either!”

“Abaddon is my servant,” said my neighbor. “That means his accomplishments are my accomplishments.”

“What...?!”

But the shock of having a gun pointed at her on their first meeting was probably still vivid in her mind, and she continued to stubbornly cut down anything Miss Hoshizaki tried to say. *There isn’t much I can do about that.*

Knowing they'd probably get into a fight if I left them alone, I decided to interject. "By the way, Peeps, I wanted to go over how we're handling the Kraken one more time."

"As we discussed last night, I disposed of the creature while leaving as little of its body behind as possible."

"Then it'll probably be totally gone by the time we leave this space, huh?" Abaddon chimed in.

Anything that happened in the isolated space would revert to its previous state when we exited. That didn't cover any lives lost within the space, however—they died in the real world, too. That was why they called this proxy war a *death game*. And apparently, the state of the dead at the end of the game affected what remained of them after.

Realizing her odds of winning the previous argument were slim, Miss Hoshizaki decided to give up and join our conversation as well. "But we can't make it look like *nothing* happened, right? The creature got pretty close to the shore."

"I believe Mr. Akutsu and the rest of the bureau are doing their best to handle that even as we speak," I said. "But I thought of another way to help out, so I've set that plan in motion as well."

"What are you getting at?"

"The girl you met at the hotel before is working on it."

"You mean the girl in the video with your sparrow?"

"I'd like to save the rest of the explanation for when we get out of here, if possible."

I'd been keeping a constant eye on my plan as we followed the Kraken northward, so I was sure of it. In fact, it had borne even greater results than I'd expected. In that sense, even Lady Elsa had contributed to our defeat of the octodragon.

"Which means that out of the four of us who met in the hotel, you're the only one who didn't do anything," finished my neighbor.

"I— I'm telling you: I did a lot!" Miss Hoshizaki insisted.

"Is the girl in the video with the bird a psychic? Or not a psychic?" asked the magical girl.

They certainly weren't on *good* terms, but I didn't think they would start brawling or shooting magic at each other on sight again.

As I watched their lively conversation, I prayed that, at the very least, they would keep their arguments just shy of a real fight.



Now that we knew the Kraken was dead, we left the isolated space as planned. More specifically, we split up with the angel and her Disciple. I felt bad for bringing them all the way here just to send them off again, but not so bad I wanted to keep them around. I'd given them some pocket money for the train home and enough to reserve a hotel room if needed, so I hoped they wouldn't run into any trouble.

Once the two of them were far enough away, the isolated space vanished, just as Abaddon had explained. My seawater-soaked suit was dry again, as though time had been rewound to before we'd entered.

And, as Peeps had reported, the Kraken was indeed dead. Even after returning to the real world from the isolated space, its flesh didn't regenerate. Outside, it would have looked like the monster suddenly disappeared from the ocean's surface. The SDF—who had been closely tracking the target—were thrown into chaos, wondering if it had warped somewhere else. The SDF soldiers deployed on the coastline, including our guide, Miss Inukai, called out to us as we gazed at the scene from the beach. Mr. Yoshikawa soon arrived, and we began a strategy meeting in one of the nearby tents.

Air-based searches were being conducted by all nations now, and not just around the Suruga Bay. But no matter how long we waited, the Kraken didn't reappear. There were no reports of further damages overseas, either.

Nevertheless, the higher-ups had the SDF remain on standby at the coast. The captain said they'd probably be on high alert for the rest of the day.

We, on the other hand, decided to go ahead and excuse ourselves. Once Ms. Futarishizuka joined us, we announced a temporary retreat. There wasn't going to be another attack no matter how long we waited. Not wanting to waste time, we claimed there was other work waiting for us and made our escape.

From there, we headed to a long-established Japanese-style inn in the Atami area. After all, we couldn't just go home after coming all the way to Shizuoka, Ms. Futarishizuka had declared. According to her, there was nothing wrong with enjoying a nice soak as a reward. In fact, she'd already made reservations the day before.

She's so prepared, I thought. In all honesty, I loved that about her.

The other members of our group didn't have any objections; in fact, everyone had been hard at work since the previous day, so they happily accepted the unexpected suggestion of a little R & R. There would be seven of us: Ms.

Futarishizuka, who had made the suggestion, myself, Peeps, my neighbor, Abaddon, Miss Hoshizaki, and the magical girl.

Once we arrived at the inn, we all enjoyed a late dinner.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” exhaled Ms. Futarishizuka. “A cold glass after a hard day’s work really hits the spot!”

“I agree one hundred percent,” I replied.

Our lodgings at the inn consisted of a living room measuring over fifteen square meters, a Japanese-style room of around twelve square meters, and our bedrooms. What’s more, this was a special suite that came with its own open-air bath *and* an indoor bath. I couldn’t help but be impressed Futarishizuka secured a reservation here just one day in advance.

We ate around a low table set up in the Japanese-style room. Ms. Futarishizuka and I had beers, of course. I felt a little guilty since everyone else was a minor, but that didn’t stop the two of us from gulping down the alcohol. Seated across from this pair of good-for-nothing adults were my neighbor and Abaddon. Then, to our left and right—on the short sides of the table—were Miss Hoshizaki and the magical girl. We’d mainly set it up this way so Miss “I Will Kill All Psychics” couldn’t try anything funny. Peeps, meanwhile, was in front of me in his usual position.

“You always do excellent work in this department, I must say.”

“Good enough to make you want to remove these markings on my hand, hmm?”

“That is another story entirely.”

“You are one stingy little bird, you know that?”

An extravagant array of food adorned the dinner table. While this establishment usually served meals over several courses, we had ordered as much as we possibly could right off the bat. It was a display of consideration from Ms. Futarishizuka to Peeps. This way, the sparrow could talk to the rest of us as we ate.

Currently, Peeps had a finely chopped cut of wagyu steak in front of him. A main dish like that should have come closer to the middle of the meal, but he was already excitedly pecking away at it. As his owner, I wished he’d eat a few more vegetables. I didn’t think it would be right to nag, though, so I recommended some of the fruit instead.

“If you’d told me yesterday that I’d be eating at the same table with a magical girl,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “I’d have said you were crazy.”

“...If I’m bothering you, I can leave,” said the magical girl, smoothly getting

up.

“Wait, no, that’s not what I meant!”

“Then maybe you should be more careful about how you say things,” suggested my neighbor. “As an old person, you should really know better.”

“L-look, I know that was my fault. But I’m hardly an old person!”

“I’m thirteen, so you seem old to me. Don’t you work full-time?”

“Hey, I’m still only sixteen, you know!”

“How long are you going to stick with that backstory? I’m getting secondhand embarrassment just listening to you.”

“It’s not a backstory! I literally go to school! I have a uniform at home, too...”

The air was a little prickly in here, but that was one thing I couldn’t do anything about. As Miss Hoshizaki had implied, they’d all been trying to kill each other until just the other day. Even I had some difficulty adjusting to sharing a table with the magical girl.

Ms. Futarishizuka had been the one to invite her. The magical girl had tried to leave on her own at first, but she’d yielded to the enticing offer of good food, so we brought her back with us. Ms. Futarishizuka’s ulterior motives were obvious—she wanted to maneuver her way into the magical girl crowd’s good graces. In the end, we’d convinced her by saying the temporary cease-fire would only last until the following day.

Keeping watch over my neighbor and Miss Hoshizaki’s argument, the magical girl sat back down on her *zabuton*, picked up her chopsticks, and started hesitantly eating from her rice bowl. She’d only asked for white rice—no side dishes. *Maybe she was trying to be considerate.*

“Why not try something other than rice, dear?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“.....”

The magical girl remained silent as the host piled one thing after another onto her plate. As I watched them, I heard Miss Hoshizaki ask me something.

“Hey, Sasaki, you said that blond girl was up to something, right?”

“Would you mind if I explained now?” I asked, just to make sure.

“Oh, quit making a big deal out of it and just tell me already.”

“All right.”

Prompted by my senior colleague, I took my phone out from my inside pocket and opened up an internet browser. Using a search engine, I typed in the words *blond, girl, sparrow, and strange words* and hit search. Right at the top, I found the news articles I was looking for. I pulled up the first result.

“Have you seen this yet?” I asked her, showing her the screen. I was playing a

video submitted to a social media website. On it was Lady Elsa, and next to her was Peeps.

“That’s the video that went public and caused all that fuss on the internet, right?”

“Actually, no,” I told her. “This is a follow-up video we uploaded.”

“Wait, what...?”

The two on camera were speaking to each other the same as before. The background, though, was completely different. In place of the posh hotel living room was an elegant Japanese-style space—specifically, one of the rooms in the villa Ms. Futarishizuka was providing us. You could make out a *shoji* paper door, a *tokonoma* alcove, and a set of staggered shelves in the background. The two of them had placed the laptop on the table in front of them to record the video.

“Take a look at the news articles discussing it.”

“.....”

Phrases like *blond girl speaking in a strange language* and *YouTube debut* danced by as I scrolled. They were calling it the biggest trend on social media. Obviously, the bureau had pulled some strings with the news. We’d immediately made the video public when word of the Kraken started to crop up, using it as a decoy to bury any trending keywords unrelated to Lady Elsa’s new video.

The existence of the Kraken—which had just begun to creep into the trending topics that afternoon—had dropped from the collective radar because of it. There was one picture of something that looked like the octodragon uploaded by an amateur photographer, but it was getting no attention. People were treating it like just another doctored photo or urban legend, and it had been buried by all the other posts. That, too, was partly the work of the section chief and the bureau.

As for the SDF’s movements, they were insisting they’d been defusing a very dangerous unexploded bomb. Plenty of news sites had articles on that as well. The bureau had relied on outside help for that part, and we’d merely taken a ride on their coattails. Thanks to that, it had been easy to get Section Chief Akutsu’s approval on the whole thing.

Miss Hoshizaki seemed to have guessed the situation after seeing Lady Elsa’s new video.

“Why is the channel name on this video site Channel P?” she asked me.

“Doesn’t it sound cute?”

“.....”

We’d named it after the distinguished Java sparrow himself, using the first

letter of his name. Checking again now, I saw it already had over a hundred thousand likes.

“You tried so hard to cover it up before,” she pointed out. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“We decided it would have more advantages than disadvantages.”

The leak of the previous video had exposed Lady Elsa not only to the bureau, but to the world. Word of it had probably reached other related agencies as well. On the other hand, the only information anyone had was that she was a psychic from another country. In other words, as long as we didn’t reveal any extra information, a second video wouldn’t make much difference.

And so Lady Elsa had made her debut as a YouTuber. In fact, by spinning this as a favor to the other agencies, we were hoping they might help us smooth things over if anything happened with her in the future. I’d worked out the contents of the video with Peeps beforehand.

To get specific, this performance was to be the story of a young lady from another world learning Japanese—scripted and directed by the Lord Starsage himself.

“Holy cow,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “This thing has a ton of views, doesn’t it?”

“We had an unusually large advertising budget,” I explained.

“So you’re investing the nation’s tax revenue into someone’s social media channel? Is that okay?”

“We’re not doing it for profit,” I assured her. “We haven’t even applied for monetization.”

“When you put it like that, it actually seems like a bit of a waste.”

Plus, most of what they were saying was in the otherworld’s language, so nobody on Earth could understand it. At most, they might make out individual phrases like *good morning* or *thank you*. But now that the contents of the video were slightly more relevant to her current surroundings, we were seeing a very positive viewer response.

Assuming the language would eventually be deciphered, I told them beforehand to muddle up the way they spoke as much as they possibly could. I didn’t know how much of an effect that would have, but I wanted to believe it was better than doing nothing.

“Can’t understand a word they’re saying, as usual,” muttered Miss Hoshizaki.

“Would you happen to know how the bureau is doing with their analysis?” I asked.

“Not a clue, really. They haven’t told me anything, at least.”

“I see.”

“So we have this girl to thank, too, huh?” Miss Hoshizaki watched the screen with a quiet, peaceful gaze.

We’d thought about inviting Lady Elsa here as well. Unfortunately, the possibility of other guests seeing her now that we’d put her all over the media meant it wasn’t a good idea. We planned to suggest something else to thank her later.

For now, it was time to sit back and enjoy Ms. Futarishizuka’s hospitality. The seafood rice bowl in front of me piled high with fresh whitebait was simply too delicious to resist.



After dinner, we all did as we liked. I decided to take advantage of the occasion to enjoy a soak in the huge open-air bath. While our suite included two luxurious baths—one indoor and one outdoor—we decided the girls in the group would use those, so I thought I’d spend some time away from the suite.

Peeps had stayed behind in the room. Walking around the inn with a Java sparrow on my shoulder was certain to draw unnecessary attention. And while I wanted to trust the magical girl, I appreciated Peeps agreeing to stay behind and make sure nothing got out of hand.

I’d just finished my bath and was on my way back when I ran into someone familiar in the lobby.

“Hey, wait,” the person called out. “Aren’t you Shizu’s current boyfriend?”

I turned toward the source of the voice and found the leader of the organization Ms. Futarishizuka used to belong to. He was sitting on one of the sofas near the wall, relaxing in a *yukata*. An empty bottle of milk sat on the table in front of him.

“Hello again,” I said. “What brings you here?”

“Don’t be so nervous,” he insisted. “You’re making me antsy.”

I stopped and turned to face the man sitting on the sofa, tightening my grip on my bathing kit despite myself. “Are you here by yourself?” I asked.

“Actually, Shizu invited me,” he explained. “Said it was a good chance to put everyone else in her debt.”

“I see.”

Apparently, Ms. Futarishizuka had already lined up her next move in case our plan failed. If she’d invited him, then he probably knew about the sparrow and

the magical girl. He wasn't likely to pick a fight here.

I'd had a feeling the nerd would have a good chance even against the Kraken. His psychic power was extremely versatile. Depending on the situation, it might have been easier for him than for Peeps. He was probably even stronger than the magical girl. His power put him a level above the rest of us.

As I wondered how he'd fare against Abaddon rampaging in an isolated space, I realized this whole line of thinking was straight out of a shounen manga. *Well, that's a little embarrassing.*

"But I guess you guys handled everything, so I didn't get a turn."

"I do apologize for taking such a valuable opportunity."

"Are you *really* sorry?"

"We were quite reluctant to take all this on, to be frank."

"You did a pretty bang-up job in spite of that. Where *did* the monster go? It looked like it vanished in an instant. Was that the work of your familiar? Or did the magical girl handle it?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination." He was already trying to get a read on the situation, asking one question after another.

"Any interest in defecting to our side?" he asked. "I'm sure we'd treat you better."

"Thank you for the offer, but I plan on staying in the bureau's care for the time being."

"Alas! 'Tis a shame," he replied. His delivery was so exaggerated I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

If I turned traitor now, who knows what kind of revenge Mr. Akutsu would wreak? Since this nerd seemed to have a connection to him, I thought it best to keep my distance. *This could even be one of his traps.*

"Are you going to see Ms. Futarishizuka?" I asked him.

"Based on your reaction, it seems you all really *did* take down that unidentified monster, huh? AO4, I think they were calling it. No point in me seeing her, then. I'll just head home for today."

"I see."

"But things are gonna get way tougher for you now, understand? I mean it. Like, for real."

"What business do you have with me, if I might ask?"

"If you ever change your mind, give me a call. Through Shizu if you need to."

"....."

Apparently, he only stopped by to confirm the situation. After saying what he

had to say, he got up and left the lobby, making sure to take his empty milk bottle with him. Once he was out of sight, I started back to our suite.

This was definitely the sort of place Ms. Futarishizuka would choose. It was incredible to look at. Even just walking through the halls like this was enough to comfort my weary soul. Hardly anyone was here, too, likely because of the nearby evacuation order. It felt like we had the whole place to ourselves. I looked out at the gardens from the outdoor passage; the elegant scenery set me at ease. One area included a walking path.

Since I'm here, I might as well take a little side trip, I thought, stepping into the garden and letting the precision-cut flagstones set into the ground guide me. Eventually, I came to a place surrounded by trees, where I found a small gazebo. Inside it, I spotted Abaddon.

He seemed to be speaking to a tree growing in front of him. I looked more closely and saw another familiar sight—a Java sparrow.

"I've gotta ask what that power was you used today," said Abaddon. *"That stuff's good enough to put you on a level with angels and demons."*

"Are you referring to your original powers that led you to start this so-called proxy war?" the sparrow returned.

"It seems to me a power like that could even destroy the world, depending on the circumstances. Haven't you ever felt that way? Or maybe I just haven't heard of you, and you're one of us who's gone rogue?"

I couldn't see any other patrons nearby, so I stopped and pricked up my ears, listening in on their conversation.

"I know nothing about angels and demons. You may rest assured of that."

"Then are you one of those, er, invaders from another world or something?"

"...Not exactly. But you're not entirely wrong, either."

Actually, Abaddon's guess was correct. A perfect bull's-eye, in fact. I figured the sparrow was just as shocked. We didn't know if the world the demon was picturing was a magical realm of swords and sorcery, though. It was just a guess, and he might've used that phrase simply to mean "somewhere that isn't here."

"Really? I was actually just joking. You've got me at a loss now."

"Why?"

"Well, the others and I would be in a real mess if this world got destroyed."

"Then you needn't worry. I haven't the slightest intention of doing so."

"Hmm. Really?"

Partly because of the unusual pairing, I couldn't help eavesdropping despite the twinge of guilt I felt. Abaddon almost never left my neighbor's side. He was

taking a risk to have this conversation, and I wanted to know why.

“I guess all I can really do right now is believe you,” he continued.

“Is this world precious to you demons?” asked Peeps. *“From what I could glean from the internet, the demons depicted in various cultures generally seem to be hostile toward the world.”*

“Ah yes, I wonder,” replied Abaddon, sounding a tiny bit dangerous.

Abaddon was a demon, which meant that unless they were both in an isolated space, he couldn't do anything to Peeps. I knew I didn't need to worry, but I couldn't help keeping a close eye on the boy's words and movements.

Eventually, his gaze shifted. *“But it looks like you've worried your partner,”* he said to Peeps. Abaddon's attention was now on me. Apparently he'd noticed me listening in.

Hesitant to run away without saying anything in such a situation, I decided to boldly walk up to them. *“I apologize for eavesdropping,”* I said.

“Oh, I don't mind at all,” the demon replied. *“It wasn't an important discussion anyway.”*

“How was your bath?” asked Peeps.

“It was wonderful, thank you. There are so few other patrons that it felt like I had the entire open-air bath to myself.”

“I'm glad to hear it.”

We continued like that for a while, the three of us engaging in small talk.

Eventually, Abaddon stood up from his place on the gazebo's bench, and we all returned to the suite. As I walked along in my *yukata*, ready for some rest and relaxation, Peeps sat atop my shoulder. Fortunately, no third parties caught sight of us on the way back.

When we arrived at the suite, Ms. Futarishizuka was in the living room in her *yukata*, sitting on a sofa and tapping away at her phone.

“Where's everyone else?” I asked.

“In the private open-air bath,” she replied. *“I'll give you a hand if you want to peep.”*

“All three of them?”

“If you're worried about the magical girl, she went home when you left to take your bath.”

“Oh.”

Apparently, the magical girl had excused herself before I had a chance to stop her. She'd been the center of attention the whole time, so maybe she was just uncomfortable. I wondered if the day would ever come when we could talk more

naturally with her.

As I chatted with Ms. Futarishizuka, I settled down on the sofa across from her and set my bathing kit down next to me. Peeps flew off my shoulder and fluttered down onto the table between the sofas. I was filled with the urge to simply flop over and fall asleep.

A moment later, we heard footsteps coming from the hallway we'd just left. My neighbor appeared in the entrance, wearing a *yukata* like Ms. Futarishizuka.

"You're back, mister," she observed.

"I only got here a moment ago."

As Ms. Futarishizuka had said, she seemed to have just gotten out of the bath; her hair was still wet. She looked comfortably warm with the towel around her neck, and compared to the sailor uniform I'd seen her in for the past few months, it made her seem quite a bit more mature.



Noticing my gaze, she brought up another topic. “The open-air bath here has an amazing view. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Really?”

“You should go in, too,” she suggested. “Allow me to wash your back.”

“No, that’s okay. I just got out of the bath, so...”

“*Speaking of the view,*” said Abaddon, “*why is this curtain still closed?*”

“Wait, Abaddon, that curtain is—,” my neighbor began.

We’d been keeping the curtain covering that side of the living room closed this entire time, as instructed. Abaddon, however, swiftly swept it aside. With a light whooshing noise, its runners slid across the rail, revealing the view outside.

From here, we could see the open-air bath on the terrace—along with, of course, the person currently bathing there. Miss Hoshizaki was sitting on the edge of the bath, enjoying the view over the fence meant to keep people from tumbling over the side of the hill. There she was, on the other side of the big window—completely naked, her towel placed beside the bath. She was in front of us, facing to the side.

Her back is so nice and straight, I thought. I was a little jealous; I had a bit of a hunch myself. How terrible it was to get older. Your muscles shriveled, and you started to curl up.

It was then that she noticed us. She gave a start, covered herself with her hands, and sank into the water—but not before our eyes met.

Past her was the view my neighbor had described. It was beautiful—the vast sea stretching far into the distance, to the horizon and beyond, its surface glittering under the moonlight.

“*Whoops! My apologies.*”

The curtain was immediately closed. This kind of slip-up was uncharacteristic of Abaddon.

“Well, I bet that was a nice view, hmm?” teased Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Sure,” I muttered, “but now I have a headache imagining what she’ll do next.”

“Abaddon, what’s the big idea?” demanded my neighbor.

“*Idea? There was no idea,*” the demon insisted. “*It was just a little mistake.*”

“.....”

My neighbor’s gaze drifted between Abaddon and me. What had he been thinking? At this point, I had no idea. But now I felt bad for my poor work colleague, having been used like that. She seemed to be getting all the unfavorable jobs lately.



“Oh, that’s right,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “About this girl’s transfer. Will a school near the villa work?”

“...I’m moving to a new school?”

I’d finished my work, knocked back a few beers, and taken a dip in the bath. I was feeling very good about everything, but there were still so many problems waiting in the wings. Listening to the two of them reminded me that I had a lot left on my plate.

Come to think of it, now that my apartment’s history, I need to find somewhere new to live.

Afterword

Thank you, as always, to everyone who purchased this latest volume. With your support, this series has managed to reach its fourth book. This is truly wonderful news, so allow me to express my gratitude for helping me to overcome this first hurdle.

I needed about six months between the previous volume and this one, and it looks like that will be the case for each book moving forward. This is a pretty standard pace for light novels, but like the previous volumes in this series, this one has about one and a half to two times the amount of text as other titles. Please wait patiently, and I will have more story for you soon.

Now, then. There isn't much space, so I'll move on to the acknowledgements. First, Kantoku. You've been busy with so many other big titles lately; I'm deeply grateful you've devoted so much time to this series.

My editor, O, and the editorial department at MF Bunko J—thank you so much, as always, for your unending support for this series despite how busy you are with all the media developments related to your other series.

And finally, I'd like to send my heartfelt thanks to the sales team, the proofreaders, the designers, booksellers both in Japan and overseas, internet-based booksellers, and everyone from all the companies who had a hand in this project—you've all helped me so much.

This has been *Sasaki and Peeps*, published by Kadokawa and MF Bunko J, originally posted on Kakuyomu. I look forward to your continued support of this series.

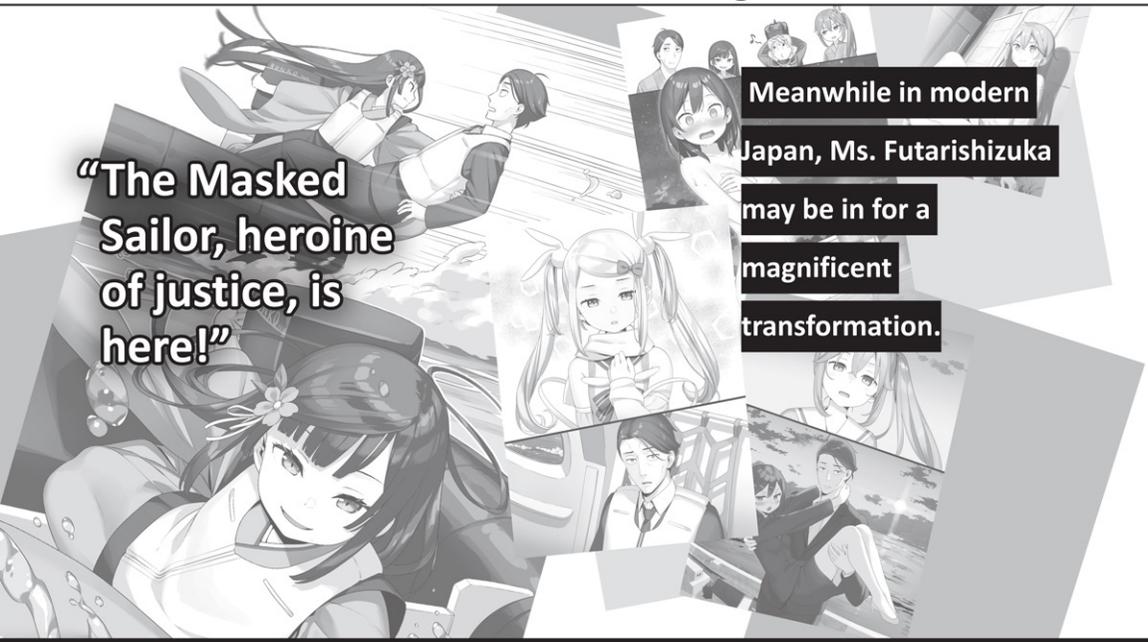
(Buncololi)



The battle over
succession between
Herz's Prince Adonis and
Prince Lewis reaches its climax,
and betrayal, strife,
and coups d'état send
the kingdom hurtling into chaos.

"I'm sorry,
Peeps.
I'm never
quite up
to snuff."

Can Sasaki save what the Starsage holds dear?



"The Masked
Sailor, heroine
of justice,
is here!"

Meanwhile in modern
Japan, Ms. Futarishizuka
may be in for a
magnificent
transformation.

Sasaki and Peeps ⁵ scheduled for
release Fall 2023!!!

Page 246 Goldenagato.jp/directs.com

The Psychics and the Magical Girl Drag the Death Game Crew into the Fight

~Alert! Giant Sea Monster Approaching Japan~

Buncololi
Illustration by Kantoku



Peeps, have you heard of the magazine called *This Light Novel Is Amazing!*?



No. What is it?



It's the definitive guide to the hottest new light novels.



What about it?



Would you believe that this series won first place in *This Light Novel Is Amazing! 2022* (published by Takarajimasha)'s large format novel division?



That sounds like quite the honor.



Even the author doubted his own ears when they contacted him about it.



Then we must show our thanks to the readers who voted for us.



I'd like to use this space to thank everyone who voted for us. Thank you so much.



I have some good news, Peeps.



There's more?



We've received handwritten fan letters.



Even in this age of widespread internet usage, there are still those who communicate via paper and letters?



That just makes it all the more fun to receive them.



I see.



I carefully read every word. Though I apologize for not being able to send individual replies.



We will do our best to meet your expectations.



I'll keep doing my best, so I hope you'll continue to support us in the future.

HAVE YOU BEEN TURNED ON TO LIGHT NOVELS YET?



86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. 1-11

In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the “nonexistent” Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot “unmanned” weapons into battle...

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The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winfield Kingdom’s prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf’s ears and tail named Myuri, who stowed away for the ride!

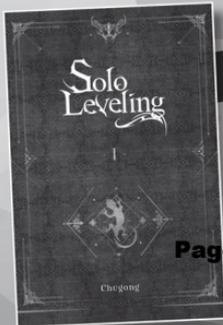
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E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he’s abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he’s ever encountered.

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THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. 1-11

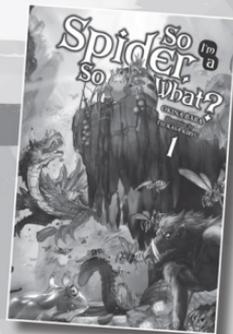
Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

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SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. 1-15

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

Manga adaptation available now!



OVERLORD, VOL. 1-15

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues’ gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

Manga adaptation available now!

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HAJIMEMASHITA ~NARABI NI KYODAIKAIJU GA NIHONRAIHO NO OSHIRASE~

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