

Betrayals, Conspiracies, and Coups d'État! The Gripping

Conclusion to the Otherworld Succession Battle

~Meanwhile, You Asked for It! It's Time for

a Slice-Of-Life Episode in Modern Japan, but

We Appear to Be on Hard Mode~

5

Buncololi

Illustration by
Kantoku

Sasaki and Peeps

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“Daddy, my stomach is rumbly.”

“I know you’re joking, but I must ask you to stop right there.”

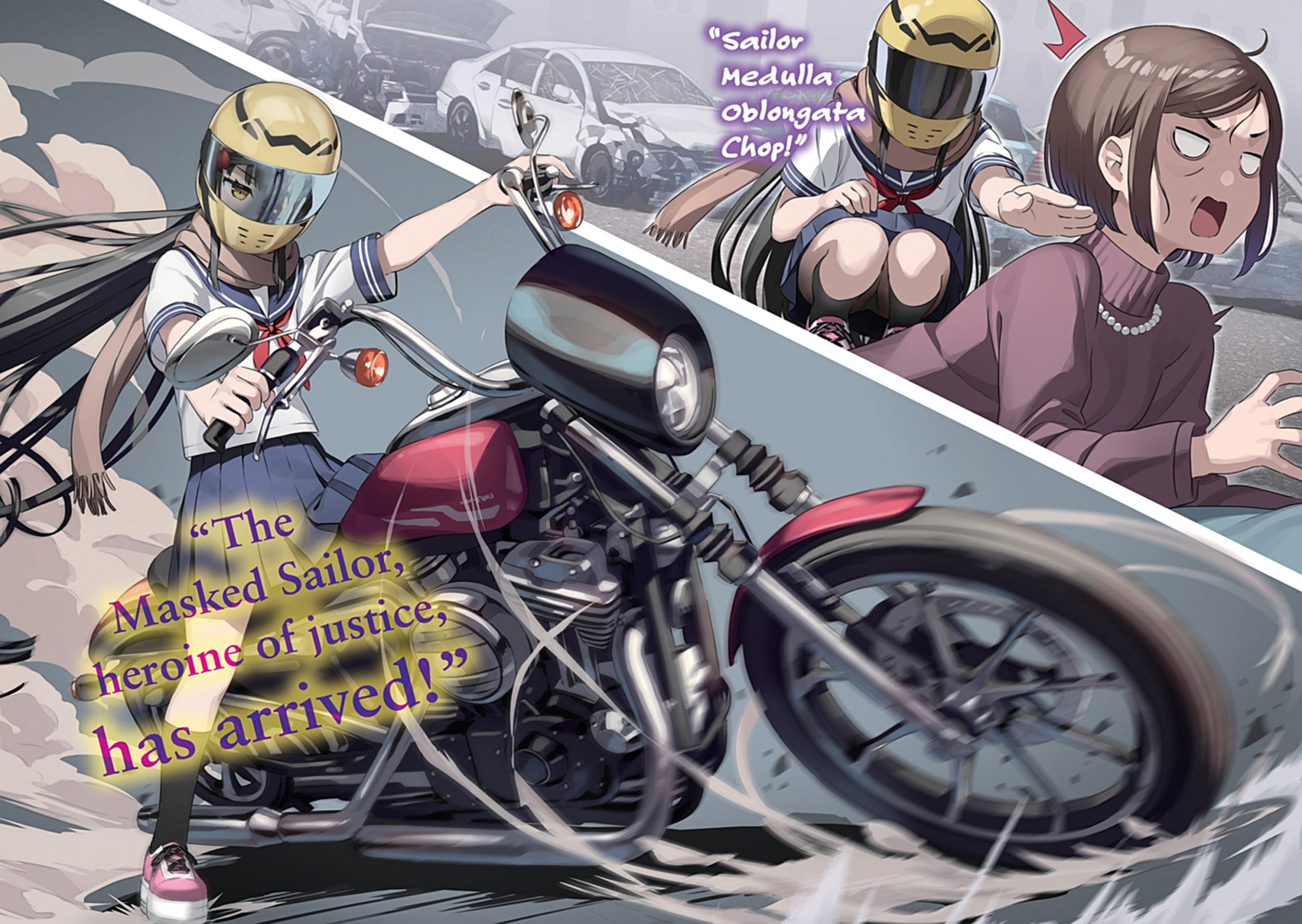
Daughter (Age XXX)

Studying with a High School Girl

“You’re not trying to look up my skirt, are you?”

“Here are the lesson materials. My English teacher said that, at first, you should just read along with the scripts to get your tongue used to the words. If you’re starting from zero, it’ll be easy to trip up. So let’s stick to this for today.”





"Sailor
Medulla
Oblongata
Chop!"

"The
Masked Sailor,
heroine of justice,
has arrived!"

Miss
Hoshizaki's
recent posts



01/01/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

Happy New Year.



03/16/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

It's starting to get warm out.



10/25/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

Recently it's been chilly in the mornings and evenings.



01/01/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

Happy New Year.



04/05/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

Seems it's time to put away my coat.



11/09/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

I'll need to get my coat out soon...



11/10/20xx

Zakky @qkAxf3w2PbIJes5

Lately I feel like time is passing really fast.



Sasaki and Peeps

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New York

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<Summary of Events Thus Far>

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

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

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

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

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

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

But such smooth sailing didn't last.

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

But back in modern times, Sasaki's work at the Paranormal Phenomena Countermeasure Bureau proved challenging. Unable to rely on Peeps for support, Sasaki made use of the magic he acquired while training in the otherworld to survive a series of battles against psychics.

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

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

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

Sasaki's neighbor, requested his help, and along with Futarishizuka, it was decided they would cooperate.

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

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

Immediately, a battle began, plunging the hotel suite into chaos. The girls barely even shared a word before they proceeded to tear up the room. Sasaki, who had to clean up the aftermath, was left totally exhausted but managed to bring the situation to a close—just before receiving news of a giant sea monster attack.

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

Meanwhile, the proxy war between angels and demons was heating up, as plots spilled out of the isolated spaces and into the streets. The angelic faction, which saw Sasaki's neighbor and Abaddon as a major threat, sent a spy to blow up the apartment complex where she and Sasaki lived.

After barely managing to survive, his neighbor encountered the suspected culprits: an angel and her

Disciple. Sasaki, who witnessed the explosion, was able to secure his neighbor and Abaddon's help with a decisive strike against the sea monster. Thanks to additional support from psychics and the magical girl, Peeps was able to slay the dragon in secret with his magic.

Though the girls met on bad terms, by the time the dragon was defeated, their relationships had improved enough to visit a hot spring resort in Atami together and share a meal.

That relief, however, would only last a moment.

Back in the otherworld, trouble is brewing in the struggle for Herz's royal throne...

<Vacation and Daily Life>

The day of the Kraken hunt was behind us, and dawn had broken.

We'd stayed the night at a Japanese-style inn in the coastal city of Atami and departed the next morning for the capital to report to our boss on everything that had happened. As usual, Ms. Futarishizuka was taking us there in her car—I sat in the passenger's seat with Miss Hoshizaki in the back.

“Are you *absolutely sure* Futarishizuka should be driving? Shouldn't you do that, Sasaki? She's got me worried to death we'll get into an accident. Her foot *can* actually reach the brakes, right?”

“How very rude of you,” replied the girl in the driver's seat. “And when I'm going to the trouble of ferrying you all over the place...”

“I think I'm more likely to get into an accident than she is,” I pointed out.

This was Miss Hoshizaki's first time in Ms. Futarishizuka's car, and she was staring with blatant unease at the little girl behind the wheel—an admittedly unusual sight. The high schooler's restlessness only intensified as we merged onto the highway.

I remember being just as worried at first, I thought, suddenly feeling nostalgic. At this point, though, I'm so calm

I could take a nap. I'll try my best to chat with her, though, since I know she'll get mad if I fall asleep.

“Dear, if you’re that uneasy,” said Ms. Futarishizuka, “you should have gone home on the train.”

“But Sasaki was going with you,” Miss Hoshizaki said. “And it would be weird for us all to take different routes to the same place.”

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to get some extra pocket money by making the bureau pay for your fare anyway,” I commented casually.

My senior grimaced. “O-of course not! What about you?”

Whenever I went somewhere moderately remote on business, I’d usually rely on whoever I was meeting to drive me around. Then, after returning to work, I’d still receive the full reimbursement for transit since I’d applied for it beforehand. A lot of office workers low on cash did things like that—it was never much, but it always put a spring in my step.

“I never intended to put in for it,” I replied.

“Would you like me to go a little faster?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka in her usual slow, grandmotherly tones.

“P-please just drive safely!” cried Miss Hoshizaki.

We’d sent my neighbor and Abaddon to the hotel near the ruins of our old apartment using Peeps’s teleportation spell. They’d stayed there the day before, too, while we were on bureau business. After bringing the two of them to the hotel, my distinguished Java sparrow planned to return to the villa

in Karuizawa where Lady Elsa was waiting. Considerable time had passed since we'd parted ways at the inn, so he was probably already there.

“Anyway, what was all that stuff yesterday?” asked Miss Hoshizaki.

“What stuff?” I replied.

“You know—when everyone suddenly disappeared except for us and the Kraken. It wouldn't hurt to give me a *little* explanation. We need to have our stories straight for our meeting with the section chief, right?”

It was obvious she was trying to change the topic after my implicit accusation that she was pilfering from the bureau. But it was true I hadn't explained anything to her yet about the angel–demon proxy war or the isolated spaces. The same went for the charming sparrow that had single-handedly defeated the sea monster and the otherworldly magic I was able to wield. The term *magical middle-aged man* had also, of course, been left up in the air.

“Oh, is that all?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka. “Just keep feigning ignorance like you've been doing.”

“But I want to fly like Sasaki.”

“I'm sorry, but I don't think that will be possible,” I told her.

We'd already imposed silence on Miss Hoshizaki the day before by bringing up our relationship with Mr. Akutsu. After mentioning our work at the bureau and our wages, she'd reluctantly agreed to stay quiet. Or so we'd thought.

However, it was clear she wasn't happy about the situation—especially if she felt the need to revisit the issue after just one night.

“Wh-what if I told you that, in exchange, you could...um, do as you pleased with me?” She gave me a provocative smirk through the rearview mirror. But it only lasted a moment.

“That ploy won't work,” cut in Ms. Futarishizuka. “The man's into little girls.”

“Huh...?” Miss Hoshizaki's smirk morphed into a grimace.

“Ms. Futarishizuka, please don't use misinformation to ruin my work relationships,” I said.

“Wait, Sasaki, are you...going out with her?” asked my senior.

“Oh, we're *all over* each other,” answered Ms. Futarishizuka in my place. She sure was talkative today—probably because Peeps wasn't with us—and I could see an evil grin on her face. This conversation would benefit her no matter how it turned out. Her composure as she replied revealed a level of confidence that was fitting of her true age.

“Do you honestly think someone like me could handle her?” I asked, resigned.

“...I guess you have a point,” replied Miss Hoshizaki. She seemed convinced.

The conversation was going at a good pace; I had to hand it to Ms. Futarishizuka for that. A moment later, she spared

me a sidelong glance that seemed to say *Be thankful*. Our senior now silent, all I could do was nod in gratitude.

I'd skipped my trip to the otherworld the night before because of Miss Hoshizaki's presence. Unlike my neighbor and Abaddon, who had gone to their bedroom without complaint, she'd kept a persistent watch on the living area throughout the night, despite the futon we'd set out for her.

We'd given my neighbor and Abaddon a twin bedroom and put Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka in the Japanese-style room. Peeps and I wound up in the living room. Miss Hoshizaki had come out several times during the night to confirm that I was still lying on the sofa—I was sure of this because Peeps told me the next morning. That, combined with the exhaustion of running all over the place fighting the Kraken, had left us without a good chance to go to the otherworld. We'd accidentally fallen asleep waiting for *her* to fall asleep.

“I'll keep quiet about your *real* powers and your psychic friends for now, Sasaki,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “And if the chief asks about yesterday, I'll tell him the Kraken suddenly disappeared. Does that work?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied.

“In exchange, you'll keep helping with my work like you're supposed to, okay?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Just to be clear, if you don't help, I may accidentally let something slip.”

“Rest assured, I'm well aware.”

“Really? You’re agreeing to all of this pretty easily.”

“Well, it is my job.”

“...Right.”

Staying employed at the bureau was exactly what I wanted. If that was her compromise, I could ask for nothing better.

With a little more time, Mr. Akutsu would learn about the angel–demon proxy war on his own. At that point, Miss Hoshizaki could tattle on us all she liked—it wouldn’t matter. I could even tell the chief that my otherworld magic was simply a reward for taking part in the war. Though I felt a little bad for my neighbor, the death game would serve as good cover.

It seemed we’d managed to avoid leaking any information.

“Ugh, this driver in front of us is slow as molasses,” complained Ms. Futarishizuka. “This is the passing lane, you know!”

“I know you’re joking, but please don’t provoke other drivers,” I warned her.

“These police notebooks are real, you know. Maybe I’ll install some lights on the roof, too.”

“.....”

Considering she’d previously installed a signal jammer in here, I was a little scared she’d actually do it.

Our conversations continued in this vein as we passed the time on the road.



The ride in Ms. Futarishizuka’s car wasn’t long; we arrived at the office a little after noon. She parked in the lot, and we all headed inside. But we hadn’t even settled at our desks when Mr. Akutsu caught us. At his instruction, the three of us went to the meeting space.

Our positions around the long conference table were the same as always: Mr. Akutsu on one side, with Ms. Futarishizuka, myself, and Miss Hoshizaki sitting across from him. The chief had a laptop hooked up to an external display.

“I’ll spare the pleasantries,” he said right off the bat. “Should I assume the Kraken has been dealt with?”

During the ride here, the three of us had decided how to respond to this.

“Unfortunately, I’m not sure we can answer that question,” I told him.

“What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“After traveling north through the Pacific and entering Suruga Bay, the Kraken suddenly disappeared from the water,” I explained. “I believe word will have reached you of this already, but the SDF is still searching for it.”

Irrespective of our actual role in the incident and whatever our boss may have assumed, that was all the info we could give to him as his employees. Neither Ms.

Futarishizuka nor Miss Hoshizaki had anything to add. They silently looked between the chief and me.

Mr. Akutsu immediately put on the pressure. “If there’s a chance it’s still alive, you’ll all be working on-site indefinitely.”

Personally, I was all for enjoying more relaxing inn stays along the southeastern coast. We’d only had one night at the resort in Atami, and I wished it could have been longer. *I wouldn’t mind staying there another two or three nights.*

“The only fact we can relay is that the Kraken vanished, sir,” I repeated. They could look all they wanted. They’d never find the octodragon. The Starsage himself had guaranteed it.

After hearing the same information a second time, Mr. Akutsu’s eyebrow twitched, and though he opened his mouth to continue, he quickly closed it, seeming to sink into thought.

It was ten or fifteen seconds before he appeared to catch on to our intent. He slowly nodded, then answered briefly. “All right. Then that’s what I’ll report to the higher-ups.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As long as we remained stubborn, the section chief wouldn’t openly play up our existence. He had plenty of other useful subordinates and connections, and I trusted they’d handle the matter skillfully. They probably specialized in things like this anyway. Even if they started now, I imagined they’d get word back faster than the SDF.

“By the way, sir,” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Are we to receive no words of appreciation for our hard work?”

“I am extremely grateful for your efforts over the last few days.”

“Oh, no. That isn’t really what I meant.”

No sooner had my boss and I reached an agreement than Ms. Futarishizuka started pressing him for some kind of reward. She refused to back down. I supposed she *had* been constantly busy for the past two days.

“If it’s confirmed that the Kraken really has vanished, then the bureau will be up to its neck in paperwork for a while,” said the chief. “Since you three were dealing with things on-site, I’m thinking of giving you all some time off, starting today.”

“Now *that’s* what I’m talking about.” Ms. Futarishizuka’s grim expression did a complete one-eighty, blooming into a smile.

This reward was exactly what Peeps and I needed as well. The otherworld was just as busy as modern Japan these days, and I’d been neglecting my magic practice. I was extremely happy at the prospect of setting aside a whole chunk of time for it. And with Prince Lewis’s motivations still unknown, I wanted to prioritize problems over there for the time being.

Miss Hoshizaki was the only one who looked put out. Rather than vacations, she tended to get more excited about extra pay for extra work. I expected she’d keep her complaints to herself in front of Ms. Futarishizuka and me,

though, considering she'd done relatively little during the fight with the Kraken.

"I'd like you all to get some rest for a few days so you're fresh when you come back," finished the chief.

"Boss's orders? I suppose we'll just have to enjoy ourselves, hmm?" said Ms. Futarishizuka, turning her gaze on me—probably warning me not to bring any trouble to her doorstep during her time off.

"There's also the matter of your apartment, Sasaki," added the chief. "Feel free to focus on that until things calm down. But I will need you to write up that report—the one delayed by the Kraken operation—before you start your break."

"Understood, sir," I said. "I'll have it in your inbox by the end of the day."

What *was* I going to do about that? I needed someplace to move now that my apartment had been burned down. If I'd still been living my old, average life, this would have been a real emergency. But I hadn't thought about it at all until now. I'd just figured that if worse came to worst, I could flee into the otherworld. How many days had it been since I'd slept in my old apartment?

Well, this was a good chance to discuss new living arrangements with Peeps. I wanted to pick out a place that would bring more color to our days together. Now that my financial issues were a thing of the past, we could even opt for a custom-built house if we wanted.

"Chief, I wouldn't mind staying on the job," put in Miss Hoshizaki.

“I think you’ve had more than enough time on the job,” Mr. Akutsu replied. “I want you to focus on graduating for now. The unofficial decision is to bring you on board after that, but I’d like all our employees to have a decent level of education. Foreign languages especially will go far in expanding the range of tasks you can handle.”

She nodded reluctantly at her boss’s harsh words. “...All right, I understand.”

Maybe I should make an effort to learn English, too, I thought. We didn’t need it for any of this, but who knows what will happen in the future? Now that I’d met Peeps and the world had opened up to me, I felt a little uneasy. I can’t necessarily make do with just my mother tongue anymore.

“Now, then,” said the chief. “Are there any questions?”

“No, sir,” I replied.

“I’d like to get the desk work over with and start my vacation,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka.

“I don’t have any, either, sir,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“Then this meeting is adjourned.”

I’d rallied my nerves and my resolve before coming in here, assuming we’d be pretty busy for a while. But instead, I now had some vacation time on my hands. Relieved, I left the meeting room and went back to my desk in the office.



After safely wrapping up our work that day, Ms. Futarishizuka and I left the bureau at five. I got back in her

car and we drove through the city, heading for a hotel near what was left of my apartment building. This was where Peeps had sent my neighbor and Abaddon that morning. We planned to reunite with the two of them this evening.

We met up in the hotel guest room, and then we all climbed into Ms. Futarishizuka's car and got going. Our destination was a local funeral home.

The entrance to the property had a sign reading KUROSU FAMILY CEREMONY. My neighbor's surname was right there, written in black ink on white paper. As I looked at it out of the corner of my eye, the facility staff guided our car to where the ceremony would be held.

My neighbor's mother's wake was that night.

"I'm sorry for putting you through all this trouble, mister," said my neighbor. I looked at her in the rearview mirror. She was bowing.

"Actually, she's the one who organized the details," I replied, gesturing to Ms. Futarishizuka in the driver's seat.

"Really?" my neighbor asked.

"Apparently, she was setting everything up even while we were busy handling the Kraken," I explained. "Any thanks should go to her. She'll probably be helping you in the future, too, with moving and everything."

"It seems we owe you a lot," remarked Abaddon.

"Oh, no. This really wasn't that much," replied Ms. Futarishizuka with a low chuckle.

She was currently doing her utmost to ingratiate herself with the death game participants, doing all sorts of things for my neighbor and Abaddon to strengthen their relationship. Even the funeral ceremony was probably meant to bring them into her fold. She was trying to stake her claim on them before anyone else beat her to it.

Considering my neighbor's lack of family, I was personally very grateful to Ms. Futarishizuka for doing this. I was pretty sure she'd taken my feelings into consideration as well, leaving nothing to be desired. She was quick at figuring out how to benefit from things—and equally quick at acting on it.

My neighbor bowed again toward the driver's seat. "Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka."

"Don't worry about it. You two helped me out before, after all."

"I don't remember doing anything..."

"If that big guy had come ashore, we would have been up to our eyeballs in work."

We'd all gotten dressed for the wake at the hotel beforehand. My neighbor was wearing her school uniform, but Ms. Futarishizuka and I wore mourning clothes. She'd traded out her usual kimono for an all-black one-piece dress. The fluttering skirt made her look even younger than usual, and the facility staff was staring at her in bafflement through the window.

Abaddon was, as always, wearing his crown and cape. Nobody else could see him, though, so that wasn't an issue.

In fact, his outfit, with its black motif, actually kind of fit the situation.

“All righty. We’re here,” announced Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Would you happen to know the starting time?” I asked.

“Any moment, I’d expect. We can go straight there.”

“Understood.”

We all got out of the car and followed a map through the grounds.

Some families had wakes at their homes. My neighbor’s home had gone up in flames, however, and so Ms. Futarishizuka had rented this facility. According to her, she’d already planned out everything, including the next day’s funeral. Because of the deceased’s cause of death, her remains wouldn’t be shown at the wake. The funeral would be held with only the coffin; what little remained of her mother would be examined by the bureau and then cremated. For that, the bureau—as well as the police—would be acting as go-betweens for the bereaved family. Since I’d been in charge of handling the explosion’s aftermath, I had a good understanding of all the factors at play—and it was these factors that had pushed back the wake by a day.

I took the chance to ask for more details from Ms. Futarishizuka in my neighbor’s place. “Do you know who the chief mourner will be?”

“They told me they got in touch with the girl’s grandmother,” she replied.

It had only been a few days since my neighbor and Ms. Futarishizuka met. Considering my neighbor's reserved personality, she probably felt uncomfortable asking a bunch of questions. As an involved party accompanying her, though, I wanted to get what information I could so that I wasn't rude to her extended family.

"Her daughter—the mother—eloped, so they've been estranged for some time," Ms. Futarishizuka continued. "But she lives in the same prefecture, and she saw what happened on the news. That's apparently why they were able to get in touch with her so quickly."

"Will her ex-husband be attending as well?"

"I'm not sure about that one."

"I've never met my grandmother," commented my neighbor.

"A lot of families are like that," Ms. Futarishizuka assured her. "It's nothing to worry about."

"All right. I won't, then."

Ms. Futarishizuka's words of comfort struck me as a little odd. I didn't want to voice what I was thinking in front of my neighbor, though, so I swallowed the question.

Even Abaddon, who was always chatting with the girl, had put a lid on his usual banter the moment we got in the car. The proxy war had been repeated many times in the past, so while the world might have changed, he probably had some idea about weddings, funerals, and the like.

We left the parking lot and passed through the entrance. After going down the hallway, we soon arrived at the wake venue. One of the staff members at the reception area showed us to a somewhat large Japanese-style room with a decorative altar in it. An anteroom was available, too, in case anyone had to change clothes. A reception would be held in a different part of the building following the ceremony.

Only Ms. Futarishizuka could have set up something like this—it must have cost a fortune. The wake, plus the funeral, must have set her back millions of yen.

Upon seeing the splendid altar, my neighbor said, “Um, I’m kind of poor, so I don’t think I can afford all this...”

“Just think of it as thanks for your help yesterday,” Ms. Futarishizuka assured her.

“.....”

Several other attendees were already present. Naturally, I didn’t know any of them.

After setting foot in the room, we became the center of attention. We’d seen several people in the hallway, too, engaged in conversation—but each time, they stopped as soon as they saw my neighbor. Or rather, they lowered their voices and started whispering among themselves, throwing the occasional glance our way. A few scattered phrases made it to our ears.

“She’s here—that one right there. The one in the sailor uniform.”

“She started middle school this spring, right?”

“A friend of mine has a daughter who goes there. She says she’s the victim of bullying.”

“I heard a child consultation center got a report about her once.”

“What? Really?”

“Who’s going to take her in?”

“Not us, that’s for sure.”

“Will *anyone* take her in?”

“She’ll obviously end up in a facility.”

“A girl that age... If someone took her in and something happened, it’d be a total mess.”

“*That woman* is her mother. She’s bound to be nothing but trouble.”

I’d guessed this from her home environment, but it seemed she really was ostracized by her extended family. Many among the attendees were elderly, and most of them were women older than me. I guessed it was mostly the wives coming in place of their husbands who were at work.

“Who’s the girl next to her?”

“A second child?”

“There’s a man with her—perhaps she’s his.”

“Do you think he was the dead woman’s lover?”

“He looks a little old for that.”

“He’s probably rich—I mean, look at this place.”

“I hear the man who died was her lover, too.”

“What a floozy, just like I always thought.”

“I hear the cause of death was a gas leak.”

“Maybe that man got jealous and did it on purpose.”

“Oh god, you might be right.”

Soft-spoken rumors continued to fly every which way. Not only were the stories exaggerated, they were embellished and hyperbolized with such momentum they seemed about to break through the atmosphere. I felt like I was in the middle of a soap opera, and my repulsion gave way to sheer amazement. I stopped short only one step into the room.

Clearly, I was on the away team here. *I should have stayed in the car for a few more minutes.*

A moment later, I felt Ms. Futarishizuka tug on the hem of my jacket. I looked down at her.

With a childish lisp, she said, “Daddy, my stomach is rumbly.”

“I know you’re joking, but I must ask you to stop right there.” I shuddered, feeling goose bumps on my upper arms. Incidentally, I was hungry, too. We hadn’t eaten dinner after leaving the bureau; we’d come straight to the wake.

“Then quit paying attention to those people,” she replied, “and go take your seat.”

“Right. You’re right.”

At her urging, I sat down on one of the floor cushions set up in rows in front of the altar—as far toward the back as I could reasonably go. I wound up between my neighbor and Ms. Futarishizuka, making me feel like a father who had brought his two children. For the first time since meeting her, I was jealous of my colleague’s overly youthful appearance.

After a few more minutes of sitting with my legs folded beneath me, the Buddhist monk arrived and began to recite a sutra.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

I know about wakes. At least, I know they’re an event that happens when someone dies. But I’ve never been to one before. As I look at the intricately decorated altar at the back of the room and the portrait of my mother hanging high over it, I reflect. I’d never dreamed hers would be the first I’d attend.

I also feel uneasy. This all must have been so expensive. I can barely afford to eat every day—I could never pay for this in a million years. That woman my neighbor called his colleague, Futarishizuka, explained that she’d prepared the whole thing. But I’m still too scared to ask how I’m supposed to repay her.

“Um, I’m kind of poor, so I don’t think I can afford all this...”

“Just think of it as thanks for your help yesterday,” she tells me.

“.....”

I suppose that means I can relax about the wake and funeral costs. I just wish she would have spent all this money thanking me in a more meaningful way. But with my neighbor here, I can't speak up and tell her that, so I end up staying silent.

If I want to negotiate with her, I think, it would be best to do it when he's not around. If I stay well-behaved when it comes to my mother, he'll keep being nice to me. I'd do anything to get him to be nice to me. I want to.

“She's here—that one right there. The one in the sailor uniform.”

“She started middle school this spring, right?”

“A friend of mine has a daughter who goes there. She says she's the victim of bullying.”

“I heard a child consultation center got a report about her once.”

“What? Really?”

“Who's going to take her in?”

“Not us, that's for sure.”

“Will *anyone* take her in?”

“She'll obviously end up in a facility.”

“A girl that age... If someone took her in and something happened, it'd be a total mess.”

“*That woman* is her mother. She's bound to be nothing but trouble.”

Everyone here is whispering about me. Under normal circumstances, they would have sent me to an orphanage for sure. But because I'm involved in the proxy war, Futarishizuka is letting me live in her Karuizawa villa for now. *Of course, if I hadn't gotten wrapped up in all this, my apartment would never have burned down to begin with.* Personally, I'm saddest about no longer living next to *him*.

“Who's the girl next to her?”

“A second child?”

“There's a man with her—perhaps she's his.”

“Do you think he was the dead woman's lover?”

“He looks a little old for that.”

“He's probably rich—I mean, look at this place.”

“I hear the man who died was her lover, too.”

“What a floozy, just like I always thought.”

“I hear the cause of death was a gas leak.”

“Maybe that man got jealous and did it on purpose.”

“Oh god, you might be right.”

My relatives' interest doesn't stop at me—it extends to my neighbor and Futarishizuka, too. They start whispering totally baseless rumors all around the room. My mother and I had nothing to do with these relatives before, so I suspect they came just to gossip.

“Daddy, my stomach is rumbling.”

“I know you're joking, but I must ask you to stop right there.”

Futarishizuka's playacting irritates me. *It's not fair for her to act friendly with him like that. It's really, really not fair.* Maybe I should try calling him Daddy sometime, too.

At school, students sometimes mistakenly call a teacher Mom or Dad. I haven't seen it happen since entering middle school, but I witnessed it several times back in elementary. *That's a good plan; I'll have to try something like that.*

We wait awhile, and then a monk comes, sits down in front of the altar, and begins reciting a sutra. Everyone in attendance sits on their cushions, listening. I quickly glance around. Not a tear in sight. In fact, nobody seems sad at all. I'm obviously not, either.

Abaddon, perhaps interested in the ceremony itself, starts floating around the room, here and there, all around the altar. One moment he's studying the monk's clothes, and the next he's sniffing the incense stand next to him, basically doing whatever he likes. The room is too quiet for me to call out and stop him.

A few minutes later, the monk tells us to light the incense. Then his chanting continues like the background music in a movie. An older woman sitting in front of us gets up and

goes to the incense stand between the monk and the altar. I know that this sort of thing is done at wakes. I don't know the rules for it, though. And my turn comes very quickly.

“The girl is the next closest relation, yes? She should be next,” says Futarishizuka.

“Indeed,” replies my neighbor.

I read in some book once that turns are decided by how closely one is related to the deceased. In other words, the one who just lit the incense is the chief mourner—my grandmother.

I'm confused, but my neighbor and Futarishizuka stand up to guide me. I follow them to the incense stand. They then take a step back and watch as I carefully imitate what my grandmother did, bowing and trying to mimic the way she brought the incense to the burner.

It takes me a while, and misgivings flood my mind. If I'm too slow, will the monk's sutra end? Maybe he's ad-libbing the whole thing while hitting his bell and wooden block, like a singer going from the B melody into the chorus and then the solo, then repeating the A melody again instead of finishing, since the incense isn't burning yet.

“She seems awfully calm for someone whose mother just died.”

“I heard she was abused. I wonder if it's true.”

“You don't think *she* messed with the gas main, do you?”

“Stop—she can hear you.”

I hear relatives I've never met before whispering about me. I asked about my father on the way, but I don't see him here. His current family must be more important than my mother's funeral.

Instead, I notice one woman staring at me. Unlike the other attendees, who don't seem to care much, her face is locked in a deep frown—a terrifying expression. She looks somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties. She has a pretty face, and since most of the others at the wake are middle-aged or older, her youth makes her stand out. She doesn't seem to have anyone with her; she's sitting on her own, away from everyone else.

The woman's nice mourning clothes are just as wrinkled as her forehead. Why is that?

Once the attendees all finish burning incense, the monk gives a sermon. He speaks for a few minutes at most. After it's done, he leaves the room, marking the end of the ceremony. My neighbor and Futarishizuka quietly explain each step in the process as it happens.

The hushed room bursts to life as chattering resumes among the attendees. All the people sitting on cushions in front of the altar get shuffled out by the staff into another room.

There's a reception afterward. Apparently, I'm supposed to attend. But my two companions suggest something else.

“Can we not just go home?” proposes Futarishizuka. “We don't need to stay until the very end.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” agrees my neighbor. “What do you want to do?”

They're doing this because of the attention from the other attendees. And I *am* really uncomfortable.

Even moving from one room to the next, plenty of people are glancing at us. And one of them isn't just glancing—the woman who was staring at me before breaks from the line filing into the next room and heads our way, stalking over and then stopping in front of me.

What does she want? I wonder.

“Excuse me, but would you happen to be Miss Kurosu's daughter?” she asks in a firm voice.

“I am... Why?” I say honestly.

She grits her teeth. Then she slaps me.

The sound reverberates through the building.

I stumble. Of all the things she could have done, I didn't expect *that*. An arm quickly reaches out to steady me. It then circles around my shoulder and back, gently holding me up before I lose my balance. I reflexively turn toward its owner and see my neighbor's face from the side.

My heart pounds. *This is great.*

“No matter what your reason, I must ask you to refrain from violence,” he says to the woman.

“You're a rowdy one,” Futarishizuka interjects. “Shall I call the police?”

They both look at the woman with severe expressions.

That doesn't frighten her away, though. Ignoring the two of them, she raises her voice into a shrill cry. "She should have died alone!" she shrieks. "She was a whore—a cheating whore! And she got *him* involved! I'm carrying his child! How are you going to fix this?!"

I feel my body grow warm where my neighbor's hand is touching it. He almost never, ever had any reason to touch me in the past. And now he's done it proactively—he did this for the first time just the other day, when he carried me in the isolated space. In the past, he'd never touch me. No matter how much I wished for it.

I'm so happy I couldn't care less about the woman standing in front of me. In fact, I want to thank her for hitting me.

"Are you the wife of the man my mother was going out with?" I ask.

"Going out wi—of course he wasn't going out with her, you bitch!"

Apparently, her husband cheated on her with my mom, and she came all the way to the woman's wake to yell at her daughter. She must hold an exceptionally deep grudge. Her stubborn glare makes sense now. As do the wrinkles in her mourning clothes—she probably came here straight from her husband's funeral.

"I'll never forgive either of you for this," the woman went on. "You two stole our happiness. I won't forgive you, even in death. I'll pray for your misfortune every day. No matter where you go, I'll follow. I'll curse you for the rest of my life."

"As her daughter, I do feel bad about what she did," I say.



“Excuse me?! What does that matter? Your apology isn’t going to bring him back!”

“.....”

Then what do you want me to do? I wonder.

My neighbor and Futarishizuka both look troubled. Eventually, the woman’s arm comes up to hit me again. This time, though, my neighbor moves quickly. I feel his hand leave its place at my shoulders and back.

He takes a step forward and grabs the woman by the wrist as she brings down her hand. “Once again, ma’am, would you please refrain from violence?” he repeats.

“Let go of me, molester! He’s a molester! This man is a molester!”

She shouts her baseless slander for everyone to hear. They all turn toward us, wanting to know what’s going on.

He’s touching her, and she’s complaining? Unbelievable. For years, no matter how much I wanted him to touch me, he never even poked me with the tip of his finger. Even when he handed food to me, he was always very careful not to make physical contact.

“Well, don’t blame us for this...,” says Ms. Futarishizuka, following my neighbor and taking a step toward the woman.

“Abaddon, please take care of it,” I say, interrupting her, invoking the name of my demon. I can tolerate her speaking ill of me. But my neighbor? I can feel my gut churning.

“Aw, come on,” Abaddon whines. “Why use me for something like this?”

“Make sure to keep her conscious,” I tell him.

“If only you’d be so decisive in isolated spaces.”

The demon floats over to the woman. I’m probably the only one who sees him do it. Futarishizuka stops after hearing Abaddon’s name and turns back to look at me. I wonder if they object to me handling the situation. My neighbor looks at me in surprise, too.

The demon’s finger touches the woman’s neck. Immediately, she falls to her knees. Without any energy to hold herself up, she ends up sitting on the floor.

“Ugh... What...what is this...?”

She seems surprised by what has just happened to her. My neighbor lets go of her arm.

I then proceed to solemnly inform her about past events. “Actually, your husband never seemed very interested in my mother.”

“What? Then why was he staying so late at your apartment?”

“According to his own words, he was after *my* body from the beginning.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! He would never be interested in a child!”

“He assaulted me one day when my mother wasn’t around.”

“Wha...?”

If I tell him how scary it was and ask for comfort, I wonder if my neighbor would sleep with me. If he’s hesitant because I’m a minor, then maybe if he finds out I already have experience, he’ll be more willing to take that first step.

I figure it’s worth a try. I *was* assaulted, so it shouldn’t be too much of a problem even if I bleed after we do it.

“I think it would be best for everyone if you check to make sure he didn’t commit any other crimes,” I tell the woman.

“D-don’t you lie to me! Why would a little girl like you...?!”

“Your husband said he liked little girls like me.”

“You’re insane!”

What about my neighbor? I wonder. I’m very curious about that.

In the meantime, the funeral home staff runs over to us. I’m not sure if an attendee informed them, or they just heard the woman’s shrieking, but several men in suits rush in.

After seeing them arrive, I turn my back to the woman slumped on the floor. “I’m sorry, but I’ll be leaving now,” I say, knowing it’s probably best to go home at this point, just like my neighbor and Futarishizuka suggested.

We start down the hallway toward the building's entrance. According to Ms. Futarishizuka, my grandmother is handling things at the funeral. That means we don't need to be there. The other two follow me in silence, seeming to pick up on my intentions.

Farther down the hallway and away from all the attendees, they each give very different opinions.

"You sure told her," says Futarishizuka. "How refreshing!"

"I believe it's best to refrain from violence altogether," ventures my neighbor.

"She wasn't listening to reason," objects Futarishizuka. "Sometimes you just have to beat them up a little."

"That mindset is what earned you the curse mark on the back of your hand."

"Ugh. You sure know how to hit where it hurts."

I don't know what my neighbor is referring to, and I bet they won't tell me if I ask. They'll change the topic so smoothly I won't be able to keep up. I'm frustrated, but all I can do is listen to them, Abaddon bobbing through the air at our side as we walk down the hallway.

As soon as we exit the funeral home, we hear hurried footsteps coming up behind us.

"Wait! Please, wait!"

Turning back, we see her: the first one to stand up and burn the incense. A woman who must be my grandmother is running toward us. She looks sixty or so. Despite the obvious

wrinkles on her face, arms, and legs, her back is straight and she seems physically healthy. Once we stop and turn around, she slows to a firm, sharp walk.

I guess I didn't ever say hello to her, I think. The wake started as soon as we got there, and my mother's boyfriend's wife attacked us right after, so there was no chance. Her responsibilities as chief mourner had kept her busy, too.

"Forgive me for not saying hello," the woman says. "I'm your grandmother."

"No, it's my fault," I reply honestly, bowing. "I should have said hello before leaving."

The woman's attention immediately shifts to my neighbor. "Are you the one who contacted me about the funeral?"

"No, that wasn't me, ma'am," he responds.

"Then what relationship do you have with my granddaughter?"

"I lived in the apartment just next to hers..."

"What? Don't tell me *you're* after the fortune, too."

"...Fortune?" my neighbor repeats as my grandmother's face visibly changes, her smile morphing into something more dangerous.

Practically glaring at him now, she says, "You must be planning to trick her and con her adoptive family out of their money. Is the little one yours? To think you would use a *child* to get close to my precious granddaughter! I don't

think I've seen such an underhanded, cowardly man in my life."

It sounds like "the little one" means Futarishizuka. She looks on blankly, apparently surprised to suddenly be the topic of conversation.

But my grandmother quickly turns back to me and smiles, rattling off her next words quickly. "You mustn't rely on a stranger like him," she tells me. "And you mustn't depend on any of your relatives here, either. They're all trash who want to sponge off your adoptive father. But don't worry—I'll look after you until you're an adult."

It makes me angry to hear her one-sided rejection of my neighbor. I don't know what she's referring to when she says *adoptive family* or *fortune*, but it's enough of a first impression for me not to like her very much.

"You see, I've divorced your grandfather," she explains. "And it's lonely living on my own. Won't you come stay with me? Your apartment burned down, after all. I can take care of anything you need."

"Excuse me, but is my grandfather here as well?" I ask.

"You don't need to pay that good-for-nothing any attention at all," she assures me.

My parents were already divorced—I didn't expect my *grandparents* to have split up, too. The woman's evident unwillingness to keep up appearances when it came to her poor relationship with my grandfather, as well as my mother's own attitude toward me, gives me a lot to think about. I never complain about our family being worse off

than others. I'm pretty sure there are plenty of other families like this in the world.

But now I know why Futarishizuka consoled me the way she did when I asked about my grandmother.

"Ms. Futarishizuka, how did you contact her relatives?" my neighbor asks her.

"I prepared an adoption for convenience's sake and had an agent contact them. Why?" she answers.

"She seems to have misunderstood and thinks her granddaughter has been adopted into a well-off family."

"Yes, it seems like it."

My neighbor and Futarishizuka trade words in hushed tones. Their voices are soft—soft enough that my grandmother, standing a few steps away, doesn't hear. Even I can barely make out what they're saying.

Apparently, now that I've lost my legal guardian, Futarishizuka was using her connections to get me adopted by someone or other. Considering my relationship to Abaddon, I feel sure it must be a good situation; she wants to stay on good terms with him, after all.

But I don't like being kept in the dark about it. Once we get to Karuizawa, I'll clear things up with her. And if possible, I want *him* to be my new father. I *really* want to see him lusting after his own adoptive daughter.

"Why, he's a complete stranger!" repeats my grandmother. "Forget about him and come with me."

“.....”

“*Hmm. My demon senses are saying you shouldn't do that.*”

I don't need Abaddon to tell me. I know I have to turn down the invitation. She probably sees me as a money tree. The fact that she's never bothered to contact me in the past is proof of that. And I don't want to be anywhere near someone who would talk bad about my neighbor as soon as they see him.

But as I calculate my interests with regards to my grandmother, I hear a voice from beside me. “Dear, if you're looking for an old hag to depend on, I should think you'd be better off with *me.*”

“Excuse me?” says my grandmother. “What nonsense! What are you even talking about, you little brat?”

“Oh? A brat, huh? I'll have you know this *brat* survived the Meiji Restoration *and* World War II unscathed.”

And now Futarishizuka and my grandmother are having some kind of old lady fight, both puffing out their chests. Futarishizuka looks exactly like a little girl, so her responses probably make no sense to anyone else. My grandmother, on the other hand, is clearly irritated; she most likely thinks a child is trying to rile her up. Futarishizuka must be attempting to steer me in the same direction Abaddon was.

“Mister, could we please hurry up and go home?” I ask my neighbor.

“Are you sure?” he replies.

In contrast to the two of them, my neighbor is trying to be considerate of my family relationships until the very end. His behavior has been the same ever since our apartment building exploded—unlike Abaddon and Futarishizuka, who always speak and act in their own interest. This might be my own arrogance talking, but it seems like he actually *respects* me.

That makes me very happy. I want to do all kinds of things for him.

“I’m sorry my extended family has been causing so much trouble for you,” I say.

“No, don’t worry about it,” he replies. “Why don’t we head back to the car?”

“Okay.” I start walking toward the parking lot entrance.

Futarishizuka, still grinning smugly at my grandmother, quickly follows, and Abaddon floats along after us.

We hear my grandmother shouting at our backs. “Wait... wait just a second! Where do you think you’re going?”

I briefly turn around and call out, “Please tell my grandfather I said hello.”

“Ugh... No! Did that man do something? Is that it?!”

I end the conversation there.

I feel bad for my unknown grandfather, but I need *someone* between my grandmother and me to take the brunt of all this. By the time she realizes I’ve never even met my

grandfather, I'll be settled into my new place. As we leave, I see her rush to pull out her phone and call someone.

"That was so...wicked of you," says Abaddon.

"I'm just putting him to good use. I don't think he'll mind much."

Now that we've escaped my grandmother's clutches, we all climb into the car and leave the funeral home.



Though we attended my neighbor's mother's wake, we didn't take part in the reception, instead going back to the hotel near our old apartments. I felt very bad about how everything had gone. It must have hurt my neighbor even more. I intended to talk with Ms. Futarishizuka later about the next day's funeral, including whether we'd attend.

After getting back to the hotel room, Peeps used his teleportation magic to warp us over to the Karuizawa villa. Though the sparrow was still abstaining from the internet, he received our message and came to the hotel room to get us.

Once at our destination—the villa's living space—we all faced one another.

"This may sound sudden," began Ms. Futarishizuka, looking up from her piping hot cup of tea, "but would you two like to move in tomorrow?"

She and I sat next to each other on one sofa, with my neighbor and Abaddon across from us on the other. The

“head of the table” position was occupied by Lady Elsa. Peeps was perched on his little tree atop the low table.

“*Music to my ears,*” replied Abaddon. Then, turning to my neighbor, “*You agree, don’t you?*”

“I actually wouldn’t mind living at the hotel for a little longer,” said my neighbor.

“The electricity, gas, water, and internet are all up and running,” insisted Ms. Futarishizuka. “I also put a rush on household goods, so you’ll want for nothing. I’ve received word that the place can be handed over tomorrow morning.”

“...I see.”

“Still, it’s taking a while to get the workers ready. We can’t have unvetted people on the property, of course. So for a little while, you’ll have to cook and do the laundry for yourselves—or come here to eat and wash.”

“*This area seems to have a lot of wild edible plants, so I, for one, am satisfied.*”

“It’s getting cold, Abaddon. The plants won’t be around much longer.”

“*Come on, I was joking. Don’t be so serious.*”

The topic of conversation was my neighbor and Abaddon’s living arrangements. It seemed they were all set to get moved in. And with Ms. Futarishizuka handling matters, she probably had their new place well secured. There would be no more self-professed former fathers walking in the front door with explosives. That set my mind at ease.

But at the same time, I was growing a little impatient. *We have to do something about our next home, too*, I thought. It seemed my roommate was thinking the same.

“They appear to be ready to move. What about you?”

“You literally read my mind, Peeps,” I replied.

“Oh, Sasaki,” chimed in Lady Elsa. “I have a proposal for you.”

“What is it?”

“Why don’t you ask Futarishizuka if you can live here with me? There are so many rooms, and I think she’d be fine with the arrangement. And I’d be happy to have someone else to talk to.”

I *had* considered it. It was comfortable here—more comfortable than anywhere else I could imagine. Plus, we’d get three meals a day, all delicious and fully nutritious, without even having to ask for it. Still, my relationship with Ms. Futarishizuka gave me considerable pause. I wanted to maintain a certain distance between us.

“Come, come, what did she say?” asked Futarishizuka.

“She suggested that we live here as well,” I told her.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind. But only if you promise not to destroy the place. In fact, your sparrow seems fairly well settled in already—sometimes he’ll go around a corner and run right into me like a pane of glass, you know.”

“.....”

Peeps sheepishly fell silent.

We were already having Futarishizuka look after Elsa, and I didn't want to further indebt ourselves to her. Plus, there was no guarantee our current cooperative relationship would last forever. I also got the feeling she was a very influential person, and the idea of living with someone like that intimidated me a little.

“Um, I have a suggestion, mister...”

“What is it?”

“Why don't you come stay with us?”

“*Oh! That's a great idea!*”

Abaddon's agreement came *very* quickly, piling on the pressure. He probably wanted to keep anyone who could help fight the angels near at hand. I'd also seen at the inn in Atami that his opinion of Peeps had changed since the incident with the Kraken.

“That really wouldn't be good for appearances,” I told them. “I'd prefer not to.”

“...I see,” replied my neighbor.

A middle-aged man living with a minor he wasn't related to? That would be insane. Thanks to my newfound official powers, I doubted I'd be arrested for it, but there was no guaranteeing my status would last forever. It was always possible my relationship with Mr. Akutsu could sour and all the agencies under his thumb would turn on me.

I felt bad about turning down my neighbor's and Abaddon's offer, but I wanted to keep my reputation clean for now—at the very least while my own family register still applied. I didn't want to wind up with an attention-grabbing prior record.

“And I think it's completely possible to help you two even if we live separately,” I continued.

“Is that so? Living together sounds pretty handy, though,” pointed out Abaddon.

“Depending on the situation, I could have Peeps stay at your place, or something along those lines.”

“I've no objections to that arrangement,” the bird agreed.

“Oh—no, that's really fine,” insisted my neighbor. “We can't trouble you like that.”

Now that she had backed down, the matter of where Peeps and I would be living next was temporarily shelved. We'd have plenty of time to think about it in the otherworld. I saw a big dog adoption in my future, so if possible, I wanted to look at large single-family homes. Now that I'd left my former job with its unchanging, meager salary, such a thing was no longer a dream. I'd just have to look a little ways out of the city, in the suburbs.

We'd need somewhere to wash our feet after getting back from walks, right beside the entrance. Lots of small windows on the outer walls. A covered porch with good sunlight next to the living room. Even if the yard wasn't big enough to run around with a dog, we could still have a nice-size lawn to jump and play on together.

Once I started thinking, my mind spun with possibilities. I was overjoyed just imagining it all. But if I wanted to make that fantasy a reality, our business deals in the otherworld would be extremely important.

“By the way, Peeps. About tonight’s plans...”

“We’ve lost a day. Shall we head there early?”

“Yes, exactly. I think we should.”

“Understood. Then off we go.”

It was time to put in the work to achieve my dream multi-pet scenario. After saying good-bye to everyone relaxing in the living room, we headed off for the otherworld for the first time in two days.



After warping out of the Karuizawa villa, we first visited Count Müller like we always did. Since it had been so long since our last visit to this world, I braced myself for bad news. Surprisingly, though, not much had happened. Soon, we slipped into what had recently become our routine: watching Lady Elsa’s video letter and recording the count’s reply.

Prince Lewis, who had been gallivanting about my barony before, had finished his inspection of the fortress on the Rectan Plains and gone home. He’d already departed from Baytrium, the count explained, and would be arriving at the capital any day now.

With that out of the way, we decided to head to my domain. Peeps used his teleportation magic to pop us over,

the count included. When we arrived at our usual spot in the sky and looked down, a majestic fortress was there to greet us.

About 80 percent of the surrounding walls had been built. And around those, the space that used to be a sea of tents was now in the process of transforming into a town of stone and wood. The workers seemed to be improving and maintaining the roads at the same time, too; we spotted several stone paths in the vicinity.

“I’m surprised they’ve kept up the lightning-fast pace,” I commented.

“Even I didn’t expect construction to progress this quickly,” agreed Peeps. *“I know I’ve said this before, but the magician aiding them must be skilled indeed. The golems’ movements look as sharp as ever.”*

“I’ve never heard you give such high praise, Lord Starsage.”

“Julius, can you tell me aught of the caster?”

“They don’t seem to enjoy social calls. I’ve checked on the matter, but I haven’t managed to secure a visit. I don’t wish to force the issue and cause them to leave, however, so I’ve been communicating through others on-site.”

“Would you mind notifying us should you learn anything?”

“No, of course not.”

Count Müller looked happy as he bowed to the sparrow. *I see he still loves the “Lord Starsage” as much as ever.*

After that, we descended and met up with Mr. French. According to him, no problems of note had cropped up following Prince Lewis's departure. The only part of the fortress still to be finished were the interior furnishings and decoration, and some of those working on wall and building construction had already been shifted in that direction.

“And following that, sir, I think we'll have a lot of work on the self-governance front as well.”

“Yes, you're probably right about that.”

We were chatting in a room inside the fortress—this would be the reception room, but for now we stood. They hadn't brought in furniture yet, so the place was empty.

“I wanted to discuss that, actually,” I said. “Will you continue to take the lead on the fortress? I'll visit regularly and bring the decisions you all have made here to those above me for discussion.”

“Excuse me for being rude, sir, but if you leave it *all* to us, people are going to do whatever they like. Most of them came here voluntarily, so many are pretty attached to the place. And not all of them know you personally, sir.”

That, however, was all according to plan: We wanted them to band together with enough momentum to overpower “Baron Sasaki.”

“I'm sorry to ask,” I said to him, “but could you handle all that as well?”

I remembered saying something very similar before. I started to get embarrassed, recalling how high-and-mighty I'd sounded, proclaiming I'd hand over all authority for

territorial development to him. But it seemed he hadn't thought I'd leave *everything* to him—worker management and whatnot were one thing, but actual, permanent dominion over my territory? That was the core of a Herzian noble's right to rule.

However, this was something Peeps and I couldn't afford to budge on. After all, it was *hard* to build an organization from the ground up. Rules about official authority and other regulations—like the kind you might have at a company—made my head hurt just thinking about them. And deciding something on the spur of the moment would only lead to failure down the road. Unfortunately, seriously carrying out these duties myself wasn't suited to the slow, relaxed lifestyle I was after.

This wasn't a game of pretend where I could simply appoint so-and-so to take charge of this, or what's his name to be the minister of that, leaving things to those who seemed good at each task. The ones on the ground, the ones who would be affected, were people of another world with a totally different culture and set of values from my own. If I was to try to bring them all together into a single organization, I was confident only that I'd fail. If I could escape all the hard work and anguish by handing over the fortress's rights and interests to someone else, it was a cheap price to pay.

I casually glanced over at my shoulder and made out a small nod from the sparrow perched there. *All right—approval from the politics pro himself!*

“A-are you serious, sir?” replied Mr. French. “I can't see how that benefits you at all! Won't all the funds that went into this project evaporate if we mess up?”

“You and the others from Baytrium have done all the work developing the Rectan Plains. I had planned to present the fortress to Count Müller from the start. Will you accept it?”

“Sir, I...” Mr. French’s eyes darted between the count and me, his gaze one of sheer disbelief.

In place of the useless Baron Sasaki, the count himself commented on the matter. “If that is your decision, then I will respect it.”

“I’d just like to ask, my lord,” said Mr. French to the count. “Why would you give all this to a commoner like me...?”

“As you know, Baron Sasaki cannot stay at this fortress permanently. I’ve always known I would need someone else to serve in his place. And if he has directly designated you for that job, then I’d rather not voice any objections.”

We hadn’t discussed this beforehand, and yet the count knew exactly what I was going for. And it was a good deal for him, too, having another base between his land and an enemy border.

“But my lord, I’m not a noble. I’m just a chef...”

“I won’t force you to do this,” I told him. “If you’d like to prioritize your own development as a chef, then introduce me to someone else you think would be suitable for the role, and I’ll have this discussion with them instead. Personally, though, I’d be extremely grateful if you were the one to take up the mantle.”

“.....”

“And when it comes to funding, I will continue for the time being at the current rate through the Marc Trading Company,” I said, appealing to his wallet to try to win him over.

I felt guilty for putting so much on his shoulders. But I didn't think it would be *all* bad for him, in terms of his prospects in the otherworld. If it went well, it could really transform his life. In a few years, he could yield his post, retire early, and pursue that life of relaxation and leisure that Peeps and I were after. In fact, as far as I was concerned, he was more than welcome to indulge in drink and women while still in his post if he so desired. In my opinion, everyone here would benefit from my proposal.

“A-all right, then, sir. I'll do my best!”

“Thank you for everything, Mr. French.”

“If you should ever find yourself in need, please feel free to pay a visit to my estate,” added the count.

Now that I had Count Müller's agreement, I felt like a burden had been lifted. My eyes wandered to the reception room window, and through it I saw, in the distance, large dragons flying up toward the sky, out of the big hole Peeps had made. I was glad they seemed happy and full of energy.

It seemed safe to assume that this border fortress project was now fully off my plate.



Once our tasks in the Kingdom of Herz were finished, we headed for the Republic of Lunge. After transporting the

goods from Ms. Futarishizuka's warehouse into the one belonging to the Kepler Trading Company, we went to see Mr. Joseph, product inventory in hand—all routine business for us at this point.

We entered the company's reception room, then finalized our deal for the day. Money-wise, we made about as much as last time. The unit price for all these goods was extremely low and stable back in modern times, making for safe, easy transactions. In fact, I'd never once had to worry about breaking even.

After our business was completed, Mr. Marc—also present—wanted to discuss something with me.

“The wireless radio you gave us with the last shipment doesn't seem to be working very well...”

“Are you referring to the larger device located here at the Trading Company headquarters?” I asked.

“Yes. We haven't been able to reach our office in the kingdom since the other day.”

“In that case, would you mind showing it to me?”

“By all means, please, have a look.”

At his request, we left the reception room and headed to an upper floor of the building. The radio was set up there, owing to Mr. Joseph's desire to keep the device's use a secret. The entrance to the room was constantly under guard, and only the three of us were allowed inside. The antenna and generator had been placed on an attached veranda.

In the middle of the room was a desk, and the equipment was laid out atop it. I fiddled with it for a moment; it didn't seem to be getting any power. A little more messing around didn't give me the answers I wanted, so I excused myself and went back to modern times, then grabbed a replacement device of the same model and brought it to them. I'd anticipated this sort of issue, so I had several extra machines stocked in Ms. Futarishizuka's warehouse, all of which were already set up; I'd just taken one of those.

After swapping out the radios, the new machine powered up easily. A short while later, Mr. Marc tried communicating with the kingdom again at their regular time. They had no problems, and they were able to exchange information just fine. The quality of their voices was about the same as before.

Once the transmission had finished, Mr. Marc bowed to me. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Sasaki. I seem to have misused it and broken it..."

"This sort of thing actually happens a lot," I assured him. "Don't be too worried about it." It could have been a manufacturing defect, given how quickly it had broken down after I'd given it to them.

In the meantime, Mr. Joseph asked me a question as well. "I don't mean to be rude, but are these machines truly so easy to replace? It was much the same with the transceivers—and from what I can see, this device looks nearly identical in construction to the last."

"I brought a couple of spares with me," I explained.

"How many, exactly?"

“You could count them on one hand. But even if they’re all defective, I have more in stock. I expected some issues to occur, so you need only say the word and I can replace it for you.”

“Oh! That would be wonderful.”

Just to be sure, I decided to ask Ms. Futarishizuka about the broken machine when I returned to Japan.

Peeps and I stayed the night in Lunge, receiving the same luxurious treatment as always thanks to the Kepler Trading Company. The next day, once they’d confirmed the products we’d brought, the money changed hands and our job was over. Mr. Marc and Mr. Joseph saw us off, and we returned to the town of Baytrium.

There, we stayed in our usual posh lodgings for several days. Sitting on the sofa in the inn’s living room, I talked things over with Peeps.

“It seems this trip, at least, has gone by without any trouble,” he commented.

“I wish it could be like this every time,” I said.

“I suppose the only problem is that the head chef at our eatery of choice is currently absent from the kitchen.”

“Sorry. I didn’t really consult you on that one.”

“No need to apologize. This is doubtless a major promotion for him. He’s allowed us to dine on plenty of delicious morsels in the past, and I’ve always intended to repay him.”

“His restaurant is still open for business. Would you like to go take a look?”

“Yes, that sounds nice.”

For several days after that, Peeps tutored me in magic. This time I put all my efforts into learning the going-to-work spell. I’d convinced the sparrow that because I’d learned that one laser beam spell—which was considered above advanced level—that I could probably learn another of similar difficulty. Unfortunately, even as our final day in the otherworld rolled around, I still wasn’t able to produce any results.

Keep at it, slow and steady were my teacher’s last words on the matter.



(The Neighbor’s POV)

The day after the wake, Futarishizuka brings Abaddon and me to our new home. It’s just a few minutes away from her villa on foot. I read in a book at the school library that Karuizawa is known across Japan for such villas, but this is my first time actually walking around the place. The area is sparsely developed, as if the homes are hiding amid the mountain trees and foliage. It’s such an incredible difference from the city. There, it’s so cramped you can often reach out your window and touch the next building over.

Our new home itself is gorgeous, too. While smaller than Futarishizuka’s mansion, it’s on a completely different level from my burned-down apartment. That whole complex

could have fit inside it. The ground floor alone must be over three hundred square meters, and it has two entire stories.

Standing in front of the entrance, we chat briefly.

“Now this is what I call a mansion.”

“It was just about to go on the market,” Futarishizuka explains. “Until around a decade ago, properties like these were sold privately, but that’s gotten more difficult these days. This one was about to go public next month, but I swung in and grabbed it for dirt cheap.”

“Are Abaddon and I the only ones who will live here?” I ask.

“Complaining, are we, dear?”

“I’m not complaining. It just seems too big for two people.”

“Unfortunately, anywhere else would have been farther from my place.”

“Come on, just look at it. I, for one, am a big fan.”

“I’ll send over the workers you’ll need to maintain the place as soon as I procure them,” Futarishizuka tells me. “It’ll be more lively with more people, I’m sure. In fact, I could always send you a good-looking live-in male prostitute or two.”

“I’ll accept help with the chores, but not the rest of what you said.”

“Really? You and that man both—so young, and yet so *staid* when it comes to such things.”

She’s probably referring to my neighbor. I can’t help but agree with her there—he could afford to be a little more honest about his sexual urges, couldn’t he? We parted ways with him last night at Futarishizuka’s villa, and he told me he was going back to the hotel he’d rented near our ruined apartments. His talking sparrow was with him—they did tend to stick together.

Just to be sure, I ask Futarishizuka to send him our plans for the day.

“Well, there’s no point standing out here,” she says. “Why don’t we go have a look inside?”

“All right.”

We follow her through the mansion’s front entrance, which feels to me like the lobby of a hotel. There’s a shoe rack inside, but it’s so big I can’t tell how many people’s worth of shoes it’s supposed to fit. The entrance *alone* is about the size of my last place’s main room. If you include the hall extending out from it, it would be bigger than the whole apartment, kitchen and bathroom included.

“*What’s the layout like?*” asks Abaddon.

“They tell me it’s a seven-bedroom with a living room, dining room, and kitchen. It has a lower level, too, apparently.”

“Seven bedrooms in one house?” I reply. “What are we supposed to do with all of them?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. You could invite guests over or keep a few lovers around. Whatever you like, really.”

“.....”

We go down the hallway and eventually find ourselves in the living room. It's *shockingly* large. It has to be almost fifty square meters. Just looking at it sets me ill at ease; I feel like I'm standing in the middle of a public place—like I'm at school or something. I doubt I'll be able to feel at home in here.

I can see expensive-looking furniture all over the room. The sofa, for example, isn't something you'd ever see in a regular house—it's so big you'd probably struggle just to carry it in. I wonder how many years' worth of school meals you could buy with only the price of that one item.

A grand fireplace sits in the corner, just like in Futarishizuka's villa. I guess it's something all the mansions in Karuizawa have. It's a real one, too, set up to burn actual firewood for warmth, rather than one of those fakes made to look like the real thing. Plenty of fuel already sits next to it.

“This mansion is incredible, right?!”

“It really is, though I hate having to agree with Abaddon on anything,” I reply. “This fancy a place will be wasted on us. Is it really okay to live here? Like I said before, I won't be able to repay you for some time.”

“I have high hopes for you two,” answers Futarishizuka. “Consider it an advance investment.”

“You heard her, Abaddon.”

“As long as you give me the order, I’ll do anything—with flair.”

“Incidentally, would there happen to be any angels or their Disciples set up nearby?” asks Futarishizuka. “That fellow finally has some time to spare, so I think we should launch right into eliminating them.”

“I agree. The two of them are extremely powerful. They’ll prove a force to be reckoned with inside the isolated spaces, too. The idea of joining forces and lashing out with a first strike in our new home is very attractive, indeed.”

“I don’t like how we keep asking more and more of him,” I complain.

“I very much doubt he’d say no if you asked, dear,” says Futarishizuka.

“No, I’m the one who doesn’t like it...”

“So you don’t like him, hmm?”

“That isn’t what I’m saying.”

I just don’t want him to end up hating me over something so stupid.

Winning the proxy war means a lot to both Abaddon and Futarishizuka, albeit for different reasons. But if *he* starts hating me as a result, there’s no point in it for me. In fact, if that happens, I’d rather have not formed the contract with Abaddon at all and had my mother’s boyfriend rape me.

“Based on my conversations with him, I think taking the initiative and going after him will yield the best results.”

What about you? If you don't hate him, I think it's fine to ask for his help."

And now Abaddon is bringing up my true motives despite Futarishizuka's presence. *He isn't a demon for nothing, I think. He sure knows how to take advantage of people.*

"You may think it's fine, but I don't," I say.

Even though I used my reward from the proxy war to rouse my neighbor's lust with demonic power, he ultimately backed away from me. I doubt it'll be easy to get my feelings through to him. I need something else—something that will appeal to his core. If it's only surface level, like getting him drunk, he'll flee instantly.

According to the many books I read in the school library, when a woman pursues a man, it's all too easy for the man to make a mistake. Japanese literature, at least, is full of such scenes. So why hasn't he done anything with me?

I must be lacking something, I think. I'm not good enough somehow.

"Abaddon," I say, "we haven't been able to show that it would be worth it for him."

"When you put it like that, I have to agree with you."

"Whatever we end up deciding, the first thing we need to do is figure out what he wants."

Sometimes it seems like I know everything about him, but there's still so much I don't understand. I think that's the best angle to approach from for now.

The demon doesn't object.

While we're talking, an upbeat melody suddenly begins to play; it sounds like it's coming from Futarishizuka's inside pocket. We watch as her small hand takes out her personal phone, which I remember seeing several times in the past.

"Speak of the devil, eh?" she says. "And I don't mean *you*."

"Is it him?" I ask.

"Mm-hmm. Excuse me for a moment."

Apparently, it's a call from my neighbor. Futarishizuka politely notifies us before picking up.

"Hello there. What is it?"

That's a very familiar way of opening a phone conversation—and it makes me suddenly think of something.

Have the two of them already crossed that line?

If so, then his reticent attitude toward me would make sense. He's an honest and sincere man. If he wants to remain faithful to her, he'll never give his heart to another woman, even if they're not actually dating.

"Where are you right now?" she asks.

But that would cause a problem for me. The two of us were made for each other—we were both supposed to have nothing else. And yet, right now, he feels so far away.

“You’re here? You can just come in, you know. The door’s unlocked. Yes, yes, the door in the front of the building. Go straight down the hallway and you’ll come to the living room. No, just come in; it’s fine.”

After this rapid-fire explanation, Futarishizuka takes the phone away from her ear. Apparently, he got her earlier message and has come back.

“Very handy to be within walking distance, isn’t it, dear?” Futarishizuka says boastfully as she puts away the phone.

“You’re very right about that.”

I hear someone approaching the living room from the front entrance, and I decide to pop the question right then and there. “Ms. Futarishizuka, there’s something I want to ask while I have the chance.”

“What is it?”

“You seem very close with him. Are the two of you in a real relationship?”

“Oh? That’s your question? And you want to know right here, right now?”

“Is it something you can’t tell me?”

Her silly, lighthearted tone of voice doesn’t give me any sense of what the answer is. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think she was a little kid horsing around. But she’s apparently a lot older than even my grandmother, so it seems much more like she’s trying to distract me.

“Are men like that your type, dear?”

“I just want to know the truth.”

If he found out about my feelings only to reject me, I'd be sad—I might go crazy. Futarishizuka might have already caught on, but I don't want to openly confirm her suspicions. And considering my relationship with Abaddon, she's probably guessed at least that much.

“You know,” she begins, “despite how he looks, he is *quite* big.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she continues jovially, “and my own tiny little hole is just too—”

“Would you mind not judging something you've never seen?” interrupts a voice from the living room's entrance. The footsteps I heard in the hallway were indeed my neighbor's—he's here.

“Oh, you arrived so quickly,” says Futarishizuka.

“I only went through the door and down the hallway like you told me to,” he replies.

Thank goodness, I think. They haven't gone that far yet. I can tell from the sour look on his face as he watches Futarishizuka and his displeased remark that she was just bullshitting me. I *am* curious about his size, but confirming those details can wait.

“One grand mansion after another,” he comments. “And nobody was using this?”

“Yes, it is grand, isn’t it? Luckily, it was unoccupied and being sold privately.”

I consider additional possibilities. What about his other colleague, the makeup woman? I have suspicions about the magical girl, too, but age-wise, that doesn’t make much sense.

As I mull it over, Abaddon comes over and whispers into my ear. “*You’re not going to ask this same question of every single one of them, are you?*”

“This is really important to me, Abaddon.”

“*Wow, you’re really going for it, huh?*”

Going for it? My relationship with him is more important to me than anything else in my life. By all rights, he should have already dragged me to his room and done all sorts of things to me. But a bunch of strange people keep popping up from who knows where and getting in the way, and now we’re here.

Every time I see the bird on his shoulder, it makes me jealous. I want to be touching him twenty-four seven, too—I want it from the bottom of my soul.

“By the way, Ms. Futarishizuka,” he says, “there’s something else I need to talk to you about, if you have time.”

“What is it?”

“The people at Atsugi Base contacted the bureau to thank us for our help with the Kraken incident.”

Work again? I think. His tone is familiar, and hearing it disappoints me. I thought he said yesterday that he'd be on vacation for a while.



After returning from the otherworld to our hotel in modern times, I checked my phone. Mr. Akutsu had said we would be off for a while, so I doubted I'd have any messages of importance. But then I noticed a missed call and a text notification. My personal phone had a new message, too.

The call was from a number I didn't recognize. The two text messages were from Mr. Akutsu and Ms. Futarishizuka respectively. The former had gone to my company phone, the latter to my personal one.

The message from my boss was telling me that the unknown caller was from the JMSDF in Atsugi. Apparently, Mr. Yoshikawa had contacted the chief wanting to thank us. Mr. Akutsu's message said I was free to talk to them on my own.

The one from Ms. Futarishizuka had to do with that day's schedule. She'd finished getting my neighbor and Abaddon's new home ready and let me know they'd be heading there to see it first thing in the morning. The message also included a link that brought up the house's location on my phone. And I did want to get Ms. Futarishizuka's opinion on the Atsugi matter.

"You seem lost in thought. Is there some problem?" asked Peeps.

“No, no problem,” I replied. “But I might need to go out for a bit.”

“If there’s anything I can do while you’re gone, feel free to let me know.”

“Thanks, Peeps. Could you teleport me somewhere?”

“Of course. Leave it to me.”

What a considerate and kindhearted sparrow he is, I thought, checking the time on my phone. Not long had passed since Ms. Futarishizuka’s message, so I decided to start by tracking her down. Leaving my company phone on the desk, I waited as Peeps used his teleportation magic to warp me to the Karuizawa villa.

From there, I headed for my neighbor’s new home on foot. Walking down the mountain paths weaving between mansions this early in the day felt like the epitome of luxury. I was smack-dab in the middle of nature, far away from the congested streets and fully packed trains of the city. The air was so crisp and clean it almost made me worry that I’d have to pay for each deep breath I took.

I walked for a few minutes, then once I’d arrived in front of the magnificent mansion, I called up its owner. She instructed me to come right in. At her insistence, I passed through the entranceway and set foot inside the building. As I took off my shoes, I heard voices from farther in. They belonged to my neighbor and Ms. Futarishizuka.

I walked down the hallway, making sure my footsteps would be heard, and came to a huge living area, just as Futarishizuka had described. She and my neighbor were

standing in the middle of the room, with Abaddon floating in the air nearby.

“You seem very close with him. Are the two of you in a real relationship?”

“Oh? That’s your question? And you want to know right here, right now?”

“Is it something you can’t tell me?”

“Are men like that your type, dear?”

“I just want to know the truth.”

“You know, despite how he looks, he is *quite* big.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and my own tiny little hole is just too—”

Ms. Futarishizuka sounded like she was spinning a tall tale for my neighbor. Anyone who knew her personality would have taken her comments as a joke, but my neighbor had only met her recently. Considering the dubious looks I’d already begun to receive whenever I was out in public, I wanted to make sure to deny her remarks outright.

“Would you mind not judging something you’ve never seen?” I said.

“Oh, you arrived so quickly,” she remarked.

“I only went through the door and down the hallway like you told me to,” I replied, looking around at the living room as the two of them walked over. The interior decoration was

just as gorgeous as the building's outward appearance. "One grand mansion after another. And nobody was using this?"

"Yes, it is grand, isn't it? Luckily, it was unoccupied and being sold privately."

Next to us, my neighbor and Abaddon started whispering to each other. I'd heard it said that adolescents were sometimes prone to moral fastidiousness. I wondered if we adults were having too vulgar and dirty a conversation for her—especially since one of us was a middle-aged man. I had zero clue what a girl her age could possibly be thinking about.

As she continued to watch me, I started to feel guilty, despite not having done anything wrong. So this useless adult decided to change the topic to business.

"By the way, Ms. Futarishizuka," I said, "there's something else I need to talk to you about, if you have time."

"What is it?" she asked.

"The people at Atsugi Base contacted the bureau to thank us for our help with the Kraken incident," I explained.

"Really? Well, I wonder if that blue magical girl is involved."

"The message I received from Mr. Akutsu didn't say. The base called me directly, but we were away at the time, so I missed it. I wanted to get your opinion before calling them back."

"Well, I'd certainly like to know what this is all about."

“All right.”

If they wanted to thank us for our help with the Kraken, it would only be right to talk to Miss Hoshizaki and my neighbor as well. In fact, the chief had specifically asked me to pass the news on to my coworker.

What about my neighbor, then? I wondered. We hadn't told the boss anything about the proxy war. Naturally, we hadn't mentioned my neighbor or isolated spaces in any of our reports, either. *And neither she nor Abaddon were there during the incident out at sea.*

Since the people at Atsugi Base had never seen her before, they'd probably get confused. But that didn't change the fact that she had contributed to the Kraken's downfall. *What to do?*

“Do you have more work, mister?”

“It probably falls into that category, yes,” I told her. “It looks like we'll have to talk with another organization about the business you and Abaddon helped with, but we're not sure exactly who called us.”

“In that case, Abaddon and I will stay here and wait.”

“Are you sure? This smells of a reward.”

“I don't care. I don't want to cause him any trouble.”

“Oh, what a good girl you are,” commented Ms. Futarishizuka in that grandmotherly tone of hers.

I found myself agreeing. *She really is a good girl.* I hoped she would continue to grow into an honest, upright

individual.

“You know,” Ms. Futarishizuka said to me, “if you want a wife, a reserved, modest girl like her would be perfect.”

“Look, I don’t mind if you’re rude with me, but don’t be rude to her.”

“...I didn’t think I was being rude.”

“I’m sorry for always asking so much of you,” I told my neighbor. “Ms. Futarishizuka will be looking after you from now on, so you’ll have a lot more freedom than before. She’s been helping me quite a bit lately as well. I really can’t thank her enough.”

In my neighbor’s eyes, I was in a dubious position—the guy next door who had been giving her food since she was little. Plus, I was familiar with the owner of this mansion. The balance of power between us had settled with her one-sidedly in my debt.

In that sense, it was the perfect time to tag in Ms. Futarishizuka. I could use my neighbor’s move as an excuse to put some distance between us. I figured she’d be fine if Abaddon was with her. And Peeps and I had to start a new life in a new home ourselves.

I looked at the mansion again, suddenly longing to live in a proper house with a big dog. And if it was in a resort area, I could probably even set up a little dog park in the yard. I wished there was a spell to magically create the home of my dreams.

Karuizawa might be asking too much, I thought, but what about Atami? It had been so pleasant when we visited

the other day. Actually, what if I moved way out to Okinawa or something? That should be more than possible with Peeps's magic. Every day would be a vacation. I was getting excited just thinking about it.

“Then I suppose the two of us will just head there alone,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“All right, then,” I said.

“But could we take a quick look around first?” she asked.

“Sure. Would you mind if I joined you?”

“Of course not. And I doubt the child would say no.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, turning to my neighbor. “I’m sorry for suddenly barging in like this.”

“No,” she replied. “Um, I really don’t mind it at all, so...”

With my neighbor’s permission to view the mansion now secured, it was a perfect chance to get a look at an ideal home. *It’ll give me some good ideas for what my new place should look like.*



We spent a little under an hour viewing my neighbor’s new home in Karuizawa. After that, we parted ways, and Futarishizuka and I headed to the hotel near my old apartment—using Peeps’s magic, as planned. From there, we got into Ms. Futarishizuka’s car and went to Miss Hoshizaki’s school.

Per the section chief's orders, my senior colleague was there, hard at work. We picked her up out front, then headed to Atsugi Base together.

Since she'd been at school, she was dressed like a student. She'd donned her uniform, lost the thick makeup, and wore a pair of glasses. Through the rearview mirror, she came off as a bookworm who would look most at home in a library. But every word that came out of her mouth was exactly what I'd come to expect from my senior.

"Hey, Sasaki, there's something I've been wondering about for a while," she remarked.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Do you always use Futarishizuka as your chauffeur?"

Her question came as she made a big motion out of crossing her legs, despite wearing a skirt. The gap between this gesture and her pure, quiet appearance was immense.

The girl in the driver's seat next to me commented, "You're very sharp, you know that? Tell him off some more!"

"I thought so," replied Miss Hoshizaki.

"I *do* have a license," I told her. "But I never drove after getting one. We'll almost certainly crash immediately if I take the wheel. I do feel bad for burdening Ms. Futarishizuka lately, though..."

"Argh!" groaned the driver. "Quit your rambling. You're just making excuses."

“I didn’t think it was that hard to drive a car,” Miss Hoshizaki pointed out.

“You’re right! In fact, you should give it a try!” said Ms. Futarishizuka, sounding like she’d just had an epiphany. “I’m sure you’re only being lazy.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” I protested.

She parked the car on the shoulder, and no sooner had we stopped than she got out and walked to the passenger’s side. I had no idea when she’d unlocked it, but I watched as the door opened from the outside and her little hand grabbed my wrist. She proceeded to tug on me, trying to drag me out.

“Come, come! Out of the car with you.”

“I’m telling you, I can’t!”

“This might be the first time I’ve seen you so desperate,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki.

Ms. Futarishizuka seemed to be serious about handing over the wheel—she pulled on me so hard it hurt. I couldn’t do much against her inhuman arm strength, so I gave up and undid my seatbelt before following her around the car and settling into the driver’s seat.

“Please don’t blame me if we get into an accident, all right?” I pleaded.

“It’s not like it’s a manual,” she replied. “Now stop complaining and get us on the road.”

“...Well, okay.”

I called to mind what general information I could remember about how to drive a car. First, I disengaged the parking brake, then put my hands on the steering wheel. But as I was about to switch on my turn signal, I found I couldn't remember how. After puzzling over it for a moment or two, I fiddled with the lever to see what happened, only for the windshield wipers to start swiping back and forth.

“You did that on purpose,” complained Ms. Futarishizuka. “That’s so cliché.”

“I would never,” I assured her.

I touched the lever again and this time got the turn signal blinking. After checking behind me to see if it was safe and confirming there was nobody there, I carefully pressed down on the accelerator with my foot.

In response, the car rumbled to a start. I got a little emotional—I couldn't remember driving a car even once since graduating driving school. *Huh, so this is how cars move...*, I mused, feeling weirdly impressed. A moment later, I realized something: If I got a house in the suburbs, I'd need to start driving.

And if I adopted a big dog, if I ever had to bring it to the vet, I couldn't exactly carry it all the way there. I'd heard that golden retrievers weighed thirty kilos or so. I'd need a car for that. And when I thought about going for a drive with a pet dog, well... *That sounds so wonderful.*

Maybe this would be a good chance to practice.

After going straight for a little bit, we came to an intersection. I tapped the brake to slow us down, then followed the GPS and tried to make a left turn.

“Hey, there’s a bike crossing!” Futarishizuka cried.

“Huh?! Oh, uh, sorry, sorry!”

I’d been so focused on the steering wheel and using the turn signal that I forgot to check my side mirror. Panicking, I swung the wheel the other way. My right foot, moving purely on reflex, stepped on the accelerator.

“*Nuwoohhhhhh!*”

“H-hey! Sasaki?!”

The engine roared. I felt the back of the car start to slide. The vehicle turned as if to make a right at the intersection, and by pure coincidence, we managed to evade a car coming at us down the opposite lane. We almost hit someone trying to cross at the light, and we were now headed in the opposite direction from what the GPS had said.

Ms. Futarishizuka wasted no time reaching over with her leg, hitting the brake and causing the car to come to a screeching halt.

After the sudden stop, the vehicle went silent. The surprised gulp I made rang *very* loudly in my ears.

Eventually, Ms. Futarishizuka glared at me. “What the heck was that?” she demanded. “Were you showing off your driving skills or something? Are you *trying* to aggravate me?”

“I’m really, really sorry. I was so focused on steering that I forgot to check my side mirror.”

“It was *clearly* a little more than just that!”

“And then I was so focused on avoiding the bike that—”

“None of that could *possibly* have led to *this!*”

I quickly checked outside the window. Thankfully, nobody seemed injured, and I sighed in relief.

“Futarishizuka,” said Miss Hoshizaki, “I think Sasaki’s telling the truth here.”

“Grrrrr...”

Trying to show off my driving skills? I thought. Are you kidding? If one single thing had gone wrong, someone could have died. As that reality sank in, I felt a chill crawl down my spine. Driving was *terrifying*. Just a little bit of inattentiveness could lead to a huge accident. How did most of the world’s people do this so comfortably and naturally when it was so *dangerous*? It seemed just as strange to me as the otherworld’s magic. Even moving the car a tiny bit involved so many little tasks. Did you just have to get used to it?



“I’ll find some free time soon to practice driving. I know I’m asking for a lot, Ms. Futarishizuka, but would you mind waiting a little longer for me to build up my skills? I’m thinking of attending some classes for people in my position—who got their license, then never drove.”

“Ugh. Fine, I’ll keep being your stupid personal driver for a while.”

“I’m really sorry. I’ll try to resolve the situation as soon as possible.”

“I can’t exactly force you if people are going to wind up dead.” Ms. Futarishizuka sighed in exasperation before trading places with me.

Once she was in firm control of the steering wheel again, we continued our journey to Atsugi Base.



With the correct person back in the driver’s seat, we had a nice, safe drive, eventually arriving at our destination. We climbed out of the car and headed into the office building of Fleet Air Wing 4, which we’d visited just the other day. There to greet us and show us into the facility was Miss Inukai, the now-familiar executive SDF officer from the Kraken incident, taking up the same role she’d had back then.

We followed her into the building’s reception room; Mr. Yoshikawa was already there. Two others were present as well, neither of whom I knew.

One of them was someone I'd seen from afar during the business with the Kraken, though: the blue magical girl. Just like the magical homeless girl I knew, this one wore something straight out of a children's anime. Basically, it was a quintessential magical girl outfit, absolutely covered in frills and flowy fabric. The design itself was somewhat different from the pink one I was used to, but I could sense an underlying theme linking them together. In contrast to the girl based in Japan and her mostly pink clothes, this girl wore mostly blue. And that wasn't just true of her clothing, either, but her hair as well. Her alien hair color was just as eye-catching as her outfit.

Next to her sat a large Caucasian man. He looked like he was in his midforties, with chiseled features. The way his small face contrasted with the size of his body made me *very* envious. And with his Ivy League haircut, blond hair, and striking blue eyes, he was quite an attractive middle-aged man.

He wore the military uniform of another country—one I remembered seeing on the news and in movies. A jumbled mess of badges adorned his left breast, but I didn't know what any of them referred to. The only thing I could glean was that, from the eagle mark on his shoulder, he must be a captain, the equivalent rank to Mr. Yoshikawa, who was a JMSDF captain.

They'd already positioned themselves on one of the two sofas in the center of the room, with the magical girl and Mr. Yoshikawa on either side of the Caucasian man. But they each stood up at once as we entered the room. I heard Ms. Inukai shut the door behind us.

“Thank you all for coming,” said Mr. Yoshikawa, greeting us before anyone else.

At his urging, we lined up in front of the sofa across from them, the low table in between us. The other group remained standing, so we followed suit. Our ordering was no different from the meetings we had at the bureau, with Ms. Futarishizuka on one side of me and Miss Hoshizaki on the other.

“My name is Captain Mason. I’m stationed over at Yokota,” said the Caucasian man, quickly extending a very large, rugged-looking arm. I assumed he was looking for a handshake.

“I am Futarishizuka. This man here is Sasaki, and the girl is Hoshizaki. As you may have already heard from the officer next to you, we’re not affiliated with this base or the military in any way, so I’d appreciate it if you could treat us essentially as civilians.”

“All right,” he replied. “In that case, I’ll dispense with the formalities.”

“I appreciate it.”

Ms. Futarishizuka took the lead, grasping the man’s hand. At the exact moment they touched, for the briefest instant, I thought I saw the man shiver slightly. He was probably aware of her psychic power. He obviously knew about magical girls, so I assumed he also knew about psychics. Though her hand looked even smaller than usual against his large palm, if she so much as squeezed her fingers, his bones would break under the pressure. I couldn’t blame him for the reaction.

“U-umm, umm...,” stammered Miss Hoshizaki from her spot by my side. I glanced over; she was clearly panicking.

I was, too. Very much so, in fact. After all, the two of them were speaking English to each other. The only thing I could make out from their exchange was our names. Miss Hoshizaki was a minor, so that was understandable, but a man my age, flustered because he was unable to talk? That was the opposite of cool. Ms. Futarishizuka, on the other hand, sounded incredibly fluent.

Mr. Yoshikawa and Ms. Inukai had directed their attention to us as well. I felt sweat begin to roll down my back.

“What about the other two?” asked the man. “Is there some sort of problem? Are they not feeling well?”

“Oh, them?” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “They’re not on top of their English skills, but I can serve as their interpreter.”

Ms. Futarishizuka’s attention shifted from the man to us, a smirk on her face. “Come, now, and introduce yourselves. I promise I’ll interpret properly for you.”

“...Thank you, Ms. Futarishizuka,” I replied, giving a short self-introduction in Japanese. Once mine was over, Miss Hoshizaki did the same.

Our colleague then converted our words into English and conveyed them to the man. Thanks to her, we were able to exchange handshakes.

While I could make out a familiar phrase here and there, on the whole, I had no idea what either of them was saying.

Futarishizuka had total control over the conversation. I wondered how things would have gone if she hadn't been here. I recalled a meeting I'd once had with foreign investors at my former job. I'd had to rely on a senior colleague who knew English then, too; I remembered sitting still and silent next to him. After returning to the office, I'd decided to take lessons, but it didn't last even six months. *I mean, I hardly ever need to use it.*

“This is our country's magical girl, First Lieutenant Ivy,” continued the man.

“My name's Ivy!” the girl said. “Pleased to meet you. Thanks so much for getting us out of trouble the other day! I hear that without your help, that horrible monster would have eaten me. I'm really, really grateful.”

“It's nothing,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka. “We have to watch out for one another in times of need, after all.”

Once introductions were over, we all settled down on the sofas. Eventually, Ms. Futarishizuka fell into a rhythm where she would first provide a short answer to the other side's questions, then interpret it for the rest of us and let Miss Hoshizaki and me respond. Then she would interpret our words into English.

“I must say,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka, “you are significantly more polite than *our* magical girl.”

“First Lieutenant Ivy may be young, but she is extremely talented,” replied Captain Mason. “We have high hopes for her.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Mason! I'll do my best to serve my country!”

“My! Aren’t you full of energy?”

The bulk of the conversation occurred between Ms. Futarishizuka and Captain Mason. I felt bad troubling her—and found myself saying less and less. Miss Hoshizaki was the same. She seemed to be losing energy throughout, though she kept herself sitting up straight. That, plus her school uniform and lack of makeup, made her come across as very reserved.

“And you’re already an officer at such a young age?” continued Ms. Futarishizuka. “I look forward to seeing where you go from here.”

“Apparently I needed the rank in order to work alongside the soldiers,” the magical girl explained.

“Oh, I see.”

“We’d like her to continue working with us in the future,” interjected the captain.

Magical Blue’s high rank, at odds with her appearance, had probably been conferred in anticipation of her assistance with incidents such as that involving the Kraken. I had some thoughts about their willingness to deploy children in violent situations, but that was their business, so I didn’t comment on it.

As the conversation progressed, our own magical girl—Magical Pink—came up.

“Futarishizuka, where might your country’s magical girl be?” asked Mason.

“Ours? She has a bit of childhood trauma, you might say. She shows up from time to time, but we never know where she is. In fact, I should think that girl might have a better read on her, no?”

“I don’t know where she is, either,” said Ivy. “I’m sorry.”

If our colleague’s interpretation was to be believed, she and they were trading harmless conversation as a kind of extended self-introduction. They asked Miss Hoshizaki and me about our job at the bureau, our positions, and things like that.



Thirty or forty minutes passed before Captain Mason broached a new subject.

“By the way, Futarishizuka, I have a suggestion, and I hope you can interpret it accurately.”

“What’s that?”

The captain seemed more serious now than before, causing the rest of us to straighten up again. I still had no idea what he was saying, but that was all the more reason to at least match his body language.

“I would like to invite the three of you to become psychics for our country.”

“Oh?”

“As for the conditions, I can promise you three million at the lowest. And you can assume that number will increase, depending on how well you work. That Kraken survived a direct nuclear attack, and you three eliminated it in secret. Our country thinks *very* highly of you.”

“If you intend to find out what happened behind the scenes, then three million seems a tad low.”

“I understand. I’ll discuss it with my superiors.”

After speaking to the captain, Ms. Futarishizuka’s attention shifted to the side. Miss Hoshizaki and I waited for her translation.

“He’s offering us a salary of three million to come over to their side.”

“Is he for real?” asked Miss Hoshizaki incredulously. “He thinks he can pluck away a few psychics for that little?”

This was one of the things I’d considered beforehand. We’d gotten an invitation from the nerd just the other day. “Miss Hoshizaki, I believe he’s suggesting a *dollar* amount, not yen,” I told her softly to calm her before she went into a frenzy.

“Huh...?” Her expression stiffened. She was probably adding those extra two zeroes onto the number—the approximate exchange rate at the moment. “Wait, so then that’s... Three hundred... Three *hundred* million...”

“Just like a professional baseball player, eh?” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked.

Our pay at the bureau was certainly nothing to scoff at—at least, not from the point of view of a former run-of-the-mill office worker like myself. But the number the captain had just given us was an order of magnitude higher than that. For Miss Hoshizaki, who lived to make money, this was a difficult proposal to reject outright. A moment later, she turned and stared at the man, shock evident on her face. As her junior colleague, this worried me. *Someone’s going to take advantage of her if she keeps that up.*

But what about me? I couldn’t accurately gauge the risk from Mr. Akutsu, but we were getting along pretty well at the moment, and I’d secured a degree of freedom in the workplace. Doing so again somewhere new would mean more struggles.

It wasn’t clear how far Ms. Futarishizuka’s finances or connections would get her in a new country, either. And now

that my business in the otherworld was predicated on her cooperation, losing all that would sting.

Plus, I wouldn't understand the local language. With all that in mind, leaving Japan seemed out of the question.

As for my finances, I'd earned more than enough from my dealings with the otherworld. The captain's offer was, as I saw it, less than what I'd make in a year here. Pay-wise, I'd actually be taking a big hit.

“Tell him that we're sorry, but we politely refuse.”

“Yes, agreed,” said Ms. Futarishizuka without skipping a beat.

Miss Hoshizaki, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. “W-wait, Sasaki, shouldn't we at least think about it?”

“What they want isn't our strength as psychics, but information on how we defeated the Kraken. If we were to switch over and they decided we weren't useful, they'd probably dismiss us immediately.”

“Oh... I guess that's another way to look at it, huh?”

Happily, it seemed I had persuaded her. Ms. Futarishizuka proceeded to convey our refusal to the captain.

He backed off without any further attempts; maybe he'd seen this coming. Whatever our true identities, on the surface, we were government employees. Nearby, two of those entrusted with Japan's defense—Mr. Yoshikawa and Miss Inukai—were watching us closely. This invitation was

probably only meant to sound us out. *I bet they'll be approaching Miss Hoshizaki again in the coming days.*

“Any incoming medals or awards aside,” said the captain, “you saved one of ours, and our gratitude for that is sincere. If you ever need assistance in the future, we would be happy to provide it.”

“Oh! I'm very happy to hear that,” replied Ms. Futarishizuka, breaking into a smile.

Once she'd explained her reaction to Miss Hoshizaki and me, the meeting came to an end. Ms. Futarishizuka and Mr. Yoshikawa were both of the opinion that we'd just received a *very* substantial thank-you gift, considering the captain's position.

I didn't know much about the subtleties of the world, so I simply decided to accept it.



With our meeting at Atsugi Base over, we got back on the road and headed home.

“Sasaki, I just realized something,” said Miss Hoshizaki, sitting alone in the back seat.

“What is it?” I asked. We'd just finished discussing the events at the base a few minutes ago. I glanced at her through the rearview mirror; she had a somewhat difficult look on her face. Maybe she was uncomfortable with the silence in the car.

“Just taking classes at school won't be enough for me to learn to speak English.”

This was a topic I knew well. Every Japanese person had that realization at some point, and it usually made us give up on the language entirely. Our brains just weren't wired to speak English.

“Unless I'm using it every day, it doesn't matter how many hours I put in studying at a desk, does it?” she pointed out. “I can write down all the notes I want, but none of it will matter if I can't make out the words and phrases someone's saying!”

“Yes, I agree with you there,” I replied. It was a very simple concept, but Japanese people tended to have trouble realizing it. And even when we did, we'd still pick up our pens and open our notebooks and textbooks anyway. Because that was how studying worked for us—that was how to get good test scores.

“Right? Then we should practice English together, Sasaki.”

“What?”

“Let's use the bureau conference room every day from now on to have English conversation sessions.”

It must have really pained her to be unable to participate in the meeting earlier. And it wasn't hard to imagine how much she longed for that three-hundred-million-yen contract.

And so she'd landed on English study sessions. Judging by the way she was talking, she was probably also angling for extra overtime pay—like an office worker who never punched out and instead studied for certification exams in secret from their boss.

“I believe we’re on vacation,” I pointed out.

“Mgh... Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

But her suggestion had really hit me where it hurt—at this point, I’d tried and failed to learn the language more than a few times. And I was fully aware of the need to study English, considering the likelihood of similar conversations in the future. Having a buddy striving for the same goal would help keep up my motivation, too. It *would* be very beneficial.

“Then let’s do it at my place during the break instead,” she suggested.

“Are you being serious right now?” I asked, dubious.

“I mean, you’re single, aren’t you?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with it.”

“Then what? Are you simply against the idea?”

“I should be asking *you* that.”

I couldn’t possibly impose. I could easily see myself being reported to the police by her family or neighbors. And even if the police weren’t involved, I’d be chased out for sure. And if, somehow, I wasn’t chased out, I’d be so uncomfortable I’d have to leave of my own volition. In any case, it was a big “no” from me. Just imagining it gave me a stomachache.

“Well, you’ve already seen me naked,” she insisted. “No point sweating the small stuff now.”

“I’m extremely sorry about that.”

“Do you think about it when we’re alone together on the job?”

“Look, we’re colleagues, and I’d like to maintain a healthy distance.”

“Oh, I see...”

Still, I did wonder what Miss Hoshizaki’s family life was like. I found myself imagining things based on what she’d talked about in the past. Judging by her obsession with getting every possible minute of overtime pay, I figured her family wasn’t that well-off, for example.

We discussed the possibility of English study sessions for a little while longer until Ms. Futarishizuka’s car arrived at our colleague’s school. She parked at the front gate. I couldn’t see any students going in or out, but considering the time, classes were probably just about over. The sun was already setting, and since Miss Hoshizaki was so focused on her job, she probably wasn’t in any after-school clubs.

“It looks like classes are about to let out,” Ms. Futarishizuka remarked. “Should I drop you off here anyway?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Futarishizuka.”

“I could drive you home if you wanted.”

“Actually, I’d rather get out here. I wanted to ask my English teacher about something. I’d also like to borrow a book on English conversation from the library before going home. I remember seeing a section like that the last time I was there.”

“I see.”

“Sasaki, make sure you think about the study group, okay?”

Wow, she's really gung ho about learning English, I thought.

After climbing out of the car, she strode toward the school building with a spring in her step and disappeared inside.

Immediately, the driver started teasing me. “You were just invited to a high school girl’s house. Will you go—or just fantasize about it, hmm?”

“I will not, under any circumstances.”

“Oh, you’re *terrible*. She’s depending on you, you know. And you’re going to let her down.”

“We could just as easily do a video call.”

“Well, you’re as dull and uninteresting as ever.”

With Miss Hoshizaki returned to school, we got back on the road. The car was noticeably quieter, and soon we had reached the hotel where I was staying. After meeting up with Peeps in our room, we had him warp us to the Karuizawa villa, leaving both Ms. Futarishizuka’s car and our bureau phones at the hotel.

Looking out the villa’s living room windows, I saw that it was still light outside. Normally, I’d be headed back to my desk at this time of day. Seeing the setting sun filtering through the garden trees brought cheer to my heart. As I

settled down onto a sofa and sipped my tea, I began to want to spend the rest of the afternoon like this.

But we'd made plans to head to the otherworld that day, and we couldn't bother Ms. Futarishizuka forever. Peeps had recorded Lady Elsa's video letter for her father while I was out, so we were all set.

"We shall arrive somewhat early today," Peeps pointed out. *"Is that all right?"*

"Nothing else to do," I answered. "Why not?"

"I see. Then let's head out at once."

With the Kraken situation out of the way, it seemed like the busy days were behind us.

I hope we can keep relaxing like this, I thought earnestly.

<The Ohgen Empire>

When we arrived in the otherworld, we first paid a visit to Count Müller, as always.

We were becoming more and more familiar with everyone at his estate. While I'd already gotten to know the guards, even the knights who had been so unkind to me when we first met had recently begun chatting with me normally. Happy about this development, we let our guide show us to the reception room, where Count Müller already sat.

The very first thing he did, before we even had a chance to share Lady Elsa's video letter with him, was sit us down to talk about something else: a purging of Herz's nobility, spearheaded by Prince Lewis.

Baron Sasaki and Count Müller belonged to the faction supporting second prince Adonis, placing us in direct political opposition to First Prince Lewis's ascension to the throne. Whichever of the two princes was able to accomplish the most notable feats in this five-year period would become the next king—and it appeared our opponent had finally gotten started.

“Ah. Then Lewis has begun to act?”

“I've received word of several Herzian nobles being confined to the royal palace,” explained Count Müller. “The letter from Prince Adonis said that his brother is using their connection to the Ohgen Empire as a pretext.”

The count's expression was unusually severe. Peeps's own countenance had sharpened, perhaps unconsciously, as he asked his questions. I stayed silent and watched.

"Which nobles has he confined?"

"The most well-known include Count Belmont and Viscount Lorenz, both from Duke Einhart's faction. I also saw Count Dietrich's name on the list, doubtless because he switched to our side after the business with the Hermann Trading Company."

"And all of them possess territory close to the border with the Empire."

"Indeed. Their populations remain considerable, just as in your time, Lord Starsage."

"Could Lewis be after troops or provisions?"

"I believe it's highly possible."

"I'm sure he can't afford to let the nobles supporting him grow weaker. Not now anyway."

Prince Lewis had declared his intention to go on the offensive against the Ohgen Empire, and he probably intended to procure the necessary military power from nobles opposed to him. *Doesn't that put Count Müller in danger, too?*

I had already faced a demand to relinquish the fortress on the Rectan Plains. If Prince Lewis went even further and mobilized our workers, it would be a disaster. The count had sold off most of the things in his mansion to protect his

people during the Empire's most recent attack; it would be too painful to lose those people now to something like this.

Peeps seemed to have the same idea. *"But in that case, are you not in danger as well?"*

"Nothing has happened yet," the count assured him.

"Considering his intentions, I should think he'd come for Baytrium first."

"I had the same thoughts myself."

Back when Prince Lewis had attacked me while dressed as a woman, I'd willingly offered to give him the fortress. Maybe that was why. He'd come to observe the site himself and seen how well construction was going. It seemed likely he wanted to prioritize the region's development and had delayed purging the count accordingly.

In contrast to Prince Adonis, who had a fair, upright character fitting of his youth, Prince Lewis was a more slippery type—to use a baseball metaphor, he was always ready to throw a curveball or a slider. I couldn't deny the possibility that his personality had been warped over the many years he'd been treated as an unwanted child.

"Apparently, over half of the nobles eliminated were supporters of Prince Adonis," continued Count Müller.

"I doubt Adonis would sit quietly and watch as nobles of his faction were targeted," Peeps remarked.

"Actually, I just received a summons yesterday to come to the palace..."

Prince Adonis must be ordering his nobles to gather to him. If he'd called on the count, then politically, this could involve Baron Sasaki as well, since I was under his protection. Most of all, taking Peeps's feelings for the kingdom into consideration, there was no way I could stay uninvolved.

"In that case, should we head to Allestos right now, my lord?" I said.

"I couldn't possibly ask you to come," said the count. "Don't you have your own business to attend to?"

At this, I decided to take the initiative and make an offer myself—I expected the psychological burden of requesting something from the Starsage would be too much for the count.

"Our work has been growing more and more efficient of late, sir," I told him. "I can maintain it with little effort. You needn't worry about that. And Pee—er, the Lord Starsage—I'm sure he would be happy to do something for the kingdom if he can."

Now that we'd introduced long-range wireless communication to Marc's company, they were basically handling all our business by themselves. Peeps and I now had much less reason to go back and forth between Herz and Lunge. These days, as long as we brought in and sold our modern goods, they'd get to where they were going even without our help.

"We can leave immediately, if you wish."

"Then please allow me to accompany you, Lord Starsage."

“Of course. Then as soon as we are all ready, we shall set out.”

Normally, it took several days to travel from Baytrium to Allestos. But with Peeps’s teleportation magic, we’d get there in the blink of an eye.

“By the way, sir,” I added, “there was something I wanted to request before we left.”

“What is it?”

“It’s my belief that in times of crisis, it is even more important to treasure one’s regular routine. Would you like to view the video letter Lady Elsa made for you?”

“Oh, yes, of course. You’re a man of deep consideration—consideration which has helped me many times in the past.”

“I’m honored to hear that, sir.”

My plan to have a nice, long, otherworld vacation now that our work in modern times was done had quickly fallen apart. Still, I had a few days off from the bureau, so at least the worst-case scenario hadn’t come to pass. It was a silver lining, but the only reason I was happy about it was because of how long I’d suffered as a corporate drone.

The judging period to determine the royal inheritance as set forth by the king of Herz was five years. The otherworld would likely get busier and busier as the day of reckoning drew near.

I hoped the final showdown would come much sooner.



We headed for the royal capital of Allestos that same day using Peeps's teleportation magic, arriving at the count's other residence instantly. We warped directly into his private room, so no one witnessed our arrival. Looking outside, the sun was still high.

From there, we decided to go straight to the palace to visit Prince Adonis. The convoluted process to secure a meeting with him, which Baron Sasaki would have struggled with on his own, sped by like a high-speed express train with Count Müller's help. Lately, he'd been the talk of the kingdom among the second prince's supporters. Once he told the right person we wanted an audience, to my surprise, the prince himself came out to greet us.

Rather than stand around talking, he prompted us to follow him through the palace. Shockingly, he led us straight to his private rooms. This was not what I had expected.

Despite Herz's prominent decline, the royal residence was a luxury extravaganza. Even the bed had a canopied frame decorated with goldwork. It looked even larger than a king. Everything glittered, from the desk and the closet to all the other furnishings.

We settled down onto an expensive-looking pair of sofas and began our discussion.

"Lord Starsage, Sasaki, thank you for bringing Count Müller here. Your timing is perfect," said Prince Adonis, facing us from the other sofa.

Nobody else could be seen in the room. Along the way, knights—I assumed they were the royal guard—had surrounded the prince. Now, though, they were waiting in

the hallway. The prince had shooed them out, telling them he had sensitive things to discuss with us.

“What would you have of me, sir?” asked the count.

“I assume you’ve read the letter I sent a few days ago?”

“If you’re referring to your elder brother, then yes, that’s the reason for my visit today. And judging by the letter’s contents, I assumed Baron Sasaki was not exempt from this matter.”

“Yes. In fact, Lewis has already begun moving his troops.”

“What...?” The count breathed out in astonishment.

I casually glanced at his face; his eyes were wide with surprise. I even felt Peeps give a little start on my shoulder. Considering the kingdom’s geography, it wouldn’t be long before swarms of soldiers arrived in the count’s lands and at the border fortress.

This sounded bad. *I should probably warn Mr. French.*

“And Sasaki,” continued the prince, “he has asked me to prepare a meeting between the two of you to discuss the details of what you’ve already decided upon regarding the border fortress. I know not what sort of things you’ve spoken of with him, but I’d like to be informed now, if possible.”

“I understand, sir.”

It wasn’t something I needed to hide, so I informed him of the whole ordeal where Prince Lewis, dressed in women’s clothing, had attacked me. I did, however, leave out minor

details about his state at the time, partly to preserve his pride. It might not reflect too well on me, either.

The image of him in full costume flashed through my brain once again, and I could still see him only as a beautiful woman. I started to imagine Prince Adonis—I bet he'd give the same impression if he wore women's clothes and put on makeup. But I quickly put a stop to these indiscreet thoughts and shook them from my mind. *Cross-dressing brother princes*, I thought. *How deeply sinful.*

“Fascinating,” said the prince. “I had no idea that had happened.”

“I apologize for making a decision about the fortress without consulting you, sir,” I said.

“No, I don't mind. Your actions have likely spared the good count here from my brother's purge. I had wondered why he wasn't coming after you both—that's one mystery solved.”

“You seem to have saved me yet again,” the count said to me. “Allow me to thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“I'm honored, sir.”

Prince Adonis's remark had earned me Count Müller's appreciation. Come to think of it, I'd been keeping the mess with Prince Lewis a secret from him as well.

As we continued exchanging words, my distinguished Java sparrow asked a question of the prince. “*How fare the nobles mentioned in the letter, Adonis?*”

“They’re currently languishing in the palace jail. I tried to visit but was forbidden from meeting them.”

“A merciless man indeed.”

“The imprisoned nobles’ domains have been entrusted to the royal family for the time being. My brother has taken advantage of this to muster troops, and now he is moving toward the border. A great number of people and supplies are being shifted, if I’m to believe the reports.”

This all sounded just like what Peeps and Count Müller had discussed.

The count quickly raised a concern. “Sir, is it true that Count Dietrich was in contact with the Empire?”

“I don’t know what sort of connections the count has in the background,” replied the prince. “But perhaps Lewis felt a more forceful display of authority would be forgiven depending on how well his troops perform. While he would lose everything should he fail, if he succeeds, many such scandals would be swept under the rug permanently.”

“Considering the kingdom’s position of late, I believe you have the right of it, sir. However, I feel as though Prince Lewis’s confidence is misplaced. To be quite frank, the idea of him emerging victorious seems very far-fetched.”

“My brother’s zeal for attacking the Ohgen Empire has always been beyond my understanding.”

“I see...”

The prince’s face as he spoke was filled with sincere, deep-seated unease. Though I’d tried to probe Prince Lewis

himself on this very topic during his fortress inspection, he'd told me that the plan was top secret. I could imagine what some of the contributing factors were—the golden dragons that had taken up residence near the border—and the existence of a powerful, friendly magician. But it wasn't enough to make any concrete assumptions.

Once we'd finished sharing information, the room fell quiet. Then came a sudden knock at the door, drawing all our attention.

We heard a voice from outside call, “Adonis, do you have a moment?”

“...Brother? Is that you?” replied the prince.

“I heard that Count Müller and Baron Sasaki have come to the palace. Is that true? If they're with you, then as I explained, I'd like to talk with them for a few moments. May I come in?”

I knew that voice, too. It was the very man we'd just been talking about: Prince Lewis. His tone sounded friendlier than before—was it because he was talking to a sibling? I suddenly found myself curious about their relationship beyond the struggle for inheritance.

“.....”

Prince Adonis's gaze shifted to the three of us sitting on the other couch. As we moved to get up to welcome the other prince, he waved for us to stay seated. Just as my slightly lifted rear end fell back down onto the sofa, he called back through the door.

“You may enter at your leisure.”

“Oh? All right, then.”

Keeping us seated as the elder prince entered the room was probably a show of power. Adonis was truly a member of the royal family, dealing with politics every day. I'd never be able to pay attention to every little act, every minor motion like that.

A few moments later, the man we'd expected appeared in the doorway.

“Oh, so they were with you,” he said, looking at us.

I glimpsed a few knights outside, probably his guards. One or two of them practically glared at us. Prince Lewis closed the door behind him, though, blocking their view, before briskly walking over. He was the only one who entered.

“You mentioned you had something to speak with Baron Sasaki about,” remarked Adonis. “What might that be?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Lewis replied. “I just wanted to borrow the fortress the good baron built on the Rectan Plains for a little while. The two of us have already come to an understanding. Would you mind explaining the matter to Adonis, Baron?”

An exchange began between Prince Adonis and Prince Lewis. While the former stayed put on the sofa, the latter remained standing. The fact that we were sitting while a person of higher status stood made me uncomfortable. I started fidgeting. Count Müller seemed to share the sentiment; I made out the slight worry on his face at once.

“You can’t possibly plan to throw them in jail as well,” insisted Adonis. “These two nobles are virtuous—they would grind their bones to dust working for the sake of this kingdom. I know you are aware, as someone who has seen their domains.”

“Yes, I understand. But we can’t simply leave the new Rectan Plains fortress untouched—not if we’re going to invade the Ohgen Empire. If we aren’t careful, the Empire might capture it and put it to use as a frontline base.”

“Still...”

“And above all, Baron Sasaki himself has already agreed to this.”

“I’ve already heard from the baron what transpired between you two.”

“Did you?” Lewis’s attention moved from Adonis to me. He seemed determined to get a rise out of me, typical of the first prince. “Oh, don’t tell me—you won’t grant my request unless I change into something else? In that case, I would be *more* than happy to pay a visit to your lodgings tonight, once I’ve assumed my *previous* appearance.” He spoke flirtatiously, looking down at his outfit.

Once again, he seemed possessed of a strange, indescribable charm. His modest shoulder width and slender waistline were both overflowing with androgynous appeal. His gloomy-but-attractive countenance revived my memory of that prior, sordid affair.

“I’m very grateful for your consideration, sir, but rest assured, you needn’t go that far.”

“In that case, I’d like you to lend me your fortress.”

I was curious about what kind of looks we were receiving from the count and the other prince. They seemed utterly bewildered, perhaps because I had skipped over *that* part of my explanation. If Ms. Futarishizuka were here, she’d definitely be making inappropriate remarks.

“As I told you before,” I began, “I am quite willing to do so for the sake of the kingdom. However, I have invested a significant portion of my own funding into the fortress’s development, so I feel I should ask for a suitable amount to be paid back to me as rent.”

“And you would ask that of royalty, would you?” Lewis replied. “You show such promise, Baron.”

“Well, sir, I also need an excuse to give to those in Lunge with whom I’m conducting business,” I added, making use of my relationship with Mr. Joseph. If Lewis was aware of Count Dietrich’s defection, then he probably also knew that Baron Sasaki was backed by the Kepler Trading Company.

“Oh. Is that so?” said the prince.

“It is indeed, sir.”

“...And what exactly do you want, my good baron?”

The prince had caved quite easily to the request of this backwater baron. How handy it was to have a friend in a distant, wealthy country!

“If you’ll allow me to say, sir, there are two things I would ask for.”

“You’re quite greedy compared to Adonis’s other underlings.”

“The first is the lives of the nobles you’ve recently been detaining, sir. Might you agree to refrain from torturing those in the palace jail—and simply keep them there instead?”

“State your second request.”

The reply came immediately. *Should I assume he accepted it?* I wondered. I’d made this request to try to keep Count Dietrich safe. I didn’t like the thought of leaving him to rot in jail after getting him so involved in our affairs.

“The second is the safety of the fortress and of Count Müller’s lands, sir. I expect that more than a few soldiers will be visiting Baytrium now that they’ve been deployed. I would like measures to be taken to avoid causing problems there.”

Once I’d stated my second request, Prince Adonis chimed in, speaking up before Lewis had the chance. “I’d like to comment on that request as well. While Baron Sasaki made a promise with you beforehand, he is still on our side. Making use of one of ours should come with an appropriate compromise on your part.”

“All right. I’m listening.”

“In order to ensure the baron’s second condition is met, I would like to dispatch some of my own troops there as well. Please allow me the freedom to act within Count Müller’s and Baron Sasaki’s territories until the situation with the Ohgen Empire has calmed down.”

“Oh, what a magnificent little brother you’ve become, offering to support me from behind like this.”

“Will you accept?” I asked.

“Certainly. You may all do as you like.”

“Thank you very much.”

Apparently, we’d gotten him to agree to the second proposal as well. *This should all but eliminate any mistreatment Mr. French might face at the hands of the troops, I thought. And we should be able to maintain public safety in Baytrium, too.*

“You’d do well to surround yourself with soldiers you can trust, Adonis.”

“I shall,” said the younger prince.

With this brief exchange, Prince Lewis’s visit to his younger brother’s chambers was over. After accomplishing what he’d come for, he quickly left the room. The door closed behind him again, and we listened as his footsteps disappeared down the hallway.

Once we could no longer hear them, the count spoke. “Sir, I sincerely thank you for showing such consideration toward our lands.”

“I can’t let you two carry the whole burden,” the prince replied. “As my brother suggested, I will take a trusted group of soldiers and head toward Baytrium. With the Lord Starsage on our side, I don’t believe we will have much trouble, but we will need some people to handle any minor disputes.”

“You’ll be going personally, then, sir?” I asked.

“That would set the count most at ease, I think.”

“But wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“There is only so much I can do from the palace. Should matters take a turn for the worse, someone may need to take command of the soldiers on the ground, regardless of their affiliation. I will not sit by and watch—not when my homeland is at stake.”

“Sir...”

Prince Adonis’s crisp, smart delivery was so *cool*. As usual, his manner overflowed with a strong sense of justice. I recalled the time he had charged into that village as it was attacked by orcs. It seemed his reasons stemmed from neither vanity nor whim, but from true conviction.

Peeps broke into their conversation to remark, “*I can’t help but feel like we’re being made to dance in the palm of his hand.*”

“That does scare me a bit,” I replied.

“Lord Starsage, what do you mean?” asked the count.

“*No, I cannot say anything for sure at the moment. I apologize for bringing it up.*”

“I see...”

The sparrow’s words had drawn my attention, as well. But he was right—there was no point worrying about it right now. Prince Adonis had declared he’d ride out personally,

and even if the worst came to pass, I was sure we could rouse the dragons and have them return the two nations to their original stalemate.

After that, we traded some light conversation, then brought our discussion to a close.



(The Neighbor's POV)

Today is moving day.

I don't really have any belongings to bring into the new house, and while I could blame that on the explosion at my previous apartment, it would only be an excuse. In fact, it had changed nothing.

Right before the apartment was destroyed, I'd gotten Abaddon to fetch my schoolbag and uniform. The former held my textbooks, notebooks, pens and pencils, and gym clothes. Literally all my possessions now hang from my shoulder as I cross the hard floor of the entranceway, both beginning and ending my move.

Futarishizuka is kind enough to show me through my new home. My neighbor met up with us part of the way through, too. I'm very happy. For a little under an hour, the three of us take a look around the house.

Once we're finished, they promptly leave. On their way out, Futarishizuka hands me a phone. A brand-new one, by the looks of it, with none of the protective film removed. A few entries are already in the address book, starting with Futarishizuka. The other numbers are things like a taxi

service and utility companies; after glancing through it, I can tell how I'm supposed to use them.

A little while after the others have left, I try calling one of the entries in the list with a food-related name, just to test it out and have something delivered. It's the first time I've ever eaten sushi in my life, and it's softer and thicker than I thought it would be. Most of all, it tastes *nutritious*.

But I can't find the most important number in my address book. I look and look, but my neighbor's contact info is nowhere to be found.

Once I'm done with my sushi, I take another look around the house. The furniture and appliances are already installed, and I can start using them immediately. The bath, for example, heats up with the press of a button. There's shampoo, soap, and some sort of cream I don't recognize. All of them smell nice.

There are a lot of bedrooms. I figure the biggest one is the primary bedroom, while the others are for children or guests. All of them are very clean, and the sheets on the beds are smooth without a single wrinkle.

The bathroom is even stocked with sanitary items. I pick up a tampon for the first time ever. It's larger than I expected. These won't break the hymen, will they? I learned in health and physical education class that they're safe, but they seem like they'd scrape off the tissue if I put one in. Since I already decided I'd shed that blood with *him* present, I decide to stick with pads for the time being.

After touring around the house, I venture outside. Unlike urban residential areas, the villas in this neighborhood are located on plots of land several times bigger than the

buildings themselves. The one Abaddon and I were given is no exception. From the front entrance, I can't even see my neighbors' houses.

With tall trees all around, I feel like I'm completely isolated somewhere up in the mountains. Getting a little uneasy, I pull up the map on my phone, then check the satellite imagery. I see many mansions like ours dotting the hilly woods.

The garage is covered of course, and it's big enough to fit several cars with room to spare. Nothing is parked there right now, though. Eventually, I spot a single bicycle in the corner. *I guess kids don't get to use cars.*

The wide-open yard even has a tennis court. It seems to me that keeping all this maintained must be an enormous task. Even just cleaning the inside of the house would probably take an entire day. Combined with the sheer amount of nature around, it would surely require more than one gardener to tend the yard in the summer. You could probably spend the entire season doing just that.

And so I spend my first day doing nothing except looking around. For dinner, I order delivery again—there's not really another way to get food. After all, I don't have a single yen to my name. At worst, we'll have to do what Abaddon suggested and go up the mountain to find wild vegetables.

After that, I take a bath and finish my day a little early. I'm in bed before midnight.

Time passes. It's been a little under an hour, I think.

Abaddon, realizing I'm still awake, asks, *"It's been a while since you got into bed. Guess you can't sleep, huh?"*

“No, and if you’ve figured out that much, I’d appreciate some quiet.”

I open my eyes, which I’d kept closed for so long, and search out the demon in my dark room. I find him sitting on the desk chair, looking at me lying in bed. The moonlight coming in from between the curtains faintly illuminates his handsome features. It’s like looking at a painting.

That irritates me a little.

“I thought you could sleep anywhere. Was I wrong?”

“I wish you wouldn’t make weird judgments about me.”

My current sleeping environment leaves nothing to be desired. The bed is nice and springy, and the pillow has great height and firmness. Plus, the bed is big enough for me to stretch my limbs and still have plenty of room. The air-conditioning is perfect, too, and my throat doesn’t dry out, nor do I feel too hot or cold.

I don’t have to listen to my mom’s television programs. No one’s talking outside, and there’s no roar of traffic. The place must be very well soundproofed; it’s really, really quiet.

It’s so perfect, in fact, that if I can’t sleep *here*, it seems like I shouldn’t be able to sleep anywhere.

“You know, you didn’t seem to sleep very well at the hotel, either.”

“...So what?”

Abaddon's comment is right on the mark. I had trouble sleeping at the hotel my neighbor arranged, too. It bothers me that the demon is constantly observing me so closely, but he says it's a necessary part of protecting his Disciple so I'll survive the death game.

And besides, I know exactly why I haven't been getting enough sleep.

"First you went to the primary bedroom, but now you're lying in the smallest guest room in the house."

"That one is too big. Sleeping alone in there makes me anxious."

That's just an excuse. The size of the room has nothing to do with it. My neighbor—the man I could always sense on the other side of our apartment wall—isn't here. I could go out into the hallway and into the next room, but he won't be there.

It's really eating away at me, physically *and* mentally. The unease and loneliness wake me back up against my will.

I need him.

That big sigh he'd let out right after getting home. Hearing him take a shower in his bathroom. The sound of him accidentally dropping something on the floor. Without any of those things, I can't feel him.

It's like I've been cut off from the world, and I'm all alone. If only I had something I could reach out to that would make me feel his presence once again...

“Why not take a short walk around the neighborhood to clear your head?”

“You want to go outside?”

“We didn’t look beyond this lot during the day. It’s vital to have information about your surroundings in the proxy war, and it’s more constructive than tossing and turning in bed, right? Maybe you’ll wear yourself out enough to fall asleep.”

“It’s pitch-black.”

“The moon is out tonight. You’ll be okay once your eyes get used to it.”

“...I guess.”

Before today, I’ve never had the freedom to go out for a walk at night, and so I find myself tempted by Abaddon’s suggestion. I don’t want to make trouble for my neighbor or increase my debt to Futarishizuka, but I’m pretty sure I won’t be reported by a neighbor or bump into any police officers.

“Well, all right. But not for more than an hour. Let’s—”

Just as I’m about to say “Let’s head out,” it happens. The already quiet room suddenly grows even quieter. So quiet I almost think I’ve lost my hearing. I can tell because the previously constant noise from the air conditioner has vanished. I notice when I hear the sound of my blanket rubbing against the bed as I shift.

“Oh. Looks like the game’s already started.”

“I guess we didn’t even need to go for a walk, huh?”

I’m wearing a yukata as pajamas right now—it was set out in the bathroom. I take it off, then grab the clothes I brought in from the primary bedroom closet and put them on. Futarishizuka told me I could wear whatever I found in the mansion. She probably got it specifically for me, considering all the underwear is in my size.

Every piece of clothing looks incredibly expensive, so I pick out a pair of jeans—the least pricey item I can find. I also select a blouse and a hoodie that appear comparatively inexpensive. I throw on a plain down jacket over the outfit, hoping the layers will keep me warm in the cold night.

“You had so many choices, and you chose that?”

“If I’d been dressing up for *him*, I would have taken more time to decide.”

“Still, there’s something to be said about looking good...”

I never thought Abaddon would comment on my clothes.

But everything about this is new to me. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve received new clothing. Now I have a closet full of outfits, and I have to choose. That’s never happened before, and I never imagined it would. I’ve never even worn a bra. The one I picked out was tight and felt awful, too, so I took it back off after putting it on. I’m stunned to learn that the women of the world wear something so stifling.

“I’ve never had to choose clothes before,” I say. “I think this is inevitable.”

“Hmm? I wonder if you’d say the same thing the night before a date with that man.”

“.....”

Abaddon’s remark stings. Honestly, I’d figured my sailor uniform would be fine—I’d be taking it off pretty fast anyway.

At least, that’s what I’d assumed until a little while ago.

As I think about it again, I recall all the women who have started showing up in his general vicinity. Futarishizuka, for starters, with her habit of wearing a kimono, and the makeup woman with her sexy suit. Then there’s that blond who sports clothing from brands so famous even I recognize them...

All of them are glamorous. If we have to duke it out, my school uniform, unwashed for several days, will do me no favors. I need to find out what sort of clothes rouse his nether regions and then wear those all the time.

And now that luxury is well within reach. There are a *lot* of clothes in that bedroom closet.

“If you feel so strongly, Abaddon, will you help me with that tomorrow?”

“Oh. Looks like I said something I shouldn’t have.”



Whatever the case, I doubt these clothes will pose an issue tonight. My neighbor won't be around, so I don't really care what I look like.



(The Neighbor's POV)

We're in the middle of a proxy war between angels and demons, and an isolated space—its designated battlefield—has just appeared. In response, Abaddon and I start off from our new home. The moment we exit the mansion's front entrance, I launch myself up into the night sky. I'm hoping to catch sight of the angel and their Disciple.

But I quickly realize this will be much harder than I'd thought. As I could see from the aerial photo on my phone's map, we're quite far out in the mountains. The forests stretching down from Mount Asama cover everything, hiding other homes beneath a canopy of trees. Spotting someone out here, especially at night, will be almost impossible.

"I can't sense the enemy's presence at all, by the way."

"Maybe they already decided to retreat."

"I had the same thought."

"If they flee into the mountains, we won't be able to take care of them."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right."

“Unless they’re a wild boar or a deer, I would assume they’re coming home from work—or trying to, at least. With that in mind, we could try heading toward the station or a busier street.”

“*Yeah! Let’s go with that!*” says Abaddon, nodding enthusiastically at my suggestion. He’s probably testing me again. “*It’s really important to try to get inside your opponent’s mind.*”

“.....”

This is a simple, primitive human concept—one that goes beyond just the proxy war. And a *demon* is giving me advice on it? Okay, so empathy isn’t exactly my forte. I also know that puts me at a disadvantage in the death game. Why does human society have to be so complicated?

As I stew over this, I soar through the air, looking for lights on the ground. Before long, I come to an area with what looks like streetlights along a road. Buildings, probably restaurants and stores, stand on either side of the stone-paved street, which has no center line but is wide enough for a car to pass through. *Seems like a shopping district for the people with mansions here.*

“*This must be the area’s main street.*”

“It seems a little empty for that.”

“*Well, there are no people right now.*”

“No, I mean it seems too small for a tourist spot.”

“*If you ask me, your old place was positively overflowing with people.*”

“You said the last proxy war happened about a hundred years ago, right?”

“Compared to back then, there are people everywhere you look now.”

“Do demons hate people?”

“Oh, of course not. We love people!”

“.....”

I wonder what angels and demons are, really. I’ve asked Abaddon before but never got a convincing answer. He just gave me the runaround, saying that if I did really well in the proxy war, he’d tell me. Asking him again would probably just lower his opinion of me. Instead, I peel my eyes, searching for any angels or Disciples.

We move past the area with streetlights, toward Karuizawa’s train station. I’d already checked its location on my map, so I knew that if we went south, we’d end up there. The Shinkansen apparently runs through this station, alongside a local line. If we go farther south, we’ll reach a highway.

“I don’t see any signs of them.”

“Yeah. Me either.”

As we search around, everything suddenly changes—all the people come back.

I can hear the cars and trains from below again. I may be new to this city, but the sudden appearance of things moving with the passage of time—rather than just the bright lights

shining at fixed places—vividly conveys the fact that the isolated space has disappeared.

“Oh, looks like they got away from us. That’s too bad.”

“I guess it was a coincidence after all.”

“Maybe they got cold feet after seeing your acquaintance put up such a fierce fight last time.”

“Should we check with our informants?” I ask, remembering the angel and Disciple we captured the other day. I doubt we’d get much from them, though.

“If we ask them now, the others might learn our new location.”

“Then let’s wait awhile. By the way, we’re sort of floating in the sky for everyone to see.”

“No need to worry! I already concealed us.”

“Thank you.”

My neighbor and Futarishizuka asked me to keep secret everything related to the proxy war and all the strange, fantastic phenomena that come with it. Apparently, their job is to make sure the public never catches on to strange occurrences like these.

For most of the years I knew him, my neighbor’s routine always stayed the same. Recently, however, it has changed significantly. Apparently, his work schedule is a lot more flexible now. Knowing he isn’t simply spending time at some woman’s place brings me great relief.

“Should we go home?”

“I think so.”

We didn't get anything from this isolated space. But our search gave me a better idea of the neighborhood layout and surrounding terrain than our originally planned walk would have. And it was a good change of pace, too. I think we've done enough for now.

We fly back home to the mansion the same way we came. Unlike the ever-lively city, I don't need to worry about any tall buildings or airplanes around here. The light from the ground is weak as well, making for a very pleasant stroll through the sky.

After that, I go back to the bedroom and change into my pajamas. As I lie down in bed, I fiddle some more with the phone Futarishizuka gave me. I see a notification icon in the corner of the screen, and when I press it, it sends me to a news website with a summary of the day's notable events. It has a big list of links to articles on topics like international relations, entertainment, and sports.

One of them in particular catches my eye. It's titled *Who and Why? Notification of the Commencement of a Death Game*.

Seeing a term that's recently grown very familiar, my fingertips move on their own, tapping the link to view the article's contents. Apparently, a strange social media account is making the rounds in the news.

“Futarishizuka mentioned that these flat pieces of metal are essential for surviving in today's human society. If you don't mind, could I have a turn with it?”

“.....”

When I don't reply, Abaddon drifts over to me through the air, then peers at the screen from right next to me.

Ignoring him, I tap a link inside the article. A social media app boots up. It's already logged in to my own account, which I mostly use to keep tabs on my neighbor.

Until now, I used the computers in the school's tech room for this. Now that Futarishizuka has given me a phone, though, I can constantly check in on him. Unfortunately, he hasn't posted many updates recently. This makes me sad, as his fan.

“That is one mangled corpse, eh? Looks like they were half eaten by a wild animal,” says Abaddon, looking at the app on the phone.

The screen shows a photograph of something I've seen before: the body of the dead Disciple I ran across on my way to school before meeting Abaddon. His stomach is sliced wide open, and his ribs are protruding out of his body. There are no organs to be seen inside.

The account in question has posted several things in a row. Each of them has a photograph attached, and all of them depict someone's outlandish end. The picture I opened was one of those. The others are unfamiliar to me.

A lot of people are slamming the account in the comments for posting such gruesome content. One of them doubts the photos' veracity, suggesting they were made with computer graphics.

All the posts have the same external link in them. Tapping on it switches back to the browser and displays a website.

The first thing I see is the title at the top—*Notification of the Commencement of a Death Game*. The exact same as the article posted on the news site. Several grotesque images are displayed, all unedited, just like the social media profile. The provocative term *death game*, and the site's setup, like a teaser for some kind of event, has garnered the public's attention. The creepy, over-the-top design looks just like a promotional site for a horror movie. Even someone like me can tell it probably cost a lot of money.

I scan the page but don't find an email address to contact.

"Hey, this is one of those 'website' things, right? I know what those are!"

"Yes, Mister Smart Demon. And would you happen to know what its creator is trying to do?"

"People do this stuff because they stand to gain something from it, right?"

"You mean like someone who wants to end the game quickly?"

"Assuming it's not some show-off, that sounds pretty possible. They could also be trying to scare the other participants or let the world know about the existence of angels and demons. There are a lot of possibilities."

"....."

From the time stamps on the social media posts, I can tell that the website just hit the news this afternoon. Due to the

extreme imagery, I figure their account will be removed soon. Did the news pick it up because it was being talked about? Or is it being talked about because the news picked it up? I'm filled with suspicion, now that my knowledge of the world has grown after meeting Futarishizuka.

"This proxy war may wrap up sooner than we expected."

By "we," Abaddon probably means the other demons and angels. He mentioned the previous game lasted for most of the twentieth century. Information technology is far more advanced than it was back then, and people travel and connect much, much more often. The environment Disciples are now living and dying in is sure to be even more relentless.

I put the website's title into a search engine. A major anonymous forum has a thread going about it, with people doing their own investigations and sharing opinions. All of them are off the mark for now, but there's no telling how that might change.

"I'll ask Futarishizuka tomorrow," I decide. "She might know something."

"I think that would be better than trying to puzzle it out on our own."

"I agree."

Leaving my phone on the nightstand, I bury myself under the blanket.



Once our discussion with Prince Adonis in his private chambers was finished, we used Peeps's teleportation spell to return to the town of Baytrium. Count Müller accompanied us on the return journey as well, while the prince stayed behind, saying he needed to ready his troops.

And so we found ourselves back at the count's mansion, once again discussing matters in the reception room.

"I'd like to prepare the town for the arrival of Prince Lewis's soldiers," said the count, addressing both of us. "It is a selfish request, but would you allow me some time to do so?"

"I understand. The situation has developed very quickly, and there is a lot to do. Should you need anything, please don't hesitate to rely on us."

"Oh...! I'm so grateful to hear that."

Count Müller seemed overjoyed at Peeps's thoughtful words. *He definitely won't take him up on it, though, I thought. He's probably just happy Peeps said something nice to him. I bet that's why Peeps is always helping the count without telling him.* Personally, I was pretty envious of their relationship.

"Do you two intend to stay in town for a while?" he asked.

"Actually, I have something in mind I'd like to do."

Hmm? I thought. *That's the first I'm hearing of any plans.* I'd assumed we'd be relaxing in our usual lodgings. "Peep—er, Lord Starsage, are we going out somewhere?"

“You needn’t constantly correct yourself,” said Peeps, shooting me a sharp look from his perch on the little tree atop the low table. *“Just call me Peeps.”*

“Yeah, but we’re in front of Count Müller and everything, so...”

“It feels strange having you refer to me so respectfully.”

“...All right, Peeps.”

In this world, the little sparrow was once revered as the Lord Starsage. While he put on a show of modesty, the truth was that he was rather happy about it. In the course of our time together, I’d become privy to a few such secrets, and he was probably hesitant to put on airs around me. If I’d been in his position, I’d probably have told him the same thing.

“This is merely a suggestion, but perhaps we should pay the Ohgen Empire a visit.”

“What?” I said. *“Why? Do you want to pick a fight with them?”*

“No, I wouldn’t go that far. It would just be a stroll through town to get a look at the place, really.”

“So then, you want to go sightseeing?”

“You may think of it that way if you wish. I would like to bring you along, if you agree.”

“Me? Why?”

“Actually, you would be the crux of this trip. Depending on how matters progress, our nations could wind up in a

large-scale war. Your world has a saying—Know thy enemy and know thyself, and you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. I want to learn more about this potential enemy.”

“I see.”

He even used the internet to read up on Sun Tzu? He’s like a super strategist now. I was beyond thankful for how much thought he was putting into things.

I’d actually been curious about the Ohgen Empire’s culture, too. With the Starsage by my side, I probably didn’t have to worry too much about taking a look around. Of particular interest to me was their local cuisine.

An envious expression flashed across the count’s face, just for a moment. *He probably wishes he, too, could go on a trip with his beloved Starsage.*

“But are you sure we’ll be okay?”

“They don’t know your face. You could walk around as you are, and they would be none the wiser. But considering the possibilities, you may want to hide your face and skin color. I wanted to discuss that with you as well.”

“In that case, I’d be happy to go with you.”

“Thank you. I know this was a sudden proposition.”

“No, not at all. I’m grateful you’re thinking so far ahead.”

“In that case,” said the count, “should anything occur in Herz while you’re away, I’ll contact Mr. French and the Marc

Trading Company. If I happen to be absent, please go to one of them.”

“Understood, my lord,” I said. “Thank you for going to the trouble.”

And with that, our plans to visit the Ohgen Empire were settled. The otherworld was busy in more ways than one, but we couldn't forget our true goal as the days went by: our precious life of leisure. We must treasure our moments of luxury, eating delicious food and sleeping in a nice, soft bed every night.



After saying good-bye to Count Müller, we returned to our lodgings in Baytrium. The two of us were the only ones in the suite. I sat on one of the two sofas, facing my pet sparrow as he hovered in the air. The plan was to do something about my appearance, quite distinctive here in the otherworld, so that others wouldn't perceive it. Peeps was now instructing me on the details.

“Magic that can change your appearance?” I asked.

“Indeed.”

His explanation essentially boiled down to shapeshifting magic. It could change your skin and hair color, as well as mess with your height and facial features. When done well, you could become a totally different person. It was every bit as awe-inspiring an otherworldly fantasy as the going-to-work spell or the laser beam spell.

“What difficulty level would this fall into? You know, the ones you taught me about. I think they went from beginner to intermediate to advanced to the really amazing stuff beyond that, right?”

“I believe it would be correct to identify this as part of the ‘amazing stuff beyond that’ category.”

“Huh. I thought so.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I mean, it’s incredible, isn’t it? You can turn into someone else.”

“It’s not as flashy as large-scale attack magic, but it is as you say. Depending on how one uses it, one may exert great influence upon the world. It would be a simple task to switch places with an authority figure and manipulate people, for example.”

“Wait, has that actually happened?”

“I’ve read several historical documents detailing such occurrences.”

“It would be awful if someone misused it.”

“Still, as you’ve just pointed out, the spell is very advanced and cannot be learned so easily. In my opinion, it would be even more difficult for you to master than the teleportation magic you so long for.”

“It’s even harder than that? I can’t begin to imagine.”

“One could even grow a tail or scales—or masquerade as another creature entirely. The spell’s difficulty varies based on what form you wish to take. In my subjective opinion, it seems the further one strays from their original form, the more difficult it is to accomplish.”

“It sounds really versatile. Almost scarily so.”

“Regarding its origins, it is said that this spell was created by higher species of dragon and demonfolk so that they could interact with humans. In that sense, the ability to disguise oneself as another creature could be taken as the spell’s true essence.”

“I see.”

I was fascinated. *What a uniquely otherworldly backstory*, I thought. Here, there were plenty of highly intelligent races other than humans. And since those other races’ life spans and physical abilities surpassed those of humans, civilization, especially when it came to magic, wasn’t necessarily driven by human development. There were probably all sorts of spells out there that even the Starsage was unaware of.

“This spell is also thought to have major effects on the caster.”

“Well, outward appearance is everything in the end.”

“Exactly.”

Using this spell to change yourself into an attractive person could single-handedly lower life’s difficulty level. Considering the culture on Earth, where the word *romance*

came up even in economics, some people might consider such magic more precious than the going-to-work spell.

And when those around you started treating you differently, it changed you. The same thing happened when you advanced from elementary to middle school or moved up in the workplace. Even small changes in position like those could easily transform a person's words and actions. I assumed those were the kind of "effects" the bird was referring to.

And now that I knew of such a spell's existence, I couldn't help but worry. "That sounds pretty intense. Are you sure you should show it to me?"

"I like to think I have a good eye for people."

"Hearing that from you scares me even more."

"I could even teach you the incantation if you'd like."

"I'm grateful for the offer, but I'd like to shelve that for now. I want to keep working on the going-to-work spell for the moment. And I wouldn't want to jot it down somewhere and then lose it for some villain to find."

Since this was a dangerous, higher-than-advanced spell, Peeps couldn't use it by himself. It would put too much of a strain on his little sparrow body. I, on the other hand, would be able to use it without his assistance.

I wanted to refrain as much as possible from learning any spells that were too powerful for my master to use himself. Considering what I knew of the sparrow, I felt like I shouldn't learn them—especially the spell to cross between worlds. For starters, they were all super dangerous.

“I expected you to say that, and you did.”

“How many people in this world can use it?”

“In terms of humans, almost none. A person has to be taught by a greater dragon or the demonfolk just to learn the incantation. That in itself is quite demanding. And there are many barriers to using it, even beyond sufficient mana and mental image control.”

“In that case, I feel even more strongly about my decision.”

As we spoke, something suddenly occurred to me. When we got back to modern Japan, I would print out the incantations I'd saved to my computer and delete the files. I couldn't risk a virus leaking all the data on my drive. It might even lead to someone attacking us. In fact, such an attack could have already happened without my knowledge. My boss at work, for example, seemed very good at that sort of thing.

With that in mind, I was convinced our new home would need to have good security. Recently, I'd gotten to know people in the SDF and even people from other countries. I had a sneaking suspicion that the attack on my neighbor's apartment wasn't wholly about her.

“In any case, I wanted to request your assistance when using the spell.”

“You don't even need to ask, Peeps.”

After seeing me nod, the bird landed on my shoulder. I heard a stream of murmured words from beside my ear. A

moment later, a magic circle appeared at my feet with a *vrrrr*.

“Any requests?”

“As normal as you can. I don’t want to stand out.”

“Very well.”

It was like asking for a certain haircut at the barber. While I kind of wanted to experience what it was like to be attractive, our mission was to sightsee in the Ohgen Empire. The most important thing was having average, forgettable features.

Though I’d like thick, abundant hair, I thought. Enough to put product in.

I swallowed that request back down, however, and a moment later, my body appeared to radiate light.

“Peeps, uh, I’m getting a little worried,” I stammered.

“It will be fine. You’ll be able to handle this.”

“Huh? What is that supposed to—?”

I felt something warm spread from my core to my extremities. It felt like something was clinging onto the surface of my skin, but I couldn’t check more closely because the light got stronger, blocking my view. I couldn’t look directly at myself.

After a few moments, there was an even brighter burst of light. I shut my eyes. At this point, I just wanted Peeps to get it over with—whatever he was doing. It reminded me of

letting a doctor probe your stomach with a camera at the hospital. Giving up your dignity as a human, you just lay on the operating table, feeling like a fish on a cutting board.

How long did I spend like that? To me, it felt like ages, but it probably wasn't that long, really. As I sensed the light fade through my closed eyelids, I heard a voice from my shoulder.

“What do you think about this? Check yourself in the mirror.”

“Oh. Uh, right.”

Now that Peeps was finished with his work, I opened my eyes. The room itself was no different. Actually, that wasn't strictly true—everything looked a little bit lower than before. Following the sparrow's instructions, I went to the tall mirror in the corner of the living room and placed myself in front of it.

“.....”

The first thing I felt when I gazed upon my reflection was surprise.

It really was someone else standing there. In fact, I felt myself go stiff, like a dog or cat seeing themselves in the mirror for the first time. As I moved my arms and legs, so did the person in the mirror.

As Peeps had promised, I now looked exactly like a denizen of this world. My skin was white and my features more pronounced. My hair and eye color had changed from black to light brown. I seemed to be a little taller, too. The shape of my body appeared to be basically the same as before, but I felt like my belt hung a little more loosely.

Everything above the neck was, from my point of view, pretty attractive. But living in Baytrium had taught me that people commonly had faces like these, so I figured I was only *suitably* attractive rather than *very* attractive.

What interested me more was my hair. There was a lot more of it now, though it was about the same length. I brushed my bangs up with my hand. There was a weight to them. The hairs on my head now felt so much more reliable—dependable, even.

“As you can see, I kept you a man. However, I made you look a little younger so that people are more willing to overlook breaches of etiquette. I chose a hair and eye color common in the Empire, as well. Tell me if any of it bothers you.”

“This all feels very, very strange.”

As Peeps had said, I now looked around twenty, basically college age. Younger than Count Müller but older than Prince Adonis. With my body now different, I could feel a change in how well my suit fit. But Peeps appeared to have taken that into consideration, too. I should still be able to wear it without issue. And my feet were the same size, so no problem there.

“If there’s anything you want me to adjust, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“No, no! This is amazing. It’s more than enough.”

Nobody would ever link me to Herz’s Baron Sasaki like this. I’d be able to waltz into the Ohgen Empire with impunity.

Witnessing the transformation spell in real life, however, raised a question in my mind.

“Peeps, couldn’t you use this spell to become human again?”

“While my appearance might be human, my true identity would still be that of a bird. The change is but temporary. It also consumes mana to use the spell and maintain it. One needs to constantly supply the spell with mana while transformed.”

“Will I revert to normal if I move too far away from you?”

“You should be able to spend a little under an hour apart from me without issue. More than that, however, and there’s no telling when you’ll revert. If such a separation is likely, it would be best not to use the spell at all.”

“Oh.”

I was with the sparrow at all times whenever I was in the otherworld, so that restriction wasn’t too concerning. As long as things went normally, I doubted the spell would ever end unexpectedly. That said, it’d all be over if I was arrested under false charges and thrown in prison like Mr. Marc, or something like that. In modern times, where we often split up, frequent usage probably wasn’t in the cards.

“Also, the target of the spell is sometimes physically unable to handle the effects, and their body breaks down.”

“Wait, what?”

“By receiving my mana, you have become an elite human, so I doubt you’ll have any problems.”

“Uh... Oh. You know, I kind of feel like I could have just worn a hood or something. Though it’s a little late for that now.”

To me, magic like this that affected the body still felt a bit like some old-timey herbal concoction the elderly woman down the street might make from boiling plants—the kind you worried might harm more than help. But since the caster was the mighty Starsage himself, I had faith nothing would go wrong.

“Other than the physical and magical limitations, I believe it worthwhile to remain as a sparrow considering the nature of our relationship. Still, if you would insist I should take on human form, I will gladly reconsider.”

“Oh, well. In that case, I’d like to respect your decision, Peeps.”

He was right. When I thought back on everything that had transpired since meeting him, I’d probably get weirded out if my pet bird suddenly became human. In his previous life, he was *seriously* attractive. If I had to live with him in that state, it would definitely wear me out. I was sure of it. It seemed to me that Peeps treasured our current relationship in the same way I did, and that was the reason for his hesitance.

Besides, with Mr. Akutsu’s eyes on me, having this otherworld visitor in the guise of a small bird was extremely convenient for us. It’d be a mess if he were to suddenly and unexpectedly revert to his bird form in front of a third party.

And since this spell was beyond the advanced level, he would need me around to cast and maintain it.

“And besides,” I added. “I don’t really think we want this world knowing the Starsage is still alive.”

“Indeed. I’d prefer to refrain as much as possible from assuming my prior form here.”

Peeps appeared to understand that point as well. Still, sightseeing in the Empire with him in bird form seemed likely to cause problems. I doubted that many people walked around with a bird on their shoulder all the time—although I had seen one or two even in Baytrium with animals that must have been pets.

“But I still have reservations about you staying like that during the trip.”

“Yes, I suppose I should falsify my appearance as well.”

“If you stick to flying around the general vicinity, it should be okay. But if I go around with you on my shoulder, it’ll draw a lot of attention, even if I look like a completely different person.”

“Indeed. Then I shall take on a different form.”

“Oh, I actually had an idea for you...”

This was the chance of a lifetime. I was *not* going to pass it up.

Ever since he’d mentioned transformation magic existed, I’d had my sights set on one thing in particular. I was conflicted about using him to fulfill my own desires, but if he didn’t care one way or the other, then I felt better about making the suggestion.

He agreed without even appearing to think about it. Light radiated from his body, just as it had with mine.

Immediately, I felt a heavy weight on my shoulder. As my knees buckled and gave out, the source of the light smoothly descended to the floor. I felt something brush against the hem of my pants, and my excitement soared.

Finally, from out of the brilliant white light appeared a grand, majestic dog. It was big and beautiful and had golden fur.

This is the best.

“*What do you think?*” he asked, craning his neck to look back at the rest of his body. Apparently, he could still speak normally, just like when he was a sparrow.

I found my eyes drawn to his tail, which wagged as he spoke. We’d looked at pictures and watched videos online once before, so he’d probably based his design on those.

“Peeps, that’s *amazing*. The Starsage never fails to impress.”

“...Is that so?”

I wanted to kneel down and hug him so badly. He was still the Starsage on the inside, though. If I did that, it would be beyond uncomfortable. *Maybe I rushed things a bit*, I thought. *This is so tantalizing.*

“You look just like a real golden retriever!”

“I am aware of your particular love for this type of creature.”

Oh, crap, I thought. He knows. I must have been staring at him too much. I'd have to be careful about that. "Sorry, Peeps. I know this was a strange request."

"Not at all. I have no issue with you choosing my form. If we are to eat and sleep under the same roof, it will be easier for us both if I do so in a form that suits your liking. After all, I chose which form you would take as well."

"Thank you, Peeps."

We briefly discussed our sudden changes of appearance and decided there were no issues to address. When he needed to use me as a medium to cast magic, like with the world-crossing spell, he'd probably touch his front paw to my leg like he did a few moments ago, or I'd put my hand on his back.

"If you feel there are no problems, we should head directly for the Ohgen Empire."

"You know where we're going already?"

"I thought we would first visit a domain next to the border with Herz. It lies adjacent to your territory in the Rectan Plains, and I expect many of the soldiers in the previous attack passed through there."

"That sounds perfect, Peeps."

I'd been curious about what it was like over the border for some time now. And our destination was also a vital military position previously used by over ten thousand soldiers. Since Prince Lewis had decided to go on the offensive, that would likely be his first target.

“What’s the place called?” I asked.

“The town is named Erbrechen.”

With my questions for the distinguished sparrow—or rather, the stately dog—finished, we finally set out to do some sightseeing in the neighboring country.



Using Peeps’s teleportation spell, we jumped straight from our lodgings in Baytrium into Empire territory in the blink of an eye. We reappeared in a field by a road near the town of Erbrechen. Walking the rest of the way on foot, we entered the settlement via the proper procedures, paying the per-person tax and entering under a false name. Just as I had done to explain the sparrow, I told them the dog was my familiar and was able to pass right through the gate without any questions. Now I could pretend to be a traveler and take in the sights.

I’d also changed clothes back in Baytrium to something a local would more commonly wear. To pay the fee, I simply used the gold coins I’d received in the Republic of Lunge during our business dealings. After getting inside, I exchanged them for Ohgen Empire currency. It went smoothly, since the Republic was in the Empire’s good books.

“This is a nice town, huh, Peeps?”

“.....”

As soon as we were in, we stopped in a big open space—the town square, probably—and looked around. An endless

stream of people and carriages were coming and going nearby. The ground beneath our feet was paved with cobblestones, cut precisely to fill in even the smallest gaps. The buildings facing the road were made of stone, too, all of them sturdy looking. I saw quite a few tall structures—four stories or higher. The place must have been fairly wealthy.

Walls surrounded the whole town, but people lived outside of them, too. As far as I could tell from a quick check as we entered, they used the surrounding area for vegetable gardens and orchards, with a veritable rainbow of plants growing in them. They also seemed to be actively trading with nearby villages, as I could see roads extending from the town in four directions.

“This place is a lot bigger than Baytrium, huh?”

“*Woof!*”

“Huh...?”

“...*Dogs cannot talk.*”

“Oh. Right.”

Peeps’s unexpectedly doglike behavior surprised me. As a sparrow, he could whisper into my ear in secret. He must have decided it wasn’t possible to do the same as a dog and replied in a way he deemed suitable. A moment later, he’d whispered an explanation to me, confirming my suspicions.

We left the square and made our way to a narrow lane between two rows of buildings. After making sure nobody was around, I squatted down next to him, and we had a little strategy meeting as I pretended to be a dog owner merely checking on his pet dog.

“In any case,” I said, “we should probably set up a base of operations.”

“There is an inn near the center of town used primarily by nobles and wealthy merchants. That would be a good place to secure a room. However, it has been some time since I’ve been here, so I’m not familiar with each and every shop. It may be interesting to walk around and observe a bit.”

“That’s a wonderful suggestion, Peeps.” This was exactly the kind of relaxing activity we were after.

With the stately dog leading the way, we walked to the center of Erbrechen. This area seemed even wealthier than the outskirts. It looked like a lot of people from the upper classes, mostly nobles, had homes here. Their dwellings dotted the street, giving the place the air of a high-class residential neighborhood.

The two of us took a short walk around, enjoying the sights. I felt slightly guilty thinking this, but the way Peeps’s tail swung left and right as he walked a step or so ahead of me was simply the *best*. And the way his little paws lightly tapped along the stones—if I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn I was dreaming. He looked beautiful, with his lustrous fur blowing softly in the breeze, every bit as dignified as his surroundings.

I continued like that for a little while, enjoying the artistic collaboration of dog and townscape, until eventually we came to an inn. It was magnificent, even compared to the other buildings in the area, with a pretentious gate in front. Peeps’s explanation seemed to be on the mark; it looked like

the kind of place rich merchants or members of the aristocracy would patronize.

When we approached, they treated me as a servant, and when I told them I wanted to borrow a room for myself, they naturally made a sour face and said no—even after I promised to pay for several days in advance. Only when I mentioned running a trading company in the Republic of Lunge did they give me leave to stay, though they insisted that if there were any problems on the premises, the inn would not be liable.

After hearing all that, I thought maybe we'd slipped up a little. Such things weren't a big deal in the town of Baytrium, but maybe the gap between commoners and the nobility was more pronounced here. The town was physically big and hosted a large population of upper-class individuals, so quarrels with commoners were likely a frequent occurrence.

My stately dog offered the following advice: “*Should that happen, resolve it with money. We have more than enough.*”

Every once in a while, I caught a glimpse of the Lord Starsage's more daring side, giving me a sense of his true dignity. Though I'd exchanged a good lump of money for Imperial currency, I'd kept a number of Lungian gold coins with me. Even subtracting my investments in the land development project and payments to Ms. Futarishizuka, we were only accumulating more money by the day. Still, this was a very different kind of spending than I was used to.

“Now that we have such a posh room, I'm very glad you made this suggestion.”

“Then you’ve no need to be hesitant. I believe I quite like this place as well.”

The suite we’d been brought to really *was* luxurious—even more so than our inn of choice in Baytrium. Though the layout and floor space were about the same, the interior decorations and furniture were extremely intricate in design. Even the wooden chair frames were carved like sophisticated works of art. The tiny chiseled details didn’t have a speck of dust in them, and the chairs themselves were so shiny they practically glowed. I could tell from a glance that maintaining it all must have been incredibly difficult.

They hadn’t made a fuss about me bringing my familiar in, though I got the impression that if he broke anything or made a mess, I’d have to pay them a hefty fee.

“If the room is like this, just imagine what dinner will be like.”

“What will you do while eating? Turn into a person?”

“This form will do just fine. We don’t know who could be watching.”

“If that’s how you feel, then I have no objections.”

And if he wolfed down his dinner in dog mode, and I had to wipe off his mouth with a napkin... *Oh, wouldn’t that be wonderful*, I thought rudely, despite knowing he was a person on the inside. I was also looking forward to seeing him as a dog, sitting in a chair to eat.

Perhaps because I’d never seen him in human form, I always thought of Peeps as a bird first and foremost. I even

got the feeling I could see his silvery sparrow form behind the golden retriever now and again.

“I’ll go ask them to bring our food to us here,” I offered.

“I apologize for causing so many issues.”

“No need. I’m the one who asked you to take that form.”

Leaving Peeps in the living room, I walked down the shared hallway. Descending from our third-story suite to the first floor, I headed back to the front desk where we’d checked in. Thankfully, the same person was behind the counter, so I asked them about our food.

Typical of such a posh establishment, they were very flexible when it came to eating arrangements. We’d be able to have meals in our room, just like I’d suggested to Peeps. They told me they’d contact me once the kitchen was ready.

A little while later, as I was heading back through the third-floor hallway, I heard people arguing. As I rounded the corner, I saw who it was.

One of them was a man in luxurious clothing, likely a noble. He appeared to be in his midforties and had scary features. He stood a whole fist taller than my current form. Right now, his face was twisted into a scowl as he shouted at the person standing across from him.

That person was a woman wearing a simple robe. She had gorgeous blond hair through which I could see a sharply pointed ear. She was about my height—tall for a woman—and the rest of her body gave off a very feminine charm.

“You’re nothing but a commoner. And yet you dare refuse an invitation from a noble?! You were the one who bumped into me. The situation clearly calls for an act of good faith, does it not? Or do you want me to scold you for your rudeness in a more public place?”

“As I said, I do apologize, sir.”

“You think you’re getting off that easily? Well, think again.”

The two of them were fighting right in the middle of the hallway, and our suite was a little farther beyond. They were really at each other’s throats, making their presence known, and so to my regret, any attempt to simply ignore them and go past would be blatant.

Without much of a choice, I stopped walking. Their words continued to pelt my ears.

“Might I confirm this with my superior?” asked the woman. “He’s just in that room.”

“Any master of a servant dressed like you is far below my status, noble or not. If he came out here, it would only be to bow in reverence to me. Do you really wish to force such an unsightly deed upon your master?”

“No, that was not in any way my intention, sir.”

“Then why not settle down and come to my room? I’ll give you world-class treatment.”

Apparently, this man was really determined to get with this woman. Just like Herz, the division between nobles and commoners seemed absolute in Ohgen. And considering my

current position as a commoner, passing right in front of the noble to get to my room would only be pouring more fuel on the fire.

But I wasn't sure when this would be over, and I didn't really want to wait. *What are my options?* I recalled the Starsage's words. Unfortunately, it looked like the opportunity to act on them had come already.

Interposing myself between the two of them, I said, "Please excuse my rudeness, my lord. Might you have a moment?"

"What? Who are you?" replied the man with a glare.

I returned it with a smile, then continued—though with my facial structure now changed, I wasn't sure if I was smiling properly. "My name is Hans Schmidt, sir. I run a trading company in the Republic of Lunge."

"Hans Schmidt? Never heard of you. What's a foreign merchant like you doing here?"

The name I'd just given him was a fake one Peeps had come up with for my new form. I'd used the same name to check in here. Though it was easy to forget about my disguise, seeing the color of the skin on my hands as I raised them to talk reminded me of the transformation spell. *Have to make absolutely sure I never say the name Sasaki.*

"I'm in town sightseeing, sir, and just arrived at this inn earlier today. My plan is to enjoy the area starting tomorrow, so naturally, I'd like these lodgings to remain a comfortable, easy place to stay in."

"Make your point."

“If I may, sir, you appear to be much grander than even those of note in my own nation. I am certain you must come from a well-known family. And although I’m here on pleasure, I believe building relationships with those such as yourself would be very valuable.”

I took a few Lungian gold coins out of my pocket, then took the man’s hand and pressed them into it. I’d put these aside for just such an occasion in response to Peeps’s advice. *Didn’t think I’d be counting on them right away, though.*

“I’d heard the rumors,” said the man, “but it seems Republic merchants truly do live only for their profits.”

“Oh, not at all, sir. I personally don’t have much yet to my name.”

“That wasn’t a compliment. Any merchant of this nation worth his salt would agree that the price you wish to pay for this elf is far too cheap.”

Never mind, I thought. It didn’t help. He’s not a noble for nothing. I doubt a few gold coins will be able to placate him.

I figured the reason was the elfin beauty who had caught his attention. Everything about her was perfect, from the shape of her body to the features on her face; anyone would have turned to look if they’d noticed her out in town. I could sense how enthusiastic the man was about bringing her back with him—by fair means or foul.

“If I were in your place,” the man continued, “I’d offer at least three hundred gold coins.”

I wanted to say “I’m sorry, let’s just call the whole thing off” and flee back into my room. *Three hundred? That seems a little steep. Yeah, he definitely has some intentions toward this elf.*

“What say you, Republic merchant?”

At this point, maybe it was better to push the limit and loyally adhere to the advice Peeps had given me. It wouldn’t technically be wasted money, since I’d be buying my position at this inn. The man would be staying here for the time being as well, so it seemed important to create a temporary power balance with him.

And so the war of the wallets began.

“In that case, sir, please look at this,” I said, taking out the Lungian large gold coins I’d brought separately from the regular ones in case I needed to make a large purchase in town. According to Peeps, just like Herzian currency, a Lungian large gold coin equated to one hundred regular gold coins. And now I was holding four of them out to the man.

“Oh?” said the man, clearly interested.

Peeps, what do I do? I pleaded in my mind. I’m wasting all our money. I didn’t want to use it for something like this.

If things continued, I was going to suffer a huge and unnecessary loss. Compared to the profits from my dealings with the Kepler Trading Company, however, it was almost trivial. In fact, if some pickpocket had swiped the coins from me on the street, I wouldn’t have even been bothered.

But I’d never spent money like this before in my life. It made my stomach hurt.

Unexpectedly, the man wasted no time in responding. “Well, then I would offer *five* hundred.”

What? Why?! The man took five big gold coins out of his pocket and held them out to me. I’d never seen coins like these before, but based on the situation, they were probably Ohgen large gold coins. No, they had to be. Why was he offering them to *me*? Shouldn’t he be giving them to the girl he wanted to take home with him?

I couldn’t back down now. We were practically auctioning off the elf woman at this point. If I withdrew, she would end up having to go with the man.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. I brought out ten large gold coins—everything I had with me. If I wanted any more, I’d have to ask for Peeps’s help and either go back to Baytrium or to Ms. Futarishizuka’s warehouse. Praying this was enough to make him cave, I feigned calmness and said, “Then I will add another five hundred to your offer, sir. One thousand Lungian gold coins. How does that sound?”

“I...,” the man began, before closing his mouth again.

There was silence for a few moments. The elf in question watched to see where this would go, not saying anything.

Eventually, the man spoke again. “I realize now that your feelings for the elf are no sham.”

His stern expression suddenly relaxed, and he lowered his arm. I was curious as to the nature of this realization of his.

“To think I’d wind up chatting about elves in a place like this.”

“What...?”

Chatting? I thought. I was very grateful that he seemed willing to resolve the matter calmly and intelligently. But his reaction and words were a lot milder than I’d expected. The way he looked at me now was *nothing* like a moment ago, when he’d been more than willing to fight. Even the wrinkles on his forehead had disappeared.

“You seem to be quite the philanderer. I can sense your feelings toward elves.”

“.....”

It bothered me to be treated like some kind of skirt chaser right in front of the elf woman. I couldn’t think of a good response.

In the meantime, one of the doors along the hallway opened; it was only a few steps farther down.

“What’s all this noise about?”

Out of the suite appeared a man who looked to be in his midthirties. He was about a head taller than me and looked very strong. He wore a uniform, tightly fitted, and you could make out his rippling muscles beneath it. His slicked-back blond hair and blond mustache looked really suave. He had a lot of medals hanging from his shoulders and chest, too. He reminded me of Mr. Yoshikawa from the SDF. I wondered if he was an important military figure in the Ohgen Empire.

A moment later, the noble confirmed my suspicions. “General Troy!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“Hmm? Oh, if it isn’t Margrave Bertrand,” replied the general, looking surprised. “Good day, my lord.”

“How long has it been, man? I can barely even remember.”

It seemed like the two of them knew each other. And considering how quickly the newcomer had straightened his back, the man hassling the elf really did appear to be in a higher position than him.

I was surprised, too, to hear he was a margrave. I’d picked a fight with someone much stronger than I’d expected.

Though I was in a luxurious hotel in an upper-class neighborhood, I was a little confused as to why people like this were walking around alone. Even Count Müller always took his knights with him when he left his mansion.

The elf’s eyes were wide; she seemed similarly surprised. It appeared she hadn’t realized who she was arguing with.

“I’ll be staying here in town for a while on work, sir,” explained Troy.

“Really? That’s the first I’ve heard about it,” replied Bertrand. “What’s a national hero like yourself doing out here on the border, then?”

“Unfortunately, sir, that information is classified by the military. I deeply apologize for my late greeting, Margrave. May I pay a visit to your main residence in the coming days?”

“No, I wouldn’t want to take any time out of your busy schedule. Instead, I’d like you to press forward with the task

you've been given.”

“...Thank you, sir.”

From their conversation, I gleaned that Margrave Bertrand was the noble presiding over this region. That also made him my neighbor just across the border. I was curious, too, about the awe-inspiring title he'd given to the general—*national hero*. I'd have to ask Peeps about it later.

As I mulled this over, they ignored me—an outsider—and continued their conversation.

“By the way, Margrave, this woman is my aide,” continued Troy. “Thus, any mistake she has made is my own mistake. It seems she bumped into you in the hallway. Allow me to express my utmost apologies.”

“Oh, so this elf is a retainer of yours?”

Both men's attention shifted to the elf, who continued to wordlessly watch them speak.

“I say this to protect her honor, sir,” began the general. “But her position is not what you might believe. I think very highly of her magical abilities. Would you be willing to let this matter slide?”

“You've always been too serious. Would it kill you to have a little fun in life?”

“It's all part of gaining the citizenry's support, sir.”

Apparently, General Troy had overheard most of what had been going on outside his door. I assumed that he'd lost his first chance to come out and interrupt when I intervened.

But it seemed he hadn't realized who exactly had been arguing with the elf.

"In any case," said the margrave, "I'd rather not have a repeat of *that* tragedy."

"I fully understand your concerns, Margrave. The quarrel between two great war criminals at the time placed us in a very uncomfortable position. I've also heard of the large dragons nesting near the border, so for the time being, we will be proceeding with utmost caution."

The "tragedy" he spoke of was probably the time Peeps completely obliterated the Imperial army with that spell. All those soldiers, gone in an instant—it was still fresh in my own memory as well. And it seemed like they already knew about the dragons living in the resulting hole.

"I certainly hope so," Bertrand said.

"I beg your understanding, sir."

"Someone who lives this far out doesn't have much of a choice but to understand."

"Not at all, sir. Your presence as overseer of these vast lands is like a central pillar supporting the entire Empire. Without the abundant crops grown here, the central regions would starve."

"I wonder if I'd get better treatment if I let that happen."

"You jest, sir."

I sensed humor creeping into their conversation—as well as a note of tension between border areas and the central

regions. This was a glimpse into the power structures of the Empire. If Prince Lewis invaded, which force would he end up meeting first?

I came here to sightsee, I thought. Not to think about politics.

“Well, fine then,” said the margrave. “Seeing you has spoiled my fun anyway.”

“I’m terribly sorry for that, sir.”

But their conversation didn’t last much longer; Margrave Bertrand soon turned his back to the general.

Then his eyes darted over to me. “Do as you wish with that elf, Schmidt.”

“.....”

I could have done without such a provocative comment; the general’s full attention was now on me as well.

As I wondered how to respond, the margrave took off down the hallway, his feet clicking loudly along the floor. He hadn’t taken the large gold coins I’d offered, either. It had been a total waste of time and effort for both of us. As the outsider here, all I could do was tilt my head in confusion. Eventually, the man turned the corner and was out of sight; we all watched him leave in silence.

Eventually, once his footsteps could no longer be heard, the elf addressed me. “You bought a night with me for one thousand Lungian gold coins, didn’t you?”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “Even a thousand gold coins would be far from enough to deserve your charms.”

“Oh? I can’t say I would mind such an arrangement.”

Her attitude was totally different from when she’d been speaking with Margrave Bertrand. I really had no desire to become close with the aide to an enemy nation’s general, however. Said general had even mentioned she was skilled in magic. If she somehow caught on to Peeps’s existence, we’d be in a heap of trouble—especially since we had rooms in the same inn.

I’m definitely at the bottom of the food chain here, I thought. I’d really like to excuse myself.

“You know this merchant?” asked Troy.

“No, not at all,” replied the elf. “I must say, though, merchants from Lunge seem quite rich—no sooner had this one seen me than he offered ten large gold coins in exchange. If even the lesser-known merchants are this wealthy, the famous ones must be something else.”

“You’ll have to excuse me,” said the general, “but I, too, know of no merchant named Hans Schmidt.”

Well, of course not, I thought. We just came up with that name a little while ago. I had made sure to confirm with Peeps that no one influential had the same name.

It was time for some evasive maneuvers. I couldn’t put any more of a burden on Mr. Marc or Mr. Joseph, after all. “I call myself a merchant, sir, but as you can see, I am quite young and still trying to make my fortune. I’ve been on a trip around the world for pleasure—though I am always keeping

an eye out for business opportunities—and it has brought me here to this town.”

This was the story Peeps and I had agreed on. And it was technically accurate, too. I wasn't really lying.

“Well, I doubt a border town like this will provide many such opportunities,” remarked the general.

“I've been considering crossing the border into Herz, sir.”

“Now wouldn't be a good time for that. You should wait—for your own sake.”

“You think so?”

“There have been repeated skirmishes between our two countries of late. Though if you still wish to go, I won't stop you.”

Despite this being our first meeting, General Troy was acting quite considerate toward me. It appeared he'd correctly guessed my real intentions—I'd simply wanted to help out the elf. In which case, my next move was to thank him and be on my way. *I'll just fade away into the background now—that's probably best.* I was worried about the duration of my transformation spell now that I was away from Peeps, too.

“Thank you for the warning, sir,” I said. “In that case, I believe I'll take in the sights here, then turn back around.”

“That would be for the best.”

“Hmm? But I thought you'd taken a liking to me, Lunge merchant,” the elf chimed in.

“I already have the world’s greatest blond waiting for me in my room, ma’am, so I’ll take my leave now.”

“Oh, how coldhearted.”

I bowed to the elf and the general in turn, then left. Unfortunately, it looked like I wasn’t as good at using my money as Peeps was.



After parting ways with the Ohgen Empire big shots, I practically fled back to my room. I went through the suite’s front door and straight to the living room.

There I saw Peeps lying on the sofa. He was napping, his body flat against the wide seats, head up on his elbows. He twitched in response to my return, then smoothly picked himself up, facing his upper body toward the room’s entrance.

Did he do that on purpose, or was it natural? I wondered. Either way, it was incredibly doglike, and I was overwhelmed with affection.

“I’m back, Peeps.”

“That took some time,” he said. *“If they’ve refused, we can always go out.”*

“No, they said they’d deliver the food to our room.”

“Very well, then.”

“I actually wanted to ask you about something completely different.”

“What is it?”

“Do you know of a General Troy or a Margrave Bertrand?”

“Both nobles of the Ohgen Empire. Why?”

“Well, I just ran into them in the hallway.”

That earned a shudder from the stately dog’s tail. His current body was a lot bigger than a sparrow’s, so every little movement he made stood out much more. His flowing blond mane swayed. Apparently, my earlier encounter surprised him as much as it had me.

“That sounds alarming,” he said. *“Did you verify that it was really them?”*

“They called each other by name, so I’m pretty sure.”

“I see...”

“Is there anything about them I should know?” I asked, settling down on the sofa next to Peeps. I caught myself reaching for his back and just barely managed to stop in time. He was still the Starsage inside. It didn’t matter what gender a person was—sexual harassment was sexual harassment. I couldn’t allow it.

Whether or not he had any inkling of the internal conflicts plaguing his useless owner, Peeps launched into an explanation. *“Margrave Bertrand is the one who controls this area, including this town. That would make the two of you neighbors across the border. And that would also make him the kingdom’s first opponent should Herz make trouble with the Empire.”*

“Then he’s also the head honcho here?”

“Though this town is fairly large, it isn’t the largest in his domain, where he usually resides. A different noble, serving directly under the margrave, has control here.”

“Uh-huh.”

It seemed that what I’d gleaned of the Empire’s affairs through the margrave’s conversation was correct. Getting a look at both of their faces now was a major win for me. The trip to Ohgen had already proven worth the effort, as had the work that went into our transformations.

“General Troy is part of the Imperial military’s top brass. While he is of common birth, he has more than made a name for himself through his exploits in war, achieving noble status on his own merit. Everyone in the Empire knows his story.”

“He *was* pretty big—and his muscles were out of this world. He looked like a real warrior.”

“That is why he holds the trust of both the military and the people, and why he is frequently used as the public face of the nation. I believe his presence foretells imminent Imperial action.”

“You think he knows about what Prince Lewis is up to?”

“It’s quite possible.”

If it had been only the margrave visiting, he could have been merely observing his territory. But with the general staying here as well, plus his elfin aide, it would be

dangerous to assume it was all coincidence. I got the very real feeling that *something* was about to happen.

“The Empire maintains a frontline base called Geschwür between this area and the border. Should the prince deploy his troops from your fortress, that will be his first destination.”

“General Troy told me not to get too close to the border.”

“Then I believe it is likely something is afoot.”

Maybe we should check on that base in advance, I thought. But now General Troy and Margrave Bertrand knew my face, and I’d already said I wouldn’t go near the border. If we decided to head that way, we’d have to figure out a new plan, like using the transformation spell again to give ourselves different identities.

“An elfin woman was with the general—I think she was his aide. Do you know who she is?”

“An elfin aide? No, not even I have that level of familiarity with the Empire.”

“Sorry for throwing all these questions at you.”

“What did she look like?”

“She was about as tall as I am now and had gorgeous blond hair.”

“Unfortunately, that isn’t much to go on...”

“If I run into her again, I’ll ask her name.”

“We know who she reports to, so you needn’t go out of your way. Mistakenly revealing our identity to her would place us in a bad situation. Of course, if you’re interested in her in another way, then far be it from me to stop you.”

“Oh, uh. That’s not what this is about at all.”

Peeps seems to know a lot about other countries, I thought. I wonder if he’s used this transformation spell in the past to infiltrate the Empire and do some kind of spying. Considering his penchant for daredevilry, I expected a bit of undercover work was trivial for him. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have suggested we come here to sightsee.

“Speaking of identities,” I said, “it was definitely a good idea to have you transform us.”

“Indeed,” Peeps replied. “I had no idea we would encounter such people.”

“Now what? Should we look for a different place to stay tomorrow?”

“No, we should stay for at least as long as you paid for. If we panic, it will only make us look more suspicious. They believe you’re a Lungian merchant now, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Then let us simply enjoy our tour of the town for the next few days.”

Audacious as ever, I thought. But thanks to Peeps’s boldness, I was able to keep composed as well.

And so, just as we'd planned, we decided to take our time and see the sights in town for a while.

<Heroine of Justice>

Peeps and I spent some time touring the town of Erbrechen. The local street views were very different from the Herzian scenery I knew; the town was fairly large, too, and time passed quickly as we went here and there enjoying ourselves as tourists.

If I had to sum up the place in a word, it would be *overbearing*. During our walks, we saw many sturdy, stately buildings, all decorated with conspicuous metal adornments—metallurgy was probably more advanced in the Empire. Compared to Herz, many of the houses here were very dignified in appearance.

The abundance and variety of the available cuisine in particular was impressive, more than adequately satisfying us during our sojourn. Prices, however, were overall higher than in Herz. The townspeople's clothes looked somewhat neater and more fashionable, too.

After my initial encounter with General Troy and Margrave Bertrand at the inn on our first day, we never bumped into them again. My stately dog's impression was that they'd already left town.

Their absence meant the two of us could fully enjoy our peaceful, relaxing holiday.

The days at the inn we'd paid for in advance slipped away in what felt like the blink of an eye.

On our last day, we checked out of the inn, then decided to leave Ohgen and head to the Republic of Lunge. We'd come to the otherworld early in terms of Earth time, and so we'd put off our usual dealings with Mr. Joseph until now.

"I've been so absorbed in seeing the sights for the last few days that I completely forgot to practice any magic," I remarked to Peeps.

"A break once in a while should be fine," he replied. *"You've already made outstanding strides in that area."*

"Maybe. I feel like I've been doing nothing but slacking off recently, though."

"If you learned too quickly, I'd be out of my job."

"No way. I'm lightyears away from catching up with the Lord Starsage."

With our transformation magic dispelled, we hopped over to Lunge with a quick teleportation spell.

We then transported the goods from modern times into the now very familiar Kepler Trading Company warehouse, according to our routine. That same day, we paid a visit to the main offices and said hello to Mr. Joseph in the reception room.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Joseph," I said as we each settled down onto a sofa.

"Yes, and I'm glad you've come, Mr. Sasaki," he replied.

I handed over the inventory and waited for him to finish going over it. The three of us—including Peeps—were the

only ones in the room. Mr. Marc was apparently out of the office. A maid had come in to pour us tea, but she'd left pretty quickly.

Done checking the inventory, Mr. Joseph clapped his hands to summon an employee into the room. The man took the list we'd submitted and headed off to check the items right away; we would receive payment in cash on the spot once they'd gone through everything.

This was all the same as before. We hadn't brought any new products with us, so our deal for the day was now over. In terms of payment, I expected about the same amount as last time.

As we concluded our regular business, Mr. Joseph said, "By the way, I had something I wanted to discuss with you."

"What might that be?" I asked.

"About that wireless device we're using to communicate with the Marc Trading Company's branch office in Baytrium—would we be able to procure another one?"

"For the Ohgen Empire, I assume?"

"I am aware of your standing as a Herzian merchant—and that the kingdom and the Empire are in a precarious relationship of late. Actually, that's precisely the reason for my request. The situation is unpredictable, and our anxieties over it are endless."

Now that our regular business was done, Mr. Joseph was making his move, and with something of a sob story, too. *How unusual.*

I unconsciously straightened up. This man was the personification of confidence and self-assurance. If he had decided to give me a peek at his vulnerable side, it implied some rather unwelcome things at play behind the scenes.

And so soon after that nasty surprise at the chief's welcome party.

“Should you accept, you may examine every phrase and letter of our exchanges, as you’ve already suggested. We were also hoping to get Mr. Marc’s assistance operating it.”

Now he was actively offering to compromise, without even letting me speak. His tone was calm, but he was clearly dead set on acquiring another radio.

“Have any similar products made their way to other companies?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “At least, not as far as any of us are aware.”

“And I hear that long-distance mana-based communication is still in its early research stages,” I added, spouting some high-level info I remembered Peeps telling me once.

This earned a subtle change in Mr. Joseph’s expression. I had to hand it to the bird—apparently this was pretty new information in Lunge.

That shift only lasted a moment, though, as he continued putting on the pressure. “You heard correctly; we’ve received word of similar movements elsewhere. To be frank with you, I wish to request your help in building up the Kepler Trading Company even further.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, when the first undersea cable was laid down to connect opposite sides of the English Channel, those in attendance must have felt the same degree of emotion as Mr. Joseph did now. That event had been even more of a shock to the system than the birth of the internet. No normal person would have ever thought to lay down a metal cable dozens of kilometers long across the bottom of the sea.

“I’d ask you to recall that these long-distance radios require a very specific energy source to run,” I said. “And you’re well aware of how difficult they are to operate. Unfortunately, I don’t have any means by which to set one up in the Ohgen Empire.”

“We were actually hoping to handle the energy source ourselves,” he replied.

“Do you really intend to bring such a thing into the Empire from here?”

The power source Peeps and I had brought into the otherworld was a diesel generator. I wanted to avoid bringing gasoline over if I could, considering the danger of combustion even at normal temperatures. I could explain how to use it all I wanted, but in the end, I felt sure the Kepler Trading Company would be the site of a large explosion. And as the one who provided the offending material, I’d have no way to escape criticism.

Diesel fuel ran the same risk, though lower. My storage solution in modern times involved using magic to keep it at a constant temperature. Transporting it over a long distance by horse-drawn carts would cost a fortune.

And yet Mr. Joseph kept pressing me, this time offering rewards. “If you support us in acquiring another machine, I can promise you ten percent of the profits we make in the Empire in Lungian currency. In the meantime, we would place you on the company’s board of directors.”

This was a *very* attractive proposal. I couldn’t imagine how much money that would come out to, but I could grasp that this offer was of a different nature than our previous deals. *Being catapulted right onto a famous trading company’s board of directors? This was the kind of scenario life-long corporate drones went to sleep dreaming of.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Peeps shifting a bit. Immediately, I wanted to ask for his opinion. He was the one who’d originally suggested this trading company on our first visit to the Republic. Unfortunately, I couldn’t take my eyes off the man in front of me. *He’s staring at me so hard he’s forgotten to blink.*

“Considering the Kepler Trading Company’s scale, wouldn’t it be dangerous to rely on a single person such as myself?” I asked.

“My idea was to acquire one year’s worth of fuel to start and then have you resupply us during our regular deals—and only for the amount expended.”

“I see.”

Supplying them with whatever diesel fuel the generator consumed presented no issue. According to Mr. Marc, the machine used a few liters of it a day at most. I’d estimated about two hundred for a month, which I’d brought to the otherworld on my current trip.

On the other hand, each supply of sugar—the main product in my dealings with Kepler—weighed several tons. One extra radio would be a drop in the bucket in comparison.

If I brought over more radios, I could use that as an excuse to stop shipments of my regular products such as sugar and manufactured goods. And if I restricted the fuel to one barrel per trip, it would massively decrease Ms. Futarishizuka's workload. Ever since our first visit to the otherworld, I'd gotten carried away, trying this thing and that, and by now I was dealing in a pretty wide variety of items. I wasn't selling a lot of each one, but altogether it must have been a ton of work to stock.

“Such a proposal is not out of the question,” I said to Mr. Joseph.

“Really?” he replied. “Then would you mind looking into it for us?”

It wasn't clear to me why Mr. Joseph would want to elect some stranger of unknown origin to his board of directors. But such a proposal made me feel that whatever issue he was dealing with would be short-lived—or at least something he could resolve in the short term.

As I was thinking about it, he pressed me even harder. “We at the Kepler Trading Company very much wish to do business with you long into the future.”

This was the first time I'd experienced anything like this from Mr. Joseph. I could feel my spirit waver in the face of someone with such power begging for my help.

But I couldn't simply agree to a suggestion like this. After all, they'd be placing the new radio in the Ohgen Empire. It had to have something to do with the two nations' rising hostilities.

“Mr. Joseph, I am a trader from the Kingdom of Herz.”

“I am aware of that.”

I didn't have any strong attachment to this world. If anything about it was truly important to me, it was the being currently sitting on my shoulder. Beyond that, the things I valued most were the connections and relationships I'd formed with people like Count Müller, Mr. Marc, and Mr. French.

So, unable to betray those friendships, I gave my honest answer.

“The continued well-being of the kingdom is an interest on which I absolutely cannot compromise.”

Mr. Joseph thought about that for a moment, then solemnly nodded. “I understand.”

He must have been deeply aware of my relationship with the Kingdom of Herz from our early business transactions. I was sure he'd thought through a hundred different ways of going about this. It made me very curious how it all related to his own financial concerns.

“Then I will promise you that your interests are *our* interests,” he said.

“Are you sure that's wise?” I asked.

“I am. There’s no doubt in my mind that this will bring great benefits to us both.”

“Is that so?”

But when I mulled it over, it struck me that I didn’t need to take things so seriously. If worse came to worst, we could disguise ourselves with transformation magic, sneak into Kepler’s Imperial branch and destroy the radio. Fuel aside, the radio itself couldn’t be replicated with this world’s technology. Mr. Joseph might seek a replacement, but all the items I dealt with were safely stored away in the warehouse in modern Japan. No matter how hard he searched for one, he would never find it in this world.

“Thank you so much for your understanding, Mr. Sasaki.”

“I look forward to our future business together, Mr. Joseph.”

He held out a hand. I took it.

I didn’t know how much these profits from the Ohgen Empire would amount to. But based on Mr. Joseph’s unusual behavior, I could guess that our current deals were nothing in comparison.

So for now, I decided to simply be happy about potentially making a huge fortune.

In modern terms, this would be like creating a working quantum computer before anyone else and using it to crack the TLS encryption protocol. I began to idly wonder if such a thing was already happening somewhere. This was so far removed from the affairs of ordinary people that there was

no way to know what the right choice was—there was no answer key for any of this.

Even in another world, the most profitable product was always up-to-date information.



After our meeting with Mr. Joseph was finished, we stayed the night in Lunge as usual, where we were treated to even more generous hospitality than before. The next day, once they'd confirmed the product inventory, they paid me in cash. We also decided on the contents of our next deal: one set of parts necessary for radio communication plus a year's worth of fuel. In exchange, Mr. Joseph told me that, for the time being, I could hold off on bringing the other goods, sugar included, for as long as I pleased.



Judging by his tone, it seemed our past dealings were fairly minor business for the Kepler Trading Company overall. As Peeps and I were leaving, he told me—now a freshly minted board member—that he'd introduce me to his organization soon.

After parting ways with Mr. Joseph, we headed to Baytrium, where we paid a visit to the Marc Trading Company's branch office to deposit funds for Mr. French. It felt like we were just transferring all the gold we'd made from Kepler to its next destination. We'd gotten about the same amount as last time, and since we'd already spoken to Mr. Marc about the details, all we did was hand the money over.

Once all that was over with, we headed for the domain of "Baron Sasaki" and its famous Rectan Plains development site.

As we looked down from our lofty aerial vantage point, we saw that the work had progressed significantly. The fortress and its surrounding walls were virtually finished, with construction on the town outside advancing quickly.

Stone-paved roads stretched out from the fortress in all four directions, each lined with buildings in various stages of construction. Closer to the center, a few were already complete and in use. I could see people going in and out of them.

The same was true of the fortress and its immediate surroundings; there was a never-ending stream of people and carts passing through the wall's gates. Some of them were construction workers, while others looked more equipped for battle.

“I think I see some soldiers and knights,” I told Peeps. “Could they be the count’s?”

“Yes,” said the bird. “*Julius must have sent them here.*”

There was still a sea of tents near the town. Traffic would only increase as development progressed, and there seemed to be even more tents than last time. I expected that, the next time I visited, buildings would be standing in their place, and the zone of tents would have moved even farther out. The site’s natural progression played out in my mind.

“*Shall we descend?*”

“I was thinking of paying a visit to the fortress first.”

“*Understood.*”

The distinguished sparrow still on my shoulder, our altitude began to drop, and we headed in a straight line toward the fort. We landed just inside the main gates, right in front of the building. As we came down, we saw someone emerge from the fortress to greet us.

“Count Müller!” I called out. “I hadn’t realized you were here, my lord.”

“I didn’t inform you,” he explained. “My apologies. Did you need something from me?”

He must have come to us after spotting our figures in the sky. Behind the count were several knights—his guard, no doubt. They always used to give me cold glares, but recently they seemed to have calmed down, and now they did their jobs without much emotion.

“Not exactly, sir. I’ve finished my business with Kepler, so I came to see how the fortress was doing. I just entrusted the Marc Trading Company with fresh funds, so please check on that when you have the time.”

“I always ask so much of you, Baron Sasaki, and you always deliver.”

“You flatter me, sir. We’re doing this because we want to.”

It was all for one thing and one thing only: that relaxing life of leisure that Peeps and I had promised each other when we first met. I was trying to take the shortest route there, though I often felt like we we’d ended up on a lengthy detour.

“I received word from Prince Adonis that Prince Lewis has departed from the capital,” said the count. “I decided to stay at the fortress and wait for them both to arrive. I’ve already explained what is likely to happen to French and the others.”

“Thank you for taking the time to do that, sir.”

“Think nothing of it. This should have been my responsibility all along, not yours. In fact, I feel guilty—it’s as though I’ve placed you directly in the firing line. I’m terribly sorry to have gotten you mixed up in our business.”

He was probably saying all this to the Starsage as well as to me; I could see his eyes glancing toward the sparrow every so often. The bird couldn’t speak, of course—not with so many people around. Instead, “Baron Sasaki” continued in his place.

“In that case, why don’t we wait here with you?” I suggested.

“Are you sure?” he said. “You must have plenty of business of your own to attend to.”

“We have some free time, though it’s only for the next few days.”

After that, we’d have to get the radio and diesel fuel ready for the Kepler Trading Company. I’d probably have to go see Ms. Futarishizuka the next day at dawn. I had the machines themselves in storage, but making sure they were set up and ready for use was too difficult a job for me.

I’d been doing a bit of studying in my free time in the hopes of receiving an amateur radio license, but I still wasn’t that accustomed to the devices. In order to meet Mr. Joseph’s expectations, I had to get the preliminary work done with plenty of time to spare.

Nevertheless, Peeps and I didn’t have anything pressing until then, and shoving everything to do with my territory off onto other people wasn’t great for appearances. Since I’d already done a lot of that, I at least wanted to be here to greet the princes.

“Then you’re more than welcome,” said the count.

“Thank you, sir.”

A short time later, Mr. French came running up, and the three of us discussed matters. As the count had implied, the former chef was already aware of Prince Lewis’s incoming troops. Apparently, everyone in charge of the fortress, including him, had already come to an agreement on it. While a few had reacted negatively, they couldn’t do much to oppose the first prince.

There were also a few hotheaded types, like the master builder, whose carts had come under attack on their way to the fort from Baytrium and who were more than willing to stick it to the Empire. Though I knew the truth of that incident—that it was all a setup staged by Prince Lewis—I couldn't say a word. Ultimately, we set about preparing for the princes' arrival, with the count taking charge.

The marked increase in pedestrian and cart traffic was due to goods and supplies being brought in from Baytrium. More than a few soldiers would be coming through this area, so they were rushing to get all the necessary food and whatnot into the fortress.

In light of the situation, we decided to spend the day helping out, using magic to levitate the incoming goods and direct them to their proper places. The menial, physical labor felt good, and it was nighttime before I knew it.



That evening, we ate dinner in the fortress's dining hall—with Mr. French himself in the kitchen. It had been a long time since we'd eaten curried rice, and it tasted amazing.

Eventually, it was almost time to hit the hay. Peeps and I had come to the fortress's reception room to speak with Count Müller. Nobody else could be seen in the room, and the door was locked from the inside, with knights standing guard beyond it.

A rug had been placed on the floor; it felt comfy under my feet as I sat on a magnificent sofa—one of two set in the middle of the room. None of this had been here last time. As I sunk down into the cushions, I faced the count across a low

table, already equipped with a little perching tree that Peeps alighted on. The count must have brought it here in yet another casual display of his adoration for the Starsage.

“My apologies for calling upon you so late at night, Julius.”

“I had my hands free, so I was actually happy for the invitation.”

Unlike earlier, Peeps took the lead in this conversation. I left things to him; he’d had to remain silent all day, and I was certain it would also please the count.

“There was something I wished to discuss with you now, while we have the chance.”

“In that case, might I assume this is about the Ohgen Empire’s activities?”

“That is correct. I’m glad you’re still so quick on the uptake.”

“No, no. You flatter me.” The count seemed pleased at the compliment regardless, and while he made sure to act modest, he was smiling a little, probably in spite of himself. Seeing his reaction left me conflicted—would it be best if I just left Peeps with him for the night?

“Lewis will almost surely be defeated in the upcoming battle.”

“Yes, I feel the same way.”

“When Sasaki and I visited the Empire, we caught wind of General Troy’s movements. There have also been

developments in Margrave Bertrand's territory, directly across the border. I believe they're aware of Lewis's aims."

"What? You...you gained that much information?" asked the count, eyes wide with surprise. He probably hadn't expected us to get any supporting evidence.

"We personally met the two of them during our stay. While Margrave Bertrand's presence isn't out of the ordinary, there must be a good reason for General Troy to have left the central Empire, especially considering the timing."

"I find myself consistently impressed by you, Sir Sasaki. You discovered much despite your brief visit."

"Actually, it was all coincidence, my lord..." Everything was the result of Peeps and my choosing a particularly luxurious inn—an accidental product of our desire to live the high life. The count's reverence made me feel a little guilty.

"I know I am in no position to ask such a thing," said the Starsage, *"but I would very much like you and Adonis to pull this off."*

"Of course. You left us this kingdom, and I swear to you I will protect it."

The lights hanging on the walls shone through the dark, illuminating Peeps and the count, shortening their shadows. Unlike the ceiling lights usually found in modern Japanese homes, these had a dim glow, like the indirect illumination in a fancy bar.

The two of them looked so cool, discussing things like that. One of them may have been a Java sparrow, but he still

exuded a powerful, indefinable sense of presence.

“Should anything happen while we’re away, if you find yourself in trouble with no way out, you would do well to go to the great hole in the plains. As long as a large invasion force doesn’t attack like last time, you should be able to manage.”

“You want me to seek shelter with those two giant dragons?”

“Yes. I will instruct them to listen to your orders, to an extent.”

“Your consideration is more than I deserve. Thank you.”

“I apologize that this is all I can do for you.”

“You needn’t feel that way, Lord Starsage. The blame lies with the Herzian nobles—and us alone. And even at a time like this, we shamelessly rely on your aid. Yet you have decided to help us, in spite of everything. You mustn’t apologize.”

Peeps and the count continued this master-pupil chat for a little while. *I should bring a more lighthearted topic of conversation to the table next time*, I thought as I sat nearby and watched them.



Shortly under an hour later, we decided to turn in for the day, and each of us returned to our designated private chambers in the fortress.

From the next day on, we helped prepare the place to welcome Prince Lewis and Prince Adonis.

Due to the imminent influx of soldiers, there was a lot to do. I never wanted for a new task—especially with the town’s development still underway. I helped with that as well, partly as a means to practice the golem spell I’d recently learned.

The construction work had me covered in dust and dirt every single day, but I found it to be surprisingly enjoyable and grew absorbed in building the town.

Personally, I had been hoping for a chance to meet the incredible golem user and thank them directly. Unfortunately, they were away from the site during our visit, so we weren’t able to meet.

Several days went by in a flash, and it was soon time to return to modern Japan. We bid farewell to the count in the fortress’s reception room before making our way back.

“I’m really sorry, my lord,” I told the count. “I would have liked to greet the princes myself, but I must stock up today for my promised deal with the Kepler Trading Company. I’ll probably be away for some time.”

“Please do not worry,” he said. “Forget about us and do what needs to be done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You have my apologies as well. Say hello to Adonis for me.”

“I will. No matter what happens, we *will* protect this land.”

“Don’t hold too tightly to that. Your life is what’s most important.”

As the count looked on, the sparrow on my shoulder invoked his spell. A magic circle appeared at our feet, its brilliant light enveloped us, and our short vacation in the otherworld came to an end.



Our return destination was the hotel room serving as our temporary living space. Pulling open the curtains—the color of which I still wasn’t used to—I looked out the window.

As expected, it was already light out. The clock embedded in the bed’s headboard indicated it was just a little past eight AM. As Peeps made his way over to the laptop on the desk, I checked my office phone. No missed calls or unread messages. It was starting to feel like I was on an actual vacation. But just to be sure, I checked my private phone as well.

There was a single notification on the screen. I tapped it to open a messaging app and read the contents. It was brief and to the point: I’m on my way.

“Huh?” I muttered. “That’s a little scary...”

“What is it?”

“Oh, I just got a weird text message.”

If the message had come up in a previously existing chat, I'd have been fine with it. But getting this particular phrase without any context made it seem *very* conspicuous. *If this is spam, they could have been a little friendlier about it.*

I scrolled to check the sender, only to find my senior colleague's name. The message had reached me a little under an hour ago.

“...I think Miss Hoshizaki is on her way here,” I said.

“Does she even know where we are?”

“She probably checked the location on my phone again.”

For the last few days, I'd left my phone in this hotel room while in the otherworld. In fact, Ms. Futarishizuka's car had been parked in the lot a few times as well. If Miss Hoshizaki matched that info to our travel times, she would have had an easy time finding out where we were staying.

“Does she know our room number, too?”

“I don't know. But she has a police badge.”

If she asked for me at the front desk, they'd have no problem telling her what room I was in. We'd been here for several days now, so the hotel staff probably remembered us.

“I thought you were on vacation.”

“Well, I haven't heard anything from my boss.”

I immediately recalled Miss Hoshizaki's and my conversation from the day before—the one about studying English together. *No way. Is she here for that? So early in the morning?* She was like a kid in elementary school during summer break. I felt my face stiffen. I faintly recalled once charging over to a friend's house early in the morning and his parents fixing me with stern glares.

But I'd been in the lower grades at elementary school then. *She's in high school, isn't she?* I thought—just as I heard a knock at the door.

Knock-knock-knock. The sound echoed through the room. I wondered if I could pretend to be out—could she be fooled? But if she was using her phone to look at my location data right now, there would be no doubt I was here, so that wouldn't work. The marker indicating my current position, at least, would be pointing to the hotel.

This was confirmed a moment later.

“Sasaki, you're in there, right? Are you still asleep?” came her voice from outside the door, followed by another series of knocks.

I started to feel like I had a debt collector after me. *She must be pretty upset about the offer at Atsugi Base I made her pass up.*

“What now?”

“Well, I can't exactly ignore her—”

I was only talking to Peeps for a second when my office phone began to vibrate. I glanced over at the screen to see who was calling—it was Miss Hoshizaki.

“It’s from her.”

“.....”

Even the Lord Starsage himself was at a loss.

Without much of a choice, I went over to the door. Miss Hoshizaki now knew about my fantastic talking bird after the events surrounding the Kraken. I checked the peephole, and she was the only one I could see. *In that case, I can let Peeps do as he pleases in the room,* I thought, pushing the door open with a *ka-click*.

A familiar face filled my vision. “Morning, Sasaki,” said my colleague. “I see you’re in your suit. That means you were awake, doesn’t it?”

“Good morning, Miss Hoshizaki. What are you doing here so early?”

“Oh, good. I almost felt bad for waking you up.”

“I see.” *You calling me would have woken me up either way,* I thought. But she was smiling, so I held back my comment. This wasn’t the first time she’d raided my room in the morning.

She was in high school girl mode today, dressed in her uniform. Remembering what time it was, I had to ask. “Shouldn’t you be at school? Class is probably starting soon, don’t you think?”

“No, there’s no school today.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Yeah...”

She finally had some time off, and she was up and active this early in the morning? *I wish I had that kind of vitality.* As someone who slept until at least noon on my days off, I was seriously impressed.

“Then why did you come here in your school uniform?”

“Wh-who cares?” she stammered. “Lots of schools have rules requiring students to wear their uniforms when they go out, even on days off. Plenty of other kids wear theirs to the amusement park or whatever, you know.”

“Oh.” That had been a rule when I was young, too. I remembered finding it in the student manual. The male students had completely ignored it, though.

“Anyway, we should start our English conversation sessions today.”

“Why not invite one of your school friends instead of an old guy like me?”

“Oh? Getting nervous? Well, there is a high school girl in her uniform standing in front of you.” She put a hand on her hip and struck a pose, complete with a fearless grin.

I was fairly used to seeing her do this in her suit, but now that she was in her uniform, it felt somehow fresh. The way the motion emphasized her chest and waistline drew a stark contrast with her bookish appearance. It was almost like she was in cosplay.

“Yes,” I said. “I am.”

“Oh. Well, that was honest of you. You could have tried to deny it a little.”

“I think you’d have better luck with the boys in your class.”

“Hey, isn’t spending a day off with a high school girl, like, a reward for an old guy?”

She’s really emphasizing the words high school girl, I thought. Did something happen to her?

“The other students in your English class will be at the same level as you,” I pointed out. “Inviting one of them would probably be a lot easier. You don’t attend school that much in the first place, so you should focus on building friendships with your classmates.”

“.....”

Her momentum soon died down. When I repeatedly brought up the subject of friends, she eventually fell silent. A few moments passed.

“Miss Hoshizaki?” I asked.

“I don’t *have* any friends,” she said solemnly, her hand still on her hip.

Her saying this to my face made me *really* uncomfortable. It was times like this that her straightforward attitude became an issue.

I vaguely remembered seeing her with some schoolmates on her way home once. But that was all about an

upperclassman who liked her. Didn't she have at least one or two friends she could talk to about normal stuff?

"Sometimes I hear the kids in my class chatting, and I try to listen, but everything they say is just so boring," she explained. "They might be talking about some big video streaming site, but if we've been watching different things, it's like we live in different worlds."

"In situations like that, people tend to stick to generic, relatable topics," I said. "If you get to be better friends, I'm sure you'll start to see more interesting sides to them. And that kind of thing is usually more conspicuous with girls than guys."

"Do you have more interesting sides to you, too?"

"Well, I suppose I have a few."

"I wonder what the parts of you I don't know about are like. You're pretty friendly whenever you talk to Futarishizuka, aren't you? She plays phone games, right? I've never tried them, though, so I don't know much about them."

"Hey, there's no point in you thinking so much about me."

"I'm your work buddy. We should understand each other."

It seemed like my initial attempt to be the more mature, experienced person had backfired as she began crawling up *that* thread of conversation instead. I'd been so busy lately that I'd barely had any time to watch online videos. Back at my old job, I'd stumble back to my apartment, utterly exhausted, then drink some beer and watch animal videos to

soothe my soul. In fact, that had been practically the only thing holding my life together.

“All right, then,” I said. “What kind of videos or shows do you like?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“I like the kind where the bad guys get what’s coming to them.”

“Like samurai films or superhero shows?”

“Exactly. They’re nice and easy to understand.”

“I see.”

“I have enough annoying stuff to deal with in real life.”

“I don’t disagree there.”

This high school girl had the same worldview as a worn-out office worker. Actually, considering our work situation at the bureau, maybe she *was* a worn-out office worker. That probably made her stand out quite a bit in the classroom.

“Well, whatever,” she said. “Let’s go to my place.”

“Are we really doing this?” I asked.

“You have the day off, don’t you?”

“Your parents will take one look at me and freak out.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. They don’t live with me.”

“They don’t?”

“I live with my little sister.”

“I doubt she’d be okay with it, either.”

“I’ll just tell her you’re from my part-time job. She won’t care.”

“She’ll care. She’ll be terrified!”

“In any case, she said she’d be out all morning, so we’re fine.”

Apparently, she’d been calling her job part-time work around her family. The bureau had helped me when I switched careers, and they were accommodating when it came to overcoming societal obstacles and formulating alibis. I felt sure she’d taken advantage of those same accommodations. *It’s so convenient to have the power of the state behind you.*

“Aren’t men supposed to be happy when women invite them over?” she asked. “You’re really putting up a fight.”

“Maybe,” I replied, “but only when the man has ulterior motives.”

“Really?”

“If you’re too careless about such things, you’ll get into trouble one day.”

“I-is that right?”

Her devastating lack of friends had probably done a real number on her social know-how. Other kids her age would naturally gain experience with the opposite sex, whereas Miss Hoshizaki was completely absorbed in her work at the bureau. *She probably has no experience at all.*

In the meantime, my distinguished Java sparrow emerged from the living room. Flapping his wings, he fluttered to a stop on my shoulder.

“*Are you leaving?*” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Nothing’s been decided yet.”

“Would you mind if I borrowed Sasaki for a bit?” Miss Hoshizaki asked.

“*Me? Not at all.*”

“See? Your bird says it’s okay, too.”

Treating him like a mere bird the moment he shows up, huh? Bold as always. She didn’t seem the least bit daunted by this incredible sparrow that had single-handedly put an end to the Kraken. I couldn’t tell how she felt about him on the inside, but she was acting totally casual.

Then she said something I couldn’t ignore. “If only our cat was as smart as him. It’d be a lot less trouble for us.”

“Huh? You have a cat at home?”

“My sister picked up a stray. Then, over time, we just got used to having it around.”

Oh my God, I thought. *I kind of want to see it. And pet it, if possible.* Before adopting Peeps, I'd gone to cat cafés on the regular. The cats employed there were all professionals, though, so they were pretty curt with people most of the time—more than happy to give patrons the cold shoulder and leave them feeling lonely. I'd always wanted to play with a family cat. Just once. And now that opportunity was dangling right before my eyes.

“You like cats, Sasaki?”

“Well, yes, I am fond of them.”

“Hmm.” Miss Hoshizaki flashed me another smirk, then repeated her flirtatious pose from before, her hand back on her hip. She seemed so sure of herself. The next thing she said was predictably provocative. “If you come over, you'll be able to pet our cat as much as you want.”

“.....”

What an attractive invitation, I thought. The two of us had spent enough time together at work. A simple visit to her house posed no issues legally, including prefectural regulations. If her younger sister was out, then maybe I didn't have to be so nervous about this.

And she *had* come here to see me first thing in the morning. That was why I'd hesitated to refuse her outright. She was my colleague at the bureau—and frequently my partner on-site. Since we'd be continuing to work together in the future, we needed to find some common ground.

I'd started seriously considering it—I really was a hopeless adult.

Dogs were great. But so were cats. If I had my way, I'd adopt a kitten *and* a puppy and raise them together. I wanted to watch over them as they built a touching inter-species friendship. I wanted to record them as they grew and put it on a video site. I was already dreaming of it.

“...Well, all right.”

In the end, I decided to spend the day studying English conversation with my coworker. My call to Ms. Futarishizuka about stocking up for the otherworld would have to wait until later.



After setting off from the hotel, we took the train to Miss Hoshizaki's place.

I'd been to her school before, and as I'd guessed from seeing her walk home, she lived relatively close by—probably about twenty or thirty minutes on foot.

Eventually, we arrived at a nine-story condominium. The building itself was very solid, made of reinforced concrete. Each floor had two or three rooms, making it a small-scale apartment with under fifty units. I guessed it had been built within the last ten years. It was well-kept from top to bottom, and both the outside and inside were neat and tidy. Near the front entrance, I saw package delivery boxes and auto-locking storage. I guessed these were rental condos.

“You live in a pretty nice place,” I said. “And the location... Isn't it expensive?”

“We could have gone with a cheaper apartment, but we didn’t. For reasons.”

“I see.” It didn’t seem like she was paying more than she could afford, considering her bureau salary. In fact, it seemed like an appropriate choice for a woman.

“...You’re not gonna ask about the reasons?” she prodded.

“I don’t think it’s right to pry into someone’s private life,” I replied.

I didn’t want to end up in a heavy conversation, and considering the context, it couldn’t have been a happy story. A high school girl, living alone with her younger sister apart from their parents? I may have only met Miss Hoshizaki recently, but I could easily surmise that they’d been through some kind of family issue.

“You’re really blunt about this stuff, huh?” she commented. “Just not interested in other people, or...?”

“Did it come off that way? I wouldn’t say that about myself.”

Miss Hoshizaki put her key into the lock next to the shared entrance. The door slid open with a *whirr*, and we passed through it into the lobby—a space about twelve square meters containing mailboxes and a resident bulletin board. In the back was an elevator. The floor was totally clear of litter.

We got into the waiting elevator. Her condo was on the sixth floor. Using the same key, she opened up her front door.

“Come on in,” she said.

“Thanks.”

I entered her condo. How long had it been since I visited someone of the opposite sex? Had I *ever* done that? The thought made me somewhat nervous.

As for Peeps, we’d parted ways back in the hotel room. He was off to Ms. Futarishizuka’s villa in Karuizawa to do what his useless partner didn’t have time for and put in an order for diesel fuel and radio equipment. He was, as ever, the most dependable Java sparrow I knew. *Actually, come to think of it, Ms. Futarishizuka counts as a member of the opposite sex, doesn’t she?*

“Back already?” came a voice from down the hallway once we were inside.

Then I heard the pattering of energetic feet. A small girl rounded the corner and looked at us.

“Huh? Who’s that man?” she asked.

“Mutsumi?” said Miss Hoshizaki. “I thought you went out today.”

“My friend had to do something else, so I came back a little while ago.”

She held a cat in her arms. *The* cat. She was holding it by its sides, its lower half dangling in the air. It was just along for the ride—and so adorable.

I couldn’t afford to enjoy the view, though. “You know what, I’ll just go home,” I told Miss Hoshizaki, turning right

around.

“Wait just a minute,” she replied, blocking my escape. “You’re already here. You can’t just *leave*.” She had her arms out to either side in a defensive posture between me and the front door.

“I don’t want to bother your family,” I insisted.

“You’ll be in my room anyway. You won’t bother her,” she replied.

“I don’t think that’s the issue here.”

“Is that Mr. Sasaki?” asked her sister. “The one you’ve been talking about?”

“That’s right,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “He’s my junior at my part-time job.”

“Really?”

Her sister looked at us. Apparently, she already knew about me. A man my age at a part-time job instead of working full-time, and with a high school girl treating me as her junior colleague. Didn’t that make me a total loser in the eyes of society? There were plenty of people out there in that category, but a girl her sister’s age was likely to consider them human trash.

And now that trash was in her home. This was probably hell for her.

“Mister, she didn’t threaten you, did she?” the sister asked.

“Hey, who do you take me for?” shot back Miss Hoshizaki. “I only made him come here for some English practice.”

“You’re contradicting yourself,” said her sister. “Also, didn’t you say just the other day that you’d never learn English? You looked really smug about it, too. And now suddenly you’re all for it. I’m a little concerned, as your sister.”

“L-look, things change. Now move out of the way, will you?”

Miss Hoshizaki took off her shoes, then pushed past her dubious sister and walked farther into the condo. And since she was tugging on my sleeve with one of her hands, I had no choice but to follow.

If I shook her hand off and ran away now, that wouldn’t paint a very flattering picture, either. *I’ll just have to wait for a good chance to excuse myself*, I thought, allowing her to drag me down the hallway.

There were two doors facing each other at the far end. We went straight through one of them, which turned out to be Miss Hoshizaki’s room. I saw other doors I assumed led to the living room and bathroom, so the second door at the end probably belonged to her younger sister. Layout-wise, it seemed to be a two-bedroom unit with a living room, dining room, and kitchen.

Miss Hoshizaki’s room was probably around ten square meters, with a very simple interior. It featured wood flooring, a desk, a bed, and a metal shelving unit. The shelves held textbooks, notebooks, and makeup tools. I also saw a single-door closet.

The desk wasn't the compact sort parents bought for their children when they began school, but rather a metal home-office work desk. Around the bed, too, everything had a restrained design in various shades of brown. It felt less like a high school girl's room and more like that of a female office worker who had just gotten a job and moved to Tokyo. There was nothing on the floor, either, so the room had an empty feel to it.

"I like your room," I said. "It suits you."

"Enough flattery. I don't have chairs, so just sit on the bed or something."

"Oh. Uh, okay."

"I'll go get us something to drink. Do you want barley tea?"

"Sure. And thank you."

Without hesitation, she left me alone in her room. Not wanting to sit on her *bed*, of all things, I took a seat on the floor instead. I didn't feel right sitting cross-legged, either, so I ended up settling back on my legs in *seiza* position.

After a few moments, the room's owner returned with a tray and two glasses. She immediately shot me a questioning look. Suspiciously, she asked me, "You're not trying to look up my skirt, are you?"

"No. I just didn't want to sit on the bed, obviously."

"Well, excuse *me*. I'll have you know that I wash the sheets regularly. Every week... Well, not quite every week, I guess."

“That isn’t the reason.” *She must have a screw loose somewhere*, I thought. It had seemed that way during her conversation with her sister, too. Did she really not care if someone else sat on her bed?

But when she mentioned her skirt, I changed my mind—she was right. I took a seat on the bed, sitting up very straight and trying my best not to put too many wrinkles into her perfectly smooth comforter.

I was expecting her to pull a fold-out table from her closet or something, but she just set the tray on her bed. This whole room was set up for one person, and only one person, making it more clear than ever that she really *didn’t* have any friends.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s hop right into it.”

“About that,” I replied. “I was thinking I should just go back home.”

“My sister would probably find that even *more* suspicious, you know.”

“But I can’t bother your family, and—”

“Here are the lesson materials. My English teacher said that, at first, you should just read along with the scripts to get your tongue used to the words. If you’re starting from zero, it’ll be easy to trip up. So let’s stick to this for today.”

She handed me a stack of papers stapled together. I glanced over the front page and saw a conversation written out in English. She must have put it all together—including my share—beforehand. It was clear she was really excited

about this. When I thought about it like that, I started to want to answer her expectations.

“All right. I’ll try to help for a little while, at least.”

“Great. So for this, I’ll play the girl’s part, and you can read this one...”

From there, we began our English study session, just as we’d originally planned.



Sometime in the middle of the session I went to use the bathroom. That was when it happened. Once I was finished with my business and on my way back to Miss Hoshizaki’s room, I saw her younger sister standing in the way. She was staring at me, not moving. This didn’t seem to be a coincidence—she’d put herself there because she knew I was using the bathroom. The cat she’d been holding upon my arrival was nowhere to be seen.

“Thanks for letting me use your bathroom,” I said.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh. Okay. What is it?”

Maybe she was concerned about the manner in which I used the bathroom. *Not to worry*, I thought. *I sat down to do it*. I did that at home, too, regardless of the nature of my bathroom visit, so that shouldn’t be an issue. It was a habit I’d picked up when I’d started having to clean the toilet myself after moving out on my own. While I could wipe the toilet down with a cloth to make it look nice, things had a way of shooting in weird directions. And when I considered

the possibility of such splatter winding up on my pants, I had naturally begun taking a seat to do my business.

“Could you come over here?” she asked.

“.....”

At her request, I headed after her into the middle of the living area. Miss Hoshizaki seemed to be waiting for me in her room; she wasn't here. Her little sister turned around to face me, the unwelcome guest. She was close enough she could have stretched out her arm and touched me. While I had no uncouth intentions, this still made me nervous.

“My sister has told me about you,” she began.

“Has she?”

Both of us remained standing. The cat didn't seem to be in the living room. I wondered where it had gone. If I couldn't see it in here, it was likely in Miss Hoshizaki's sister's room. That would make it difficult to bond with—I couldn't exactly ask Miss Hoshizaki to bring me into her sister's room.

“I'm like my sister,” she explained. “I'm also into older men.”

“Is that so?”

“People say we have very similar tastes.”

“I see.”

“Do you understand what I mean?”

The danger I'd felt immediately after seeing her turned to conviction as I heard those words. As if to confirm my suspicions, she took a step forward—a quick, large step that put her on a collision course with me. She brought her hand out from behind her back; she had a phone in it.

I sucked in a breath. I knew the couch was behind me. If I so much as brushed her, this would turn into an emergency. I couldn't afford to stand there gaping, so I angled myself to the side.

Without me to catch her, she passed right by and hit her leg against the couch. Her knee and shin struck the armrest, throwing her off balance. She lurched forward, the couch cushions stopping her fall. As her face plunged into them, she let out a muffled grunt.

I hope she's not hurt.

“Oww...”

“Are you all right?” I asked.

I watched as she immediately picked herself back up and hastily turned around to look at me. Her gentle expression of moments ago had been replaced by one of obvious irritation.

“Why did you avoid me?” she demanded.

“Look, I'm sorry for barging in like this. I'll leave by lunchtime. Would you tolerate me being here for that long? I couldn't betray the enthusiasm your sister is showing for learning English.”

“.....”

During my bureau training, they'd mentioned honey traps. Most of the psychics belonging to the bureau were novice government workers without a shred of patriotic loyalty. That was partly why this kind of ploy could cause such serious damage. *I never dreamed I'd encounter one here.*

“Are you trying to take advantage of my sister?” she asked.

“What? No, of course not.”

During college, and even after entering the workforce, acquaintances had told me about acts with middle school kids. From a woman's point of view, adults who went out with minors must be a dime a dozen. Personally, I couldn't help but wonder how on earth such things even happened. Regardless, that must have been why this girl saw me as such a danger. The asymmetry of information in the marketplace of love and romance truly terrified me.

“I would do anything for her,” she said. “Even kill someone.”

“You shouldn't say things like that. Not even as a joke.”

“I'm not joking. I'm serious!”

I hadn't expected such an extreme remark, but it really showed how much she cared about Miss Hoshizaki. And the reason they were living alone here in a condo, separate from their parents, was probably related.

I expected that due to some parental issue, Miss Hoshizaki was doing her best to support her younger sister. I recalled the time she'd recommended that I go play

pachinko or fool around with prostitutes during my free time on a business trip. It spoke to her image of adult men—and by extension, possibly her own father.

In that case, wouldn't it be best for me to be up front with her sister about the situation? Miss Hoshizaki would probably explain it to her later on anyway, and if our stories didn't match up, things could get even worse.

So I collected myself and asked her a question. "Excuse me, but are you in middle school?"

"Yeah. Second year. Why?"

In that case, she could probably help Miss Hoshizaki with her English studies. For better or worse, her elder sister's English grades weren't great. From what I'd just witnessed in our session together, I was sure of it. Her stiff pronunciation and embarrassed attempts to read proved we were in the same boat when it came to the language.

"Then there's something I want to discuss with you."

"...Discuss?" she repeated, eyeing me suspiciously.

I proceeded to explain all the events that had led me here: Miss Hoshizaki running into an opportunity to use English at work, her losing out because she was no good at it, and her picking me as her conversation buddy, all while glossing over the bureau's existence and her real job. I also made sure to suggest to the girl that she take on my current role going forward.

"Is it normal for a girl to invite an old guy from her part-time job back to her house for something like that?" she wondered aloud.

“That’s something you’ll have to ask her about,” I said.

“Even if all that’s true, I can’t believe you really came. You must be crazy.”

She was right. Even I thought I was crazy for doing this. “Your sister is in a position of leadership at her job. She’s helped us all out a lot, myself included, and I find it hard to turn her down when she tells me to do something. I want to try to help her where I can.”

“But you’re no good at English, either, are you? I heard through the door.”

“She suggested we work together because we both need the help.”

“.....”

If Miss Hoshizaki’s little sister found out she was isolated at school, she’d undoubtedly be sad. But it was true that she was a big name at work—and in a leadership position. I didn’t want to harm her position or her reputation in her own home. I could say some things, but her sister would have to learn the rest from Miss Hoshizaki herself.

“I think this is the perfect opportunity for you to help her,” I continued. “If what you said before is true, will you bring it up with her? This evening, maybe? I’m sure she’ll be happy you’re offering.”

“Does my sister work at a sex place?”

I did *not* expect that fastball. But I could understand why she might have come to such a conclusion. This condo was pretty expensive for two minors to be staying in by

themselves. Their rent had to be at least twice that of my former apartment.

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“She’s still in high school, but she comes home late at night a lot. I asked her once, but she denied it. Our guardian said the same thing. But isn’t it weird that we live in such a nice place?”

Miss Hoshizaki, you work too much overtime, I thought. You’re making your sister worry! I wished the section chief would think a little more about her situation when assigning jobs. In that sense, Mr. Akutsu was something of a crazy person himself. He’d provided a substitute legal guardian but failed to explain any of the important parts!

“She doesn’t tell me anything,” said her sister.

“She doesn’t?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean we don’t get along. She really loves me. This one time, our father barged in here because he couldn’t pay his debts, and just before he punched me, she got in the way to protect me.”

“Your sister does things like that on a daily basis.”

“Even at work?”

“Yes. All her colleagues rely on her.”

Their paternal situation was a lot messier than I’d thought. No wonder Miss Hoshizaki worked her butt off to make money—it all made sense now. In fact, the elder sister

was paying for everything in this situation, wasn't she? Rent for the condo, food and basic needs, academic fees...

And considering her younger sister's age, this would be the most expensive time for them. Usually, a child could depend on savings their parents put away before they were born, or else support from relatives. Without either of these available to her, Miss Hoshizaki must have been carrying a ton of weight on her shoulders. The truth was, not all mothers and fathers could be relied upon.

This also explained my colleague's world-weary, office-worker-like mentality.

"I'll work at the sex place instead, so please, let her go," pleaded the girl.

"Your sister has a very special talent," I explained, struggling to keep a serious look on my face as I made my appeal. "That talent is why she was hired, and she uses it on the job all the time. She's not working anywhere disreputable. You'll just have to trust me on this—for the sake of her pride."

"...She's really not?"

"Really. I promise."

The way her sister was talking, she seemed to think I was running the sex place. Despite that not being the case, I still felt like a bad guy, somehow. If Miss Hoshizaki found me like this, there was no telling what kind of scolding I'd get.

Her sister still seemed suspicious. But after holding my gaze for a few seconds, she replied.

“Fine. I believe you.”

“Okay, then. If you have any questions I can answer, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Thanks for telling me all that stuff about my sister.”

“It’s really nothing. It’s only natural for family to worry about their own.” *Thank goodness, I thought. I managed to get her to understand.*

The girl bowed to me, and I felt the worst was behind us.

“She’s kind of weird—okay, *really* weird,” she said. “So I worry about her.”

“I can certainly understand the sentiment.”

Having been thrown into adult society so young, Miss Hoshizaki still lacked knowledge and experience. This shortcoming was so extreme that it was obvious even to her little sister. She really hated to lose, too. Maybe she’d simply heard a lot of things—including about sexual matters—secondhand, but without experience, she’d failed to really understand them. The thickness of her makeup seemed to hint at that as well.

Suddenly, I heard my name from the hallway. “Sasaki, what are you doing out there?”

The very person we’d just been talking about had arrived. A fair bit of time had passed since I’d left to use the bathroom, so she’d probably come out to see what was going on, then heard us talking.

I wondered how to answer her. But as I began thinking up possible excuses, I glimpsed the cat behind the couch. I'd thought for sure it was in her sister's room, but apparently it was just hiding.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I saw the cat coming this way."

"I don't care what happens to me, but if you do anything weird to my sister, you won't get away with it." She glared at me, her hapless junior colleague.

"I would never."

Her glare only lasted a moment before she smoothly redirected it toward her sister. "And, Mutsumi, don't provoke Sasaki, okay?"

"...Okay. I won't."

With Miss Hoshizaki's arrival, my conversation with her sister came to an end. At the former's urging, I headed back into her bedroom, and we resumed our English session.



After a while of sitting, textbook in hand, awkwardly repeating English conversations, it was time for lunch. And so this junior colleague, wanting to escape the Hoshizaki residence, invited his senior colleague out for lunch. That was what I'd originally planned; my idea was to leave from the restaurant afterward and go home. She gave me the okay.

Our destination was an Italian restaurant close to the subway station near her home. I'd looked it up while using the bathroom. I also saw a promising ramen place nearby,

but I figured a more put-together, prettier restaurant would be best if I was going somewhere with a girl her age.

As we neared our destination, however, she said, “Hey, Sasaki, got a second?”

“What is it?”

“There’s an amazing ramen place around here. Can we go there instead?”

Was it the same place I’d spotted on my phone? I’d eaten lunch with her and Ms. Futarishizuka several times already at work, so we had a good handle on each other’s preferences. Her suggestion was more than welcome. And while I wondered about a modern high school girl choosing such a place, personally, I was grateful for it.

“I just know you’re gonna love it. Unless you don’t want to.”

“No, no. If you insist, let’s—”

Just as I was about to say *go there*, we heard a scream from down the road.

A few moments later, people—pedestrians, most likely—came rushing toward us. They were coming around the corner of the intersection ahead, where the street we were on connected with a larger road. And there were a *lot* of them. More than I could count on my hands. Office workers in suits, wives with shopping bags hanging from their arms, a boy on a bicycle, and even an elderly man who must have been on a stroll—the throng spanned the whole range of ages and genders. And they all had one thing in common: the terror written on their faces.

“S-Sasaki!” cried my colleague.

“Go to your sister,” I told her. “I’ll head over to see what’s happening.”

“I’m coming with you!”

“She might come out here because she’s worried about you and get caught up in whatever this is.”

“But—”

“Please make sure your family is safe first. Once you know she’s all right, we’ll meet back up.”

“Okay. Thanks for looking out for my sister.”

“No problem. Let’s move out.”

Surprisingly, despite a job arising right in front of her eyes, Miss Hoshizaki caved and ran off in the direction we’d come. She’d weighed her wages against her sister—and the scales had tilted pretty quickly. It was obvious which of the two was the real reason she was working so hard.

After seeing her off, I started running against the current of people, remembering to put up a barrier spell as I did so. All the while, I heard them shouting at me.

“Run away, old man!”

“Hey! Don’t come this way!”

“There’s something real bad going on down the road!”

“It’s a terrorist! A terrorist attack!”

“Hey, dumbass, wrong way! You got a death wish?!”

“Run for it! And stay off the main roads!”

Silently apologizing as a quick stream of advice flew at me, I hurried on my way. I only needed a few minutes to reach the intersection.

The first thing I saw was smoke coming from crashed cars. There must have been a lot of traffic on the two-lane road, because there had been a big chain collision that now blocked it off completely.

Right in the middle of all this, a whole bunch of people were fighting. Like the people fleeing, they had all different appearances and ages. Some were children, others elderly, some men, and some women, all engaged in a big brawl. As their shrieks flew, so did their punches.

“.....”

I stopped at the side of the intersection and observed. In my opinion, those here could be divided into two groups. One group was actively attacking people, and the other was running for their lives from the first group.

I couldn't see any commonalities within the two groups other than their actions—it wasn't like the attackers were mainly men or younger people, nor were the ones fleeing mainly women or the elderly. In fact, one young woman was bleeding from her face as she assaulted a middle-aged man. What's more, everyone participating in the violence looked like totally normal people wearing normal clothes.

At this point, I had no choice but to suspect a psychic's presence. And the fact that this was happening so soon after

the Kraken incident, and so close to Miss Hoshizaki's home, gave me pause. It all seemed a little *too* coincidental. I wavered on what to do next, wondering if it would be best to join my colleague at her home. As I was thinking, my personal phone rang.

It was Ms. Futarishizuka. "Hello, this is Sasaki," I said.

"It's me," came the voice. *"Me! You know, me. Do you have a moment?"*

"I'd prefer it if you kept things brief."

"Then you must already be there."

"Has the chief contacted you?"

"No. Someone posted a video on the internet."

"Oh." Apparently, the brawl had already gone viral.

Thankfully—insofar as one could be thankful in such a situation—there were no clear signs of psychic abilities at play, like people flinging fireballs or floating in the air. I expected it would be relatively easy to deceive the public once this was over.

A few people were swinging around heavy objects, like a bicycle left on the road and some signboards, but nobody was holding a weapon like a knife or gun. If someone witnessed this with no context, it would probably just look like a big street fight, though perhaps that would still be plenty of cause for alarm.

"The day after we're summoned to Atsugi Base, there's a big party at our dear senior's doorstep. Seems rather

suspicious, yes? I'd assumed you were the main target, but then again, your apartment did get blown up the other day."

"I think you're on the right track." She was having the same thoughts as I was. As a result, my next words came easily. "Where are you right now?"

"Do you see the intersection with the convenience store on the corner?"

"I'll be right over."

She was at her Karuizawa villa last night, so Peeps had probably helped her get to the scene. I felt really bad for using the bird as a mode of transportation. *I should pick up some tasty meat as a souvenir before I go back.*

I quickly located the convenience store. It was several dozen meters away from the kerfuffle—which, unfortunately, was steadily expanding. In a few minutes, it would encompass this area as well.

The person I was looking for was standing out in front. "I'm so sorry this is happening on our well-deserved holiday," I said.

"Despite how it may seem, chances to indebt myself to you do not come along very often."

I went over and greeted Ms. Futarishizuka. People were fleeing all around us, having seen the big street fight nearby. The wailing of police sirens from several directions inevitably put me on edge. I peeked inside the store; the patrons were all gone, of course, and even the clerks had fled.

“Really?” I asked. “It seems to me you’ve been helping me almost constantly.”

“Perhaps, but you can’t put a price on a colleague’s life.”

“...Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

The mark on the back of Ms. Futarishizuka’s hand was still there, and at the same time, we were providing her with an endless supply of gold. With how my business in the otherworld had been steadily growing lately, she must be at a loss as to how to get an advantage on Peeps. She was right—in our world, money could buy just about anything but time or one’s life.

“I’m more concerned about Miss Hoshizaki than I am about this fight,” I said.

“The sparrow headed to her after dropping me off here. That should cover it, yes?”

“Then I’ll have to thank him later.”

I couldn’t think of more reliable backup than the Lord Starsage himself. He was more than capable of protecting both her and her younger sister.

I decided not to mention the fact that Ms. Futarishizuka appeared to know where they lived. It was possible she’d asked Mr. Akutsu about it, or she could have gone through a private detective agency to find out ahead of time. She had once tracked down my address, too, and shown up on my doorstep.

“Do you think this is the work of a psychic?” I asked her instead.

“There are several known kinds of powers that allow a person to manipulate others,” she explained. “But at this scale, it’s more than likely the work of a high-ranking psychic. If they take control of me, will you promise not to attack?”

“That would be the worst-case scenario,” I mused. I recalled when the nerd had created a fake Futarishizuka; it had been a terrifying situation. I tended to forget, but she could instantly kill a person just by touching them.

“But what can we do here?” she wondered aloud.

“Can’t you just touch them all and drain their energy?”

“Why, so someone can take a video and upload it to the internet?”

She was right; many people had taken up positions nearby, phones at the ready. I could see them up in the buildings around us, too. I expected the bureau would have to use their powers to stop the spread of information once this was over; I couldn’t imagine the chief sitting by and letting a mess of this magnitude run its course. But the current situation made it very hard for us to expose ourselves and get to work—especially for someone in Futarishizuka’s position.

“I have a suggestion, actually,” I told her.

“Eh?”

The hint came from our little sojourn in the otherworld the night before. Specifically, I was thinking of the magic Peeps had used—the transformation spell.

“I’ll need to prepare. We can talk on the way to Miss Hoshizaki’s.”

“You sound confident. I have a bad feeling about this.”

And so, shortly after seeing the disturbance for ourselves, we turned back toward our colleague’s condo and started running.



Unlike the way there, which had been a nice walk with some light conversation, the sprint back had me out of breath by the time we arrived. If I’d given it my all and tried to keep up with Ms. Futarishizuka’s powerful strides, we’d have reached our destination in no time at all. *It’s a good thing I haven’t eaten yet.*

In any case, we ended up back in the living room of condo 601. We stood in the center of the room, all facing one another. We’d used the intercom to tell Miss Hoshizaki we needed to hold a strategy meeting, and she’d let us in right away. Peeps was already there. Apparently, she’d seen him sitting on the veranda and invited him in.

Importantly, her younger sister was safe; no problems had occurred for the moment.

“All right, so some psychic or other is causing a riot,” said Miss Hoshizaki. “And you’re saying we’re the reason for it?”

“Ms. Futarishizuka and I believe that’s likely,” I said.

“We did disappear that giant monster after it withstood a direct nuclear attack,” Ms. Futarishizuka pointed out. “Other

countries probably see us as a threat to their safety, though I don't know who might be responsible for this."

We shared our information with Miss Hoshizaki and Peeps. The former's sister did as she was told and waited by herself in her room.

Peeps was using his magic to protect the condo, so I doubted anyone would be barging in anytime soon. It was the same setup as when we'd placed Ms. Futarishizuka under house arrest in our otherworld lodgings.

"Given the situation, Ms. Futarishizuka's power seems ideal for quelling the violence," I continued. "But there are still too many people watching. While our opponents are more than happy to have this riot in the public eye, we'd be putting ourselves at a disadvantage by conspicuously using our own powers."

"We could have the police or SDF mobilize to suppress the riot in the standard way, you know," suggested Ms. Futarishizuka.

"I'd rather the police and SDF not get caught up in whatever this psychic power is doing."

"Yes, I suppose that if they brought guns along, things could get out of hand very quickly."

"Doesn't this mean our own psychics might turn against us, too?" asked Miss Hoshizaki.

"Perhaps. We're better off not risking it," I told her.

Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki gave their opinions in quick succession. Peeps, sitting on my shoulder, simply

watched us in silence. Psychic powers operated under a different set of rules than magic. Perhaps he was purposely taking a step back from matters involving them.

“And if we bring in the authorities, those affected by this psychic power would naturally end up in legal trouble,” I added. “If this whole thing is happening because of us, I’d really prefer to avoid that outcome.”

“I get what you’re saying,” Ms. Futarishizuka replied. “But what about this preparation you mentioned? What do you have up your sleeve?”

“Ms. Futarishizuka, I’d like for you to transform into a superhero and fight for the good of the people.”

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Yet another utterly tiring suggestion.”

“My idea is not to go through any government agencies, but instead stage the entire disturbance as the filming of a TV show, or maybe one of those surprise pop-up events. If it goes well, those who have been harmed likely won’t come under much legal scrutiny.”

“Then why don’t *you* transform?” she demanded. “I bet you’re secretly dying to.”

“Your power is very well-known in this industry,” I explained. “If we assume whoever’s behind this has marked us as the cause of what happened to the Kraken, they’ll have taken your presence into consideration. They could flee the scene if you get too close.”

The magic I’d learned was all quintessential fantasy stuff, so I wanted to avoid wielding it out in the open. The only

thing the bureau knew I could do was create water and icicles.

Peeps, who had been quietly watching our lively conversation, remarked, *“You’d like to change this one’s appearance with magic, correct?”*

“That would be ideal,” I said. “Will it work?”

“It may, but I can’t be certain. Depending on how much mana the target has, the spell risks overloading the body and destroying it. You have received my power, so you were able to handle it. But I can make no guarantees about casting it on one from this world.”

His response didn’t sound altogether promising. *So this was what he’d meant when he’d muttered all that stuff about how it’d be fine, and I could handle it.* While I was more than happy to take the Starsage at his word, I really wanted to go and get a medical exam now.

“It risks *what?*” demanded Ms. Futarishizuka. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m against it! I will not consent!”

“Then could you hide your face or change your clothes instead?”

“How about my little sister’s school uniform?” suggested Miss Hoshizaki. “She’s about your height. It’ll probably fit.”

“Hold on a minute. That won’t help with my face, and that’s the most important part!”

“You ride a motorcycle, right?” I said. “Do you have a helmet or something similar at the villa?”

“A sailor uniform and a full-face helmet?” she said. “I thought you wanted a superhero!”

“*Tokusatsu* hero shows have been leaning toward realism for the last few years,” Miss Hoshizaki pointed out. “I think it could work.”

“And if you wore a large scarf, it might actually complete the look,” I agreed.

“While you sit here doing nothing, hmm?” she asked me. “While you just watch?”

“Every superhero needs a bad guy,” I said. “I was thinking I could play that role.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Once you drive off all the enemies, I could appear and play the mastermind behind it all. There’s no guarantee our enemy psychic is acting alone. I’ll hide nearby until then and back you up if needed.”

“It’s a spur-of-the-moment plan, but you *did* think it out. A little.”

“So how about it?”

Peeps would be able to use his transformation spell if I was the target. If he turned me into a totally different person, no third parties would find out my identity. Mr. Akutsu would probably be suspicious, of course, but that was nothing new.

After I’d outlined my plan, an evil grin appeared on Futarishizuka’s face. “You know, even a hero of justice—or

heroine, in this case—can't live on cheers and encouragement alone.”

“Speaking of that, I have a big business deal planned for the coming days,” I told her. “I believe you'll find it significantly more rewarding. And the costs of stocking things on your end should be quite a bit lower, as well.”

“Oh? Really, now?”

“How does that sound?”

“Well, you've never lied about these things before. All right, I accept.”

“Thank you.”

Mr. Joseph had made me a board member of the Kepler Trading Company in the otherworld, and as part of our expansion of their wireless radio network, our trades were set to be reduced to a single barrel of diesel fuel. I never thought this development would come in handy so quickly.

“I'll contact the chief and have him put a hold on the police response,” I explained. “You can use that time to disguise yourself. Miss Hoshizaki, I know we've rudely barged into your home, but would you mind assisting her?”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

“And keep the makeup light, if you please,” added Ms. Futarishizuka.

“L-look, I have to do it that way for my job!” Miss Hoshizaki insisted.

“And if possible, while you’re at the villa grabbing your helmet, could you upload one of Lady Elsa’s new videos onto the internet? We have a bunch saved as drafts for times like these.”

“Certainly. Better to pull out all the stops, eh?”

Thus began Operation Superhero Transformation.



I left Miss Hoshizaki’s condo and went to the main road near the big brawl. It was just as chaotic as before. I hid myself in an alley and watched.

I’d parted ways with Ms. Futarishizuka at the condo after she’d finished changing. She was off to the villa with Peeps to grab her helmet and a few small things. We’d promised to meet back up on the scene, and I’d come here in advance of her arrival.

Eventually, I got a message on my phone. The sender was Ms. Futarishizuka, and it was blank, with only a single picture taken from inside the brawl. Searching out pieces of scenery, I quickly found where she was.

“P-please, stop! What did I ever do to you?!”

“Die! Die! I hate you, creep! If you’re not hot or rich, then die!”

A middle-aged man in a suit was lying face up on the ground as a woman around forty straddled him. The latter was using her handbag to smack the man in the head. The picture was of these two, taken from a short distance away, using a phone’s magnification function.

Moments later, I heard the rumbling of an engine. I turned to look in the direction of the sound and saw a motorcycle zooming toward the fight, the muffler emitting an awfully cool roar; it must have had its baffle removed. But thanks to the noise, I could easily make out her entry point amid the pandemonium.

That long, low-seated design; the pushrods positioned on either side of the engine; the chrome plating decorating the large frame. Even someone with as little experience in motorcycles as me could tell at a glance that this one had a large, classic design and was likely produced by a foreign manufacturer. She'd taken off the plates, too—nothing had been overlooked.

Ms. Futarishizuka sat atop it, wearing—as we'd planned in advance—a sailor uniform and a full-face helmet. The mirrored visor perfectly concealed her facial features. She also wore platform shoes to make up for her extreme deficiency in height. Her outfit gave off a modern vibe, especially compared to her usual kimono getup.

The man grunted in surprise from where he lay on the ground, and the woman stopped flinging her handbag at him.

Ms. Futarishizuka slammed the brakes, letting her back wheel slide until she came to a stop right next to them; the motion was incredibly cool.

She then introduced herself, loud and clear, from behind her helmet.

“The Masked Sailor, heroine of justice, has arrived!”

Ms. Futarishizuka—or rather, the Masked Sailor—had just made her big entrance. The name reeked of Showa-era sensibilities. She also seemed more into this than I'd expected.

That said, the heroes I saw on TV as a kid would jump off their speeding motorcycle to attack the bad guys, crashing it every time. The Masked Sailor, however, clearly loved her bike too much for that; she took the time to put down the stand and turn off the engine—and even remembered to lock the handles.

“Hah!” she cried immediately after, setting upon the woman brandishing her bag. “Sailor Medulla Oblongata Chop!” Then she delivered a karate chop directly to her neck.

In reality, she stopped right before striking, instead touching the woman's skin gently to drain her energy; her target then fell limp on top of the man she was straddling.

“Who...who are you?!” he asked.

“Did I not already say? I am the Masked Sailor, heroine of justice!”

Ignoring the baffled man, Ms. Futarishizuka ran off, seeking her next prey. There were plenty of other people before her driven into a frenzy by some unknown influence; the Masked Sailor took them out one by one. Each time she touched their arms or legs, they would fall over.

She was considered a peerless A-rank psychic in close combat, and it had been a long time since I'd gotten to see her at work. Sticking to hand-to-hand fighting for the whole action sequence struck me as a little boring, but she couldn't exactly help it. If we'd worked in laser beams or the like, it

might make for a better show, but it would be straying too far from our purpose. Her cries of “Hi-yah!” and “Taaahhh!” began to echo throughout our surroundings.

Meanwhile I, the villain, stayed hidden behind a building, watching and biding my time, waiting for my turn. There was still no sign of the real mastermind anywhere.

As I looked on, a small bird fluttered down and landed on my shoulder. *“I’ve made the preparations as requested. But are you sure it’s all right?”*

“Thanks, Peeps. And sorry for making you bring the entire motorcycle here.”

It was Peeps who had descended from the sky and assumed his regular position. But he was no longer a Java sparrow—now he was a different type, a tree sparrow. He’d cast the transformation spell on himself so as not to draw attention while flying around outside. He’d done everything he could in the short time available, from transporting Ms. Futarishizuka back and forth to reuniting with me.

“What am I to do now?” he asked.

“I’d prefer you stick around, considering the spell’s restrictions.”

“Then could I stay on your shoulder like this?”

“No, absolutely not.” Tree sparrows didn’t even *like* humans, did they? I suddenly wanted to try feeding one.

“Then I’ll tuck myself away in your shirt. Would that be acceptable?”

“I mean, if it’s fine with you, it’s fine with me, I guess...”

“Then I shall.”

He slid over from my shoulder to my collar, then right into my suit pocket. I felt a ticklish sensation every time he moved. That, combined with the fear that I might crush him if I wasn’t careful or if something happened, made me incredibly uneasy. But I couldn’t think of anything better.

I looked down at my jacket’s inside pocket, and he looked back up at me with those big, round eyes. Birds were so cute. Java sparrows were wonderful, but tree sparrows were great, too. *They’re both in the same order, if I recall.* Hastily, I brought my gaze back up, scanning my surroundings to hide my fascination.

That was when I saw something curious in the chaos. One person in particular, who had been smacking a metal rod against a building window, threw his weapon aside when he saw Ms. Futarishizuka approach and darted between a couple of buildings, disappearing. That was the first person I’d seen among the brawlers who had run away. It seemed the Masked Sailor hadn’t noticed him.

“What is it?” asked Peeps.

“I think the enemy psychic just fled.”

The suspect was pretty far from me. If I gave chase now, I doubted I’d be able to apprehend him. More importantly, I had to focus on the plan—tying up the situation with a neat little bow.

“Then it’s your turn next, yes?”

“That’s right.” I nodded, then checked the road one more time. As far as I could see, Ms. Futarishizuka had whittled down the number of brawlers to just a few, who were sure to be knocked out within a couple minutes. It was time for the bad guy to show up for the big finale.

I launched out of the alley at a sprint. As the Masked Sailor put the last rioter down, I spotted an abandoned car on the roadside nearby. I didn’t see anyone inside. It looked expensive, but the bureau would be able to cover damages to a single car. There was no reason to hesitate. I leaped up onto the hood using a tiny bit of flight magic, though not enough to cause any issues.

“That’s as far as you go, Masked Sailor!” I shouted at her as her rampage through the street came to an end.

As I said the words, I felt more embarrassed than I’d thought I would. I casually glanced around, spying several people at a distance with their phones out. Even more were watching from the windows of nearby buildings.

If it weren’t for Peeps’s transformation spell, I don’t think I’d have been able to handle the pressure.

I’d cast off my plain appearance for some pretty distinctive features. My skin was so white it was like I was covered in powder. My eyes and nose had sharpened, too. Basically, I looked like some kind of makeup-covered, visual kei rock star. My hair was blond now, with a side part; and I had two horns sticking right out of my forehead.

In addition, I had on a suit and glasses, and I was striking an exaggerated pose.

“It’s you!” shouted Ms. Futarishizuka, stopping and looking up at me. “The Demonic Middle Manager!” She’d come up with that on the spot; come to think of it, we hadn’t decided on a name in advance.

“I’m surprised you would resort to violence against the very people you’re meant to protect!” I shouted.

“Oh, don’t you worry! That was just a warm-up for the real thing!”

“Does it not torment your conscience to hurt the innocent?”

“It does—more than *you* could ever imagine! But know this! That pain will be my strength, and it will lead us to a bright and just future!”

Since this whole conversation was essentially ad-libbed, I got the impression our hero’s true nature was seeping into it. Fortunately, there were no directors to demand a retake or any authors we had to be considerate of.

“You are my final enemy!” she continued. “I’m sure you can see what befell the ones under your thrall!”

“Yes, it seems that way, indeed.”

As she spoke, the Masked Sailor cast me a meaningful glance. I returned it with a tiny nod—it was time to clean things up.

“Demonic Middle Manager! I’ll defeat you in a snap and be on my way!”

“Defeat me? Never. I shall have you repent for what you’ve done!”

Ms. Futarishizuka kicked off the ground and zoomed toward me. I, the demon, hastily put up my guard, but it didn’t do much against her overwhelming physical abilities. She grabbed me by the nape of my neck, then flung me down onto the pavement. As I fell off the car and plummeted toward the road, I used a barrier spell to soften the impact.

The girl superhero took the chance to climb on top of me. From inside my jacket pocket, the little tree sparrow poked his head out.

“Don’t get too violent, girl.”

“Nuwooooh?!” Surprised at Peeps’s sudden and unexpected appearance, Ms. Futarishizuka immediately jumped away.

Peeps then tucked himself back into my pocket so that nobody would see him. I doubted anyone had, but now the onus was on the Masked Sailor to explain why she’d suddenly retreated from the big bad demon. How would she convince the audience? Fortunately, my concern only lasted a moment.

“Ack! You’ve got the body odor of the century! I can’t even get close to you like that!”

I really wished she’d picked something else.

As I stood up, I frantically thought about how to respond—though I certainly felt bad for shocking her with Peeps like that.

“Things have been too busy at work for me to go home!” I declared. “I haven’t showered in three days!”

“Not only are demons horrible to the world at large, but they’re cruel even to their own! I should have expected as much from an organization of evil!”

“Today’s the day I make you one of us—a demon! You will help us change the world!”

“No way! A heroine of justice never pulls an all-nighter at the office! Down with worker exploitation!”

We’d stalled for a while, but our real enemy—the psychic who had caused the pedestrians to go berserk—showed no signs of appearing. The person I’d spotted must have been the mastermind after all. In which case, it was time to wrap things up without giving anything away.

“Oh, well, excuse me!” I declared in a high-and-mighty tone. “Speak of the devil—literally, in this case. I appear to have a phone call from the boss.”

I took out my phone. I hadn’t actually received a call; I’d simply had the device ready for this ad-libbed conversation. In fact, I was the one doing the calling. The other person picked up in two rings, and it was exactly who I’d told the Masked Sailor it was.

“Chief, the psychic has escaped. Please send in the bureau.”

“It would have been nice if you had captured them.”

“We’ll have to leave that, as well as determining who they work for, for later.”

“...All right. I’ll have our people on the scene shortly.”

I spoke to him in hushed tones so nobody could hear me. In the meantime, I pretended to be contacting one of the bad guys higher up the chain.

Mr. Akutsu probably had a read on what we were doing through video feeds. He didn’t ask for any more details; he just expressed his understanding. I was only on the phone with him for a few seconds. Once it was finished, I put the device back in my pocket.

Now that I had the chief’s permission, I needed to notify the Masked Sailor of my impending withdrawal.

“It would appear I don’t have the time to bother with you now!”

“What?!”

“Our fight will have to wait for another day, Masked Sailor!”

“Halt! Wait right there, Demonic Middle Manager!”

And then I turned tail and ran.

Despite her yelling “Halt!” at me, she didn’t move to chase. Instead, she pretended to be concerned about all the people lying on the road nearby. Even the pedestrians in the distance with their phones were shifting their cameras’ focus around the scene.

At about the same time, bureau members flooded onto the site. Like previous incidents, they quickly locked down the vicinity, warning not only the people outdoors, but those up

in nearby buildings to refrain from photography. This time, their excuse was that they were cleaning up after filming.

Ms. Futarishizuka, in her sailor uniform and helmet, took her leave. She retrieved what I believed to be her own motorcycle as bureau employees went around securing all the people she'd taken out with her powers along with those wounded in the chaos.

I could see police officers surrounding us at a distance. But while they helped direct traffic, they stayed out of the immediate area. I also noticed them stringing out yellow “keep out” tape in several areas to prevent onlookers.

After sparing a few glances around, I returned to the narrow alley I'd hidden myself in earlier. Once I'd made sure nobody could see me, I turned my gaze to my inside pocket.

The tree sparrow was looking right up at me. “*Is your work finished?*” he asked.

“Yeah. Could you undo the transformation now?”

“*Very well.*”

I'd checked in advance to make sure there were no surveillance cameras here, and of course there were no human eyes on me, either. A moment later, Peeps's spell returned my body to normal.

And so the Demonic Middle Manager blended into the crowd and left the scene.



After withdrawing from the site of the riot, Peeps and I first met up with Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka at the former's condo, then went right back to the scene with an air of nonchalance. There, we worked with the other bureau employees to help cover up any evidence of psychic activity, all the while staying on guard in case the culprit reappeared. Naturally, we had to skip lunch to do it.

Before I knew it, the sun had set. Unfortunately, even with the site fully cleaned up, we still had a job to do. We headed to the bureau office and caught up with the section chief, who was awaiting our report, in the same meeting room as always. Mr. Akutsu sat across the table from us. Once again, I was between the two women.

“There is a *lot* I want to ask the three of you,” he began.

“Oh?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “We’ve just been at work all day without any lunch, and this is the treatment we get?”

“I know you’ve been hard at work, Masked Sailor, and you have my apologies.”

“Well, then I’d very much appreciate seeing some of that in your attitude toward and treatment of us, Mr. Demonic Middle Manager.”

Ms. Futarishizuka was so reliable—she’d taken the lead and started making a fuss, wresting control of the conversation. She’d confronted the section chief himself without so much as a moment’s hesitation. I was in awe of her vigor. There was a world of difference between her and Miss Hoshizaki, who had cried herself to sleep over the spy camera incident and was practically twisted around our boss’s little finger.

“I believe that role belongs to Sasaki, not me,” said the chief.

“Come to think of it,” continued Futarishizuka, “your people’s work out there struck me as *strikingly* quick and efficient.”

“The location being what it was, we couldn’t afford to waste time.”

“Are you sure you didn’t hear anything from the target? Maybe an advance warning or two?”

“.....”

Apparently, her calling the boss Demonic Middle Manager was just to spite him.

I recalled the nerd’s advice back at the resort in Atami—about how things would get harder for me from here on out. He must have been referring to this. If the chief had purposely decided to shelve this information rather than give it to us, then he was likely under the influence of some troublesome third party.

And from his perspective, it would be like killing two birds with one stone. He could ingratiate himself with this other person or group, while at the same time trying to figure out what, or who, was behind *us*.

“I must ask, Sasaki,” said the chief. “What *was* that face all about?”

“The demon disguise, sir?” I asked. “Miss Hoshizaki showed me the basics of how to do makeup.”

He was trying to change the subject; she must have hit him where it hurt. Rather than responding to Ms. Futarishizuka's implied follow-up question, he'd shifted his attention to me.

Miss Hoshizaki and I had agreed on our coverup for the transformation spell in advance. I hadn't changed in front of anyone, but she'd still seen me at her home with a completely altered appearance from the neck up. We'd agreed to chalk it up to her special skills with thick makeup.

"Yeah, I showed him a couple tricks," Miss Hoshizaki added. "We had all the tools at my place already."

"It seemed like more than just his facial features," the chief pointed out. "He appeared to have horns growing out of his head."

"We put them on with glue," I said. "My scalp still stings."

"...Is that right?"

I'd actually grown them with transformation magic, but that was our secret. After all, nobody would be able to tell if they were real from far away.

The tools to achieve such things were commonplace these days, and putting on makeup to change into someone else was an increasingly popular pastime. We men already knew how shocking a woman's makeup skills could be, and the chief was likely no exception.

To press our advantage, I pushed him even harder. "Like Ms. Futarishizuka said, we didn't want to simply go along with the enemy's scheme."

“Well, it’s true that I’ve been receiving inquiries regarding your actions.”

When I brought up the as-of-yet unseen agitator again, the chief folded. It seemed we’d been right—he’d had advance information on the day’s incident.

“And I am grateful to all three of you for settling the riot so skillfully,” he continued. “Your little performance reduced the damages and casualties to far less than what we’d expected.”

“Chief, I can’t just let that statement go,” said Miss Hoshizaki.

“They had no intention of causing you harm,” he explained.

“My sister could have been hurt,” she insisted. “Not just her, either. None of those people were doing anything wrong. And they could have ended up in jail.”

Miss Hoshizaki was growing agitated. The riot had happened right by her home. She was right, too—one wrong step and her sister could have gotten dragged into it.

“I promise you that I will send a bodyguard to protect your family in the future,” said the chief.

“I’m not really sure if I can trust you on that.”

“Obviously, I will let you have a say in the choice of personnel.”

“Did you leak Sasaki’s and my location?”

“No, I wouldn’t go that far. And that’s why I want all three of you to be very careful in the days ahead. After the Kraken incident, you’ve been marked by far more organizations both inside and outside Japan than you probably think.”

Judging by the psychic who’d stirred up the mob’s quick retreat, I expected Mr. Akutsu was right about that. Someone, somewhere, had obviously provoked us to try to find out our secret to taking down the Kraken. And the chief, due to some deal or other, was looking the other way.

I was all for getting an introduction to this mysterious third party. But I also knew that probably wouldn’t happen; I could guess as much from Ms. Futarishizuka’s silence on the matter.

The psychic’s power had been invisible, so that any observers wouldn’t understand what they were seeing. Various balances of power were probably at play here—which meant this attacker had been a *lot* nicer than they could have been. I wouldn’t be surprised if one showed up who was totally fine with kidnapping people outright.

“Was this a lesson you were trying to teach us, then? Hmm?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Perhaps it was. Though I doubt you needed it, Futarishizuka.”

“Then I’d rather you hadn’t done it during our vacation.”

“Oh, Futarishizuka, don’t worry. We’ll be putting in our time for all the work we did today,” Miss Hoshizaki assured her.

“That’s not what I was getting at...”

As an employee, it was very disappointing to know that my boss was most likely behind the incident we'd just had to handle. But this time, at least, it didn't seem like he'd wanted to cause us any harm, so I decided to just accept it. What surprised me was that the third party's interests extended to Miss Hoshizaki. I'd have to watch out for my senior colleague in the future.

“In any case, you now owe us quite the debt,” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Considering the backing the bureau will continue to provide you, I should think the scales are even,” said the chief.

“Grrr...”

Simply learning our boss's intentions would have to satisfy me for now.

In the future, I expected my position as an employee of the bureau would become much more important.



That day, after our meeting with Mr. Akutsu, we finished up the paperwork resulting from the incident and then headed home. The sun had already set by the time we'd arrived at the office, and when we finally punched our time cards, it was almost midnight.

Futarishizuka and I parted ways with Miss Hoshizaki at the bureau, then took Ms. Futarishizuka's car to the hotel where I was staying. In my room, we met up with Peeps, then had him warp us to the Karuizawa villa.

It was very late, and Lady Elsa was already asleep in bed. I didn't see my neighbor and Abaddon, so I figured they were in their new house next door.

The three of us sat down on the living room sofas and began hashing out the details. Futarishizuka and I faced each other over a low table, with Peeps perched on the tabletop tree in front of me.

“I want to discuss our future business dealings,” I began.

“Ugh. Haven't I done enough work for today?”

“My idea was to switch from sugar to diesel fuel for the time being.”

“Right. The sparrow told me about that this afternoon, and I've already made the arrangements.”

“Really? That was fast.”

“I have a pretty good idea of what you're doing over there now,” she added, taking on a listless expression and recrossing her legs.

Despite her childish appearance, her haughty attitude strangely suited her. I could sense a little of the person she really was now that exhaustion had worn down her mask. Before the mark on the back of her hand, she'd probably been an even bolder, more daring person than I had thought.

“I don't know the details,” she continued. “but just make sure not to flub things up and get yourself killed. We can never know what those above us are planning, no matter how much we struggle. A little mischief might be

overlooked, but once you cross a certain line, things will start moving—and fast. And at that point, it will be too late.”

“Are you speaking from experience?”

“Oh, come now. Why do you think I’m so rich?”

She’d answered my question with another question. The contents of hers felt oddly weighty and made me a little nervous. Considering what she’d said just before, I even felt a little intimidated.

“Because you’re skilled at the art of conversation?” I ventured.

“No,” she said. “It’s because I survive.”

“.....”

Her answer was so frank and to the point that I wasn’t sure how to respond. I was hesitant to ask for any details, considering the implications she was making about her past life. She was calm and composed now, but I could sense that the path here had been full of difficulty and struggle. I doubted any of it would be very fun to talk about.

“Though perhaps, as long as you’re with that sparrow, you have no need to worry,” she added.

“Indeed. You may rest assured.”

Peeps might talk big, but he *had* been stabbed in the back—and quite recently at that. I couldn’t help but notice his tail twitch a little as he spoke. He was so cute, acting all tough in front of Ms. Futarishizuka. I hoped he had reflected on his past and was planning to redouble his efforts in future.

“Also, I checked the supposedly defective radio you brought back,” she said. “I found signs of exposure to excess current.”

“Did the manufacturers not wire it correctly?”

“It takes a little more than that to cause the things I saw.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The condenser looked like popcorn.”

“I see.”

“I’d recommend you keep an eye out no matter what it is you’re doing.”

“Thank you for the warning. Really—I’m grateful.”

This revelation, combined with the previous topic, certainly gave me a lot to think about. Considering where the radio had been kept, the only possible culprit was Mr. Joseph. The malfunction had come to light two visits ago. Then, during my last trip, he’d proposed a line to link the Republic of Lunge with the Ohgen Empire. In between those two events, I’d brought in a replacement machine as a fix and told him about the state of my inventory.

I was curious why Mr. Joseph would have exposed the machine to excess current. I’d explained to him that radios operate on a very small amount of electricity. It was frustrating, but I couldn’t tell anything for sure yet. I decided to accept Ms. Futarishizuka’s advice at face value and not get too comfortable in my relationship with the Kepler Trading Company.

“Anyway, you barged into a high school girl’s house, right?” she asked. “Did you do it?”

“What? No. We just had an English study session.”

“How far did you go? Was there a condom in the room?”

“We followed along with the teaching materials and read out a dialogue together.”

“Ugh. You’re so *boring*.”

The next thing I knew, our serious conversation had given way to sexual harassment. Maybe she didn’t like the tension in the air. I was grateful for her consideration, but the way she was handling it was so last century. She stared at me, sighing.

“Regarding the diesel fuel—how long do you think it will take?” I asked.

“If you need a lot, I should be getting a notification soon. What do you want to do?”

“Then, if possible, could you hold off for a short time?”

“Fine by me. I need some dinner anyway. I can’t sleep on an empty stomach.”

“I suppose we haven’t eaten since this morning.”

We’d prioritized our work at the bureau, so we hadn’t eaten dinner. And we’d missed lunch, too, thanks to the riot that afternoon. I’d been thinking of eating first thing when we got to the otherworld.

“You two want to join me?” she asked.

“If it’s all right with you, sure,” I said.

“*You won’t mind my presence?*” asked Peeps.

“It’s no extra trouble,” she replied, getting up and heading to the kitchen.

Our little group—two humans and one bird—took our places around the table for a late dinner. The meal was cooked by the villa’s owner herself, and Peeps and I helped out where we could. It took a little under an hour to prepare before we all sat down.

The diesel fuel took longer than expected, however, and it was starting to grow light again outside by the time the notification reached Ms. Futarishizuka’s phone. According to her, it had been delivered to the usual warehouse, and we could pick it up at our convenience. Once we’d checked on it, we would head to the otherworld for another short visit.

“I’m going to sleep for a while. Don’t wake me up, all right?” said Ms. Futarishizuka.

“We won’t. Thank you for doing so much for us.”

In all honesty, I wanted to get some sleep, too. But if I went to bed now, I’d sleep like a rock, and a lot of time would pass in the otherworld. Instead, rubbing my eyes to try to keep the drowsiness at bay, I made the trip with the help of Peeps’s magic.

This time, we headed to the Kepler Trading Company before visiting the count. We’d taken several more hours than planned in Japan, resulting in a wider time gap.

There, we supplied Mr. Joseph with the extra set of radio equipment as well as the diesel fuel. We also took the chance to explain how to set it up, since their company would be handling all of that in the Ohgen Empire. It was our job to prepare them, so we went over all the procedures once again and even created a manual for them. As a result, we ended up staying in Lunge for several days.

For the time being, we decided to hold off on bringing sugar and the other products we'd previously provided. Those at the trading company were much more concerned about securing a stable source of diesel fuel.

With all that squared away, staff from the company loaded the fuel and radio equipment onto carts and headed out of the Republic. After we'd watched them go, it was time to visit the Kingdom of Herz.



Peeps's teleportation magic brought us straight to the town of Baytrium, and we made our way to Count Müller's estate directly. Unfortunately, the count was gone; we heard he'd been out for some time. When I asked for more details, I was told that he hadn't returned since we left to visit my lands together.

Peeps and I then hurried over to the Rectan Plains fortress. An entire day in Japan had passed since our last visit, and as we looked down at the surrounding area from the sky, we saw a little town forming. The business with Prince Lewis's soldiers aside, the region still seemed to be under development.

Using flight magic, we alighted in an inner courtyard of the fortress. The count came out to greet us immediately.

“Lord Sasaki! You couldn’t have come at a better time,” he said.

“It’s good to see you again, my lord.”

“I apologize for the rush, but could you come with me?”

“Yes, sir.”

The fortress and its surrounding area were bursting with activity, which meant a lot of people watching. To avoid prying eyes, we headed inside the building. Our destination was a familiar reception room—the one we’d used during our last visit. A lot of new furniture had been brought in, though, and it was now looking pretty fancy. It seemed safe to assume that the fortress’s interior decoration was now finished.

We saw someone else in the room as well.

“Baron Sasaki, Lord Starsage, thank you for coming.”

“I’m happy to see you again, Your Royal Highness.”

“As am I, Adonis.”

This was the second prince of Herz, leader of one of the two main factions in the running to inherit the crown. Prince Adonis stood up from the sofa at our arrival, welcoming us in. He was the only other person in the room, so Peeps felt comfortable speaking as normal.

“May I assume, sir, that our discussion concerns the matter with Prince Lewis?”

“That’s right.”

I’d been expecting as much, but hearing it out loud made me tense up. I wiped the sleepiness off my face.

“I know it is rude of me to ask this when your brother is in the middle of a war,” I said. “But if it pleases you, could you update us on the current situation? We would very much like to help out.”

“Consider this a request from me as well, Adonis,” the Java sparrow followed up immediately. *He’s so reliable.*

At that, the prince’s expression changed. He seemed troubled—and yet pleased at the same time. A moment later, we heard the reason from the man himself.

“My brother has achieved a major victory. He has subjugated the Empire’s frontline base while keeping casualties to a minimum.”

“What...?” I blurted out. That was not how I was expecting things to go. The Lord Starsage had much the same reaction; I saw him give a start up on my shoulder.

“We received a letter from him just yesterday,” the prince explained.

“Are you certain of its sender?” asked Peeps.

“I’ve checked and rechecked, and it’s definitely my brother’s handwriting.”

“I verified this as well, Lord Starsage,” added the count, agreeing with the prince.

It was possible the Empire had taken him and other important figures hostage and forced him to write the letter, with the aim of luring out Herz’s unarmed rear support personnel. But we would get nowhere if I kept doubting everything, so I decided to hear the rest of their explanation.

“According to the letter, he and his forces set out from here toward the Geschwür garrison. He says the enemy hadn’t fully replenished their troops after the previous incident and fell to a frontal assault.”

“Did Prince Lewis know that going in?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” answered the prince. “But it’s certainly possible.”

Peeps had obliterated a significant portion of the Empire’s military force with his magic. If the Empire was currently in chaos, what Prince Lewis had described could well be true. The relationship between the general leading the troops on the ground and the margrave in charge of the region had appeared strained, as well.

But if that was the case, how exactly had the prince found out about the Empire’s internal affairs? Did he have spies deeply embedded in the enemy nation, and we just didn’t know about them? They’d have to be very talented, if so.

“If what he says is true, this will bring about a major shift in the battle for the throne.”

At Peeps’s remark, everyone turned to look at Prince Adonis. If his brother really had been victorious, he now had

a significant lead. To catch up, Adonis would need to do something equally as glorious as capturing an Imperial stronghold. *Wouldn't that be really difficult, though?* I wondered. The second prince's supporters—myself included—were in a bad spot now. If this news made it to the royal palace, the state of the competition would change overnight.

“It might come off as rude, especially to you two, for someone in my position to say this,” began the prince. “But if it would lead to a better future for this kingdom, then perhaps I *should* yield the inheritance to my brother.”

It seemed the prince had begun to lose his spirit. He looked at us with guilt plain on his face, clearly demonstrating the kind of man he was. He wasn't making excuses to protect himself—he was genuinely acknowledging his own lack of power and prioritizing the welfare of the kingdom.

In my opinion, though, it was a little too soon to make that call. “Either way, sir, I believe we should first verify the situation for ourselves,” I replied.

“Yes, sir. That's right,” agreed the count.

“Depending on the situation, things may be even more dire than simple defeat.”

All three of us quickly voiced our opinions, agreeing that the report sounded a little too good to be true, and that it was simply too early to draw any conclusions.

“For the time being, I shall look into the matter, along with Imperial movements.”

“Are you sure, Lord Starsage?” asked the count.

“Yes, though I will need this man’s help.” The sparrow turned his head to look at me.

Did he really need to ask at this point? “If you’re all right with someone like me, Peeps, then I’ll help with anything you ask.”

“Thank you. And I apologize again for mixing you up in our affairs.”

“Hey, we all have to look out for one another, right? They’re helping us, too, after all.”

“Lord Starsage, Baron Sasaki, thank you,” said the prince. “I’m beyond grateful for your consideration.”

Whatever he might claim, the bird still seemed to hold the Kingdom of Herz dear to his heart. While his comments often sounded conspicuously detached, he refused to forsake its citizens when it counted. It showed how good-natured he was, which in turn made me want to help him out.

“I’d like to leave as soon as possible,” said Peeps. *“Is that all right with you?”*

“I think that’s a good idea,” I said. “Are we going to the Geschwür garrison, then?”

“Yes, that was my plan. I want to verify Lewis’s safety first.”

If we were going to meet Prince Lewis, we wouldn’t have to disguise ourselves with transformation magic, either.

And so we set off to see for ourselves whether the contents of the letter were true or false.

<Invasion>

Peeps and I soon departed from the Sasaki barony to pay a visit to the Geschwür garrison. Peeps teleported us as usual, but instead of going straight in, we started from a short distance away and used flight magic to approach from high in the air. We wanted to get a look at things from afar to see what was happening.

“There are a lot of carts parked around the garrison, considering its size.”

“Yes. I can see a great many people within its walls as well.”

Along the river, right in the middle of the grassy plains, stood a fortress. It was about as big as the one in Baron Sasaki’s domain. Around it were big walls, and inside, I could spot people moving about. We could also see a lot of carts lined up outside the walls, evidently unable to fit in.

And here and there, throughout the fortress, flew Herzian flags.

“I see a bunch of flags all over. Do you think they’re real?”

“We’d have to go down and see for ourselves to know for sure.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

If the letter and the flags were fake, we’d end up trapped like rats. I didn’t like danger, so I’d prefer to avoid such a situation. But since I’d already agreed to go along, I simply

nodded. I'd just have to trust that everything would work out as long as I stayed with Peeps.

We used our flight magic to descend toward the ground and headed for a spot a little ways from what looked like the front gates.

Those at the fortress spotted our approach immediately. Several mounted knights burst out of the garrison, galloping toward our destination. Personally, I wanted to fly right back up. But when I checked with Peeps, he gave me a small nod indicating that things would be fine.

Without much choice, I continued down as planned. When my feet touched the ground, the men from the fortress immediately stopped their horses.

A moment later, the knight at the front addressed me in a respectful tone. "Excuse my rudeness, sir, but would you happen to be Baron Sasaki?"

"You knew it was me?" I asked, surprised.

"Prince Lewis awaits you. Please come with us, sir."

I hadn't thought they'd be able to identify me so high in the air. I was astonished. How had they figured out it was us? What's more, I'd been expecting them to draw their swords as soon as we met, and part of me was a little disappointed.

"I understand," I told them. "I'd appreciate it if you could guide me to him."

"Right this way, sir."

This could still have been a trap. *I'm with Peeps, though, so that won't be an issue*, I told myself, deciding to go along with the knight's instructions.

Raising myself a few dozen centimeters off the ground with flight magic, I followed after the horses. On the way, one of the animals defecated, surprising me. The resulting mess struck its swinging tail, splashing outward. I barely managed to avoid it as I followed them.

I was shown into the Geschwür garrison, as planned. Prince Lewis's forces appeared to have taken control of the whole fortress, and no one tried to block our way. As we'd seen from the sky, the building had Herzian flags flying everywhere, and the soldiers going about inside were well disciplined. Nearly all of them appeared to be from the kingdom. It was starting to seem like Prince Lewis's attack on the Ohgen Empire really *had* been a great success.

Ultimately, we were brought to what looked like the office of the person in charge. The one we were after was sitting at the desk at the back of the room. Several relatively well-adorned knights stood near the prince, guarding him. After motioning for us to enter, the knights who had led us here moved just outside the door and stood at attention.

Whatever the case, I supposed a proper greeting was in order. "Allow me to congratulate you on your conquest of the Geschwür garrison, Your Royal Highness."

"Thank you for coming, Baron Sasaki. You're the first to congratulate me, actually."

"I apologize for showing up without prior notice, sir."

“I don’t mind. In fact, the earlier the better with these things. I hadn’t thought one of Adonis’s nobles would be here before any of my own. Perhaps I could have chosen better, hmm? I may as well ask—would you like to use this chance to come over to my side?”

“Your words are more than I deserve, sir. But I must humbly decline your considerate offer.”

“Ah, and when I am inviting you so *passionately*, too. How unreliable you are.”

“I can see you joining forces with Prince Adonis and leading the kingdom together, sir.”

“.....”

The reason they’d known it was me up in the sky became clear as soon as we saw the prince—he had a pair of binoculars in hand, definitely one of the items I’d sold to the otherworld in the past. I could see outside through the large window behind the desk. He must have spotted us from here, then confirmed who we were using the binoculars. I was certain the window faced the part of the sky we’d teleported into.

“Excuse my rudeness, sir, but may I ask where you acquired those?”

“I bought them from a local merchant in Count Müller’s lands.”

“If it’s not too much to ask, I’d like to know the name of the person who sold it to you.”

“You were the one who brought these goods here, yes, Baron Sasaki?”

“That is correct, sir.”

“My brother made quite the lucky find, it seems,” said the prince, his smile deepening as he stroked the binoculars. His eyes were narrowed into an awfully striking smirk. Anyone watching would have guessed he was thinking about something decidedly evil. “You’ve come here to verify the truth of the letter I sent the count, have you not?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve come to assess the situation as well as to congratulate you.”

“Go ahead. You can look around all you like. We threw the captured Imperials into the dungeon. In exchange, Baron, I’d like your help hastening provisions here from the count’s lands. I seem to recall his storehouses being quite full.”

“...Understood, sir.”

The more words I traded with Prince Lewis, the more severe the expressions of the well-dressed knights beside him became. They probably hated that a lowly baron such as myself, and a supporter of Prince Adonis, was speaking to the man at all. Back in Herz, they probably held a higher position than I did.

“What is my brother up to, by the way?” the prince asked.

“His Royal Highness is currently at the fortress in the Rectan Plains, praying for your safety, sir.”

“Really? I hadn’t expected him to stick around.”

“Now that you’ve won this unprecedented victory, will you not march back to the royal capital in triumph?”

“Why would I? If I don’t take this opportunity to press the attack, will it ever come again?”

That surprised me. Prince Lewis was grasping for even more. He was taking an extremely aggressive stance compared to his conservative-leaning kingdom. Was he too young to consider backing down from a fight? Or did he have a good reason to be confident of further victories? I couldn’t be sure. In the past, he’d done things like trying to make Lady Elsa his chief concubine or firing magic at a dragon. Unfortunately, the man had something of a flair for the dramatic.

“Have you eaten yet, Baron?” he asked.

“I have, sir.”

“Ah, a shame. I was wondering if the two of us could have a meal together.”

It’s a really good thing I had a late dinner at Ms. Futarishizuka’s, I thought. Otherwise, my stomach would have growled during this conversation. And why’s he inviting me to eat anyway? “I couldn’t, sir. Those charged with your safety must surely be on edge at my presence. Once I’ve completed my assigned task, I hope to return to the Rectan Plains fortress, by your leave.”

“I suppose you may do as you wish.”

“Thank you for your understanding, sir.”

“Also, when you go back, tell my brother to wait in the capital for good news.”

“I will tell him, sir.”

That was the end of my meeting with Prince Lewis. After that, with a knight as my guide, I took a look around the facility. Just as Prince Adonis and Count Müller had reported, the Geschwür garrison was under the complete control of Herzian soldiers. The highest-ranking captive in the dungeon was the base commander, along with several of his aides.

I was told that those low-ranking soldiers deemed to have no worth as captives had been dealt with appropriately. Around the time I arrived, I'd seen Herzian soldiers disposing of bodies—that must have been them. They also said, however, that many had fled the front line. Naturally, the Herzian soldiers hadn't emerged unscathed. I could see the wounded all around.

I spent the better part of half a day observing. The garrison, a mere frontline base, was much smaller than the town of Baytrium. I didn't see any civilians, either. I was able to finish my inspection before sunset.

My conclusion was unchanged since my arrival: Prince Lewis's forces had indeed taken Geschwür.



After my rounds at the garrison, Peeps and I returned to Baytrium, specifically to our room at the posh inn. We'd used flight magic to take off from Geschwür, then, once we

were outside the range visible with binoculars, Peeps teleported us into the room's living space.

“What should we do now, Peeps?” I asked the bird.

“*Hmm...*”

It was time for a strategy meeting to discuss developments surrounding Prince Lewis. And this time, even the Lord Starsage seemed troubled. He moved his little head around worriedly where he sat on the perching tree—he was so cute.

“It seems to me that Lewis is in direct contact with the Empire in some form.”

“I can't deny the possibility, but there's just no proof.”

If Peeps was right, then as soon as Prince Lewis ascended the throne, Herz would become an Imperial puppet state. Though no troops would be sent into the kingdom, it would be slowly absorbed into the Empire until its name and bloodlines were lost to time. This made perfect sense considering their inability to defeat the dragons at the border.

“I'm sorry to ask even more of you, but could we disguise ourselves and infiltrate the Empire once again?”

“I don't mind at all. But where are we going this time?”

“There is only one option for Lewis's next target—the town we visited before.”

“Speaking geographically, you mean?”

“Yes, exactly. Without taking that town, he will have no way forward. If he were to try to detour around it, he’d be caught in a pincer attack between it and his next target. And Lewis’s troops as they are now would be unable to withstand it.”

“I see.”

I’d met a key figure of the Ohgen Empire in that town—General Troy. His presence, along with that of Margrave Bertrand, seemed to suggest some movement within the Empire.

“Whatever we do, I’d like to work in some way for Prince Adonis to show off.”

“Indeed, that would be ideal.”

That way, even if Prince Lewis ultimately ascended the throne, Adonis could retain a high position in the court. Basically, I wanted to give the younger brother a piece of what the elder brother was cooking. Fortunately, the former hadn’t shown that much desire to take the throne. There was probably room for negotiation. The only question left was whether we could produce the necessary results.

“Should we go right away?”

“Would you mind?”

“No, I’m ready.”

“Then let us prepare at once.”

“Prepare” in this case meant “use transformation magic.” Like before, the spell changed both of us: I became a

ubiquitous local, dropping the suit and tie; and Peeps became an incredibly adorable golden retriever. A quick once-over told me we basically looked the same as before.

When I felt the big dog's presence next to my leg, my motivation shot up. *Sorry, Peeps.* A moment later, the teleportation spell took effect, and we left the town of Baytrium.

It only took a moment. The two of us entered the Empire the same way we had before, and we secured a base of operations in the same lodgings. Naively, I thought that if I was lucky, I might run into the general or the margrave again. Peeps and my plan to compare different inns would have to wait.

After eating dinner, we went to sleep without accomplishing anything in particular. We would go into town and check it out the next day.

I had assumed that news of Prince Lewis's conquest of Geschwür had reached the ears of the townspeople here, so the first thing I did was try to gather information. If we were going to infiltrate a military facility, we'd need a good foothold first.

We left the inn and walked around town, pretending to sightsee. Peeps was with me the whole time, of course; the way his paws plodded along the road was divine, the wagging of his tail simply adorable. What made me even happier was how he had to touch me every once in a while to maintain the transformation spell.

Those around us seemed to agree, and several people called out to me as we went.

“Oh!” said one woman. “He’s so cute! What’s his name?”

“Pe—er, Pythagoras.”

“*Woof!*”

“Well, aren’t you energetic, Pythagoras!”

“*Woof! Woof!*”

“May I pet him?”

“*Woof! Woof! Woof!*”

“Go right ahead.”

Thank you, I thought. I really appreciate you putting your all into those cute doggy moves. And sorry for giving you a different name without asking. I was grateful, but I was also having fun.

The people of the town were all living in peace. None of them had even heard that Herz had attacked, much less that they had taken Geschwür. In fact, as we walked around that day, we didn’t hear a single thing about Herz at all. We’d listened in at several restaurants, but nobody was talking about the news. We did, however, hear various opinions on the Empire’s previous failed attempt to dispatch troops to the kingdom. The citizens didn’t seem to think very much of it; I should have guessed as much.

In the meantime, the sun set, and night came. The two of us returned to our lodgings to eat dinner. But as we were walking down the hallway to our guest room, something happened: We heard several people making a racket around the corner.

This inn was rather expensive and aimed at noble clientele. Considering the possibility I might get mixed up in something annoying again, I stopped and drew up against the wall. Peeps followed suit next to me.

A moment later, a large group of people rounded the corner. Most of them appeared to be armed knights, led by a man in fancy clothes who looked like a noble. He was probably in his midforties, with a stern, scary face. He stood about a head taller than my post-transformation self.

I recognized him right away.

“Damn that general!” he grumbled. “Where did he disappear to?”

“Excuse my rudeness for asking, my lord,” said a knight, “but have you checked the military facility?”

“Of *course* I have, you dolt. These are *my* lands.”

“Perhaps we should send people to other inns in town, my lord.”

“Yes. And search the surrounding areas, too.”

“Understood, sir.”

Words flew this way and that as they walked down the hallway toward us. Eventually, when the noble saw us, he muttered, “Oh? Is that you, my elf-loving comrade?”

Apparently, the margrave remembered me, though not exactly in a way I appreciated. “It’s good to see you again, my lord.”

Knowing the man's rank made me even more tense. This wasn't someone a tenderfoot merchant was supposed to be saying hello to. The knights around him looked at me sternly. I sensed they were one step away from drawing their swords. Under their gazes, I greeted the man with a deep bow.

Eventually, after I raised my head again, the margrave spoke to me in the same tone as before. "There's something I wanted to ask you."

"What is it, sir?"

"Have you seen General Troy? He was with me the last time we met. The one with the gorgeous elfin aide—that should jog your memory, eh? In fact, even *her* whereabouts would be helpful."

"Unfortunately, sir, I haven't seen either of them since that day."

"I see..."

"Excuse me for asking, sir, but has something happened?"

"No, nothing you need to worry about. My apologies for stopping you."

Despite his impressive title, the man was the sort to speak frankly around others. He seemed to be in a hurry, and he quickly left down the stairs. His knights followed suit, clattering after him. The two of us remained in the hallway, watching them go. Only when we couldn't hear him or his party anymore did we return to our room.

"That was indeed Margrave Bertrand."

“I guess I met the real one after all.”

“Yes. Of that there can be no doubt. Though he looks several years older than I remember him.”

Peeps brought up the topic as soon as we passed through the door, and we continued talking while we moved into the living room. “I assume he was panicked because he knew about Geschwür.”

“It seems likely he and General Troy did not agree on the matter.”

“Are the margrave and the general on bad terms?”

“The margrave has a general distaste for anyone from the central Empire, not just the general.”

“Then maybe he was left out of the strategy meetings.”

“That is certainly a possibility.”

We arrived in the living room and stood next to the sofas. My mind had shifted from dinner mode into work mode.

“That means Prince Lewis’s informant is probably either General Troy himself or someone related to him, right? I doubt we’ll find him, considering the margrave was searching high and low with no luck.”

“Now that I think about it, he might well be at the garrison.”

“Should we go back and check it again?”

“Perhaps...”

Peeps and I continued exchanging opinions, not arriving at any specific conclusion.

Meanwhile, we noticed a flash of light in the dark outside the window, like a powerful strobe light.

A moment later, we heard an explosion.

“Huh...?”

“That would seem to be offensive magic.”

The stately dog reflexively ran over to the window and looked outside. The way he put up his front paws on the frame to see was the most adorable thing I could imagine.

I followed suit, walking up next to him and looking outside. When I did, I noticed a carriage had been overturned right in front of our inn. We stared down at it from our room on the third floor.

Its roof had been torn away, its wheels and wood broken apart. Fire began to rise from what was left of it. The horse that had been pulling it had fallen limp onto the road. It was like someone had planted a bomb in the cart.

“Would that happen to be Margrave Bertrand’s carriage?”

“It’s definitely gaudy enough—at least, it was.”

Several fallen knights were scattered about. The majority of those still conscious were injured, and even I could see how much pain they were in. The road was relatively busy, and several passersby could be seen running away.

I looked around in the chaos for the margrave, but couldn't spot him from our room.

“Do you mind putting off dinner?” I asked Peeps. “I want to go check on things outside.”

“In that case, I shall come with you.”

“There's no need, I'm just going to take a quick look. And I know it was my own request, but judging by how tense things are down there, you being in that form might draw some unwanted attention.”

“I understand. But remain vigilant.”

“Thanks, Peeps. I will.”

Perhaps it was insensitive of me, considering the circumstances, but I thought I might be able to snag some of the information we were after.



And so this rubbernecker burst out of his guest suite and dashed down to the exploded carriage. While people had mostly withdrawn from the area, I could see some watching from a short distance away. I looked back up at the inn I'd just left; faces were peeking out of the windows, wondering what in the world had just happened.

I ran over to the wreckage and checked inside. When I did, I saw someone moving. They were caught between the cart seat and an armored knight, who was covering them as if to protect them. The knight was already dead, likely killed by the explosion. But whoever he was protecting seemed to be alive; I could make out limbs twitching through the gaps.

A portion of their extremities had been blown off, but the person was still alive.

I quickly cast a healing spell, funneling all the mana I could into it. Eventually, I began to see a change. The person's limbs, which had merely been spasming before, suddenly moved as if by conscious effort, pushing away the body lying on top of them. That gave me a look at the person's face—and it was familiar. Though he was covered in blood, it was definitely Margrave Bertrand.

“Are you all right, my lord?” I asked.

“My elf-loving comrade, was that healing magic yours...?”

“If it still hurts anywhere, please allow me to heal you again, sir.”

“I'm fine. Could you spare that effort on my knights instead?”

“Yes, sir.”

The margrave crawled out of the collapsed carriage onto the road and rose to his feet. As he had said, it seemed he was no longer in critical condition. While he had a lot of dirt on him, I didn't see any wounds beneath it.

“This one's quick efforts saved me, eh?” he said with a sad expression, looking at the dead knight. If he'd been with the margrave in the carriage, they must have been somewhat close.

The back of the knight's armor had melted—he'd clearly been exposed to very high temperatures. Though it was flattened now, I could tell the armor had once looked

splendid. His helmet, as well as the sword at his waist, were of very high quality.

“Excuse my asking, sir, but what was that explosion?” I said.

“Oh, yes. It was a spell, fired at us from outside,” he explained.

As we spoke, I took a step toward the fallen knights. Just then, soldiers on horseback came galloping up; they’d probably caught wind of the explosion. They gathered by the carriage, dismounting and running over once they’d spotted us.

“...Margrave Bertrand, you’re safe!”

“Imperial soldiers? Good timing. Help me clean up this place.”

“No! You must remove yourself from that man at once, my lord!”

“What? Why?”

“Because he is the very one who tried to kill you, Margrave!”

He was referring directly to me—and nobody else. In my initial disbelief, I checked behind me, but nobody was there.

The margrave looked just as surprised as I was. His eyes darted between the two of us.

“...What is the meaning of this?” he demanded.

“Arrest that man!” shouted the head soldier to the others.

They moved immediately, dashing toward me without giving me any time to protest. Then they pinned me down on the road, pushing my head into the stone. My arms were seized from either side, and I was grabbed at the waist, effectively preventing my escape. Instantly, I looked up and locked eyes with Peeps, who was staring out the window at me. I tried to tell him with my gaze not to worry, though I wasn't sure if he understood.

“Wait,” said the margrave, confused. “That man saved my life. Why are you—?”

“It's too dangerous to remain here,” interrupted the soldier loudly. “Please, come with us, sir.”

In the meantime, the other soldiers rolled me up, then clipped a metallic band around my neck. Was this the same item Prince Lewis had used on me? A slave collar?

“Wait!” the margrave shouted. “Are you General Troy's —?”

But before he could finish, his body swayed, and a moment later, he passed out and crumpled to the ground. One of the nearby soldiers just barely caught him on the way down.

“Margrave Bertrand is tired. Bring him to the estate at once.”

I wasn't sure, but I suspected this was sleeping magic. Peeps had introduced it to me once before, and we'd used it on Ms. Futarishizuka when we brought her to this world and she wouldn't calm down.

Ignoring the rest of the fallen knights, the soldiers began to withdraw. Several knights drew their swords, meaning to defend the margrave, but they, too, fell to the ground without opposition a moment later. I guessed they'd been put to sleep with magic as well.

I never once heard an incantation. The leader of these soldiers must be a very skilled magic user.

In the end, the margrave was tragically dragged away. Then the soldiers loaded me onto one of the horses and took me as well.



The soldiers led us to an underground prison facility near the middle of town. My cell had three walls made of stone, with the other side blocked off by iron bars. The room was about six square meters, and I was the only one in it.

Though they'd unrolled me after putting me in the cell, they locked my wrists in chains. The slave collar was still around my neck, though once I was left alone I verified it wasn't actually working.

If I used magic, I could easily break out. The problem was how long the transformation spell would last. Now that I wasn't near Peeps, I ran the risk of my identity being revealed.

But as I was wondering about this, I sensed someone outside the cell. I'd never mistake that silky golden fur.

“Are you all right?”

“Peeps! I'm surprised you knew where I was.”

“I tailed the soldiers who took you.”

“They didn’t see you, right?”

“There are many spells one may use to deceive the eyes of others. Unlike your world, this one does not have mechanisms like infrared or ultrasound with which to detect the unseen. Even an average caster can hide themselves without much trouble.”

“So basically, you’ve got a spell that makes you invisible to everyone else?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said.

There was a change in the dog’s appearance, and he began to disappear and reappear like an LED clicking on and off. I should have expected as much from the Starsage. Eventually, he slipped through the bars and into the cell and put his front paw on my knee—I was sitting cross-legged. Frankly, I was moved. I was over the moon. It really made me realize how starved I was for this kind of interaction.

“There. Your transformation shouldn’t wear off for a while yet.”

“Thank you. I was just beginning to worry about that.”

Peeps had turned this crisis into an opportunity—I could use my position as a prisoner to get information on the Empire’s affairs. Modern Japan had surveillance cameras everywhere, but the guards weren’t even paying attention to this cell. Even if Peeps was with me, he could simply disappear whenever he needed to.

He could even go on an invisible spy mission through the prison. We wouldn't be able to stay for very long considering we were up against a time limit, but we'd probably get way more out of searching this place than just going through town using our inn room as a base. And I was very curious about what they were doing with the margrave, as well as why they'd arrested me.

"What shall we do now?"

"I'd like to get a good handle on this prison, first."

"I see. Then I shall accompany you."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. You've been doing the same for us. And you let yourself be captured for this very reason, yes? Because you doubted we would gain much information of import from simply looking around town."

"Yeah. Sorry for deciding all that on my own, by the way."

"You think in very different ways than I do. But that is why it always feels fresh and novel to me."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Perhaps."

The Lord Starsage was so adorable when he got all coy at climactic moments like this. *Thank you for always watching over me, Peeps.*

With his support, I could freely remove the collar and shackles burdening me and move about the place without

anyone seeing.

And so this prisoner decided to have a little staycation in my cell. I'd be eating stinky food for a while—I already missed our luxurious accommodations at the inn. Still, I couldn't get greedy—not when Count Müller and Prince Adonis were waiting for my report. At worst, I'd have a chance to meet someone important during my trial or execution.

Contrary to our expectations, however, several days passed without anything happening.

“It has been much longer since anyone has come than I would have imagined.”

“Yeah. And it's starting to get a little *too* boring for my liking.”

According to Peeps's explorations outside the cell, we were currently being held in an Imperial military facility. In addition, the fall of the Geschwür garrison had become a topic of conversation among some of the soldiers.

But Peeps hadn't been able to gain any information beyond that.

Unfortunately, it seemed General Troy was not present in the facility, either.

“I have to say, you smell rather bad.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Want to sneak away for a while and wash yourself?”

“No, if we did that, they’d *definitely* get suspicious.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

A guard visited at the same times every day to check up on me, give me food, and take back the tray. But aside from that, nobody ever came to see me.



We didn't have infinite time, so if it looked like we wouldn't be able to get any more information, then I was inclined to go ahead and break out of here. With Peeps's help, I wouldn't even have to bust out of the cell itself; we could escape via teleportation.

Another option—albeit a risky one—was to use transformation magic to disguise ourselves as Imperial soldiers and gain information that way.

Around the time I started considering the idea, we heard loud footsteps echoing through the hall. They got closer and closer until they stopped right in front of my cell.

“My comrade! I apologize for how long it took me to get here.”

“Margrave Bertrand? What are you doing in a place like this, my lord?”

“What else? I'm saving you, of course.”

“I... I don't know what to say, sir.”

“I had planned to come here a little earlier, but I faced some obstacles on the way. I'm embarrassed to admit it took a great amount of time to ensure my *own* safety, despite the fact that we are in *my* domain.”

We had just received a very unexpected visitor.

The margrave took out a key, then put it in the cell lock and turned it. With a *ker-clack*, a section of the iron bars swung inward. At this point, I clearly couldn't stay in the cell, so at the man's urging, I exited into the passage.

He then removed my shackles, as well as the slave collar around my neck. The keys he used for each looked official, meaning he'd probably talked down the organization responsible before coming here. I was *extremely* curious about why we'd been taken away.

“If I may, sir, why do all of this for me?” I asked.

“You saved my life,” he said simply. “So I’m saving yours.”

“I’m honored beyond words to receive such magnanimity, sir.”

“There’s no need to stand on ceremony every time I say something. In any case, let’s get you out of here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Peeps was staying out of sight, but I was sure he was trailing behind us.

I followed the margrave toward the underground prison’s exit. The guard on duty didn’t pounce on me; my savior must have explained things to everyone here already. After a few moments, we left the rows of iron bars behind, coming out into a hall measuring about fifteen square meters. At the other side of it, there was a staircase leading aboveground.

On either side of the stairs stood knights who looked like they belonged to the margrave. I thought I remembered a few of them from when we’d met him at the inn. A soldier at a guard post over to one side of the hall was watching them with a nervous eye.

At the margrave’s appearance, the knights walked toward us. One of them began to speak.

“Margrave Bertrand, welcome ba—”

But just then, every one of the knights fell over, unconscious. They’d swayed as if struck right in the jaw, then collapsed to the ground with a series of thuds. They were out cold—they hadn’t even had time to scream. This seemed awfully similar to what had happened during the explosion incident a few days ago, when the margrave was kidnapped.

Their metal armor slammed into the stone floor, causing a thundering clatter to echo through the prison; with everything made of the same hard material, the sound bounced around unhindered. A moment later, I heard something similar happen at my side.

I turned to look, only to see the soldier at his guard post had lost consciousness as well.

“.....”

The margrave and I stopped walking immediately.

After a second, we heard the click of boots on the floor. A person descended from the middle of the staircase, a blind spot for us. They were fully robed, their hood pulled low over their face.

Upon seeing them, the margrave roared, “Who the hell are you?!”

I took a step in front of him with my barrier spell on standby, meaning to protect him. I was sure the Starsage was right next to me doing the same. That knowledge made it somewhat easier to cope with how scared I was to be in the line of fire.

“It’s wonderful how dutiful you are, but don’t you think you should be more concerned about yourself?”

“Are you one of General Troy’s underlings?!”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.”

A young woman’s voice came from beneath the hood. I could sense a hint of derision in her tone. Actually, I was pretty sure I’d heard her voice before.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” I said, “but would you happen to be General Troy’s aide?”

“Oh? I’m surprised you noticed.”

At that, she took down her hood, revealing her conspicuous blond hair and pointed ears. As for her features, she was just as gorgeous as before—and that went for the rest of her feminine figure, too, visible despite the robe. I couldn’t tell her true age, but she looked to be a young woman around twenty.

In contrast to her previous docile expression, she now wore a smug, condescending grin.

“Elf! Did General Troy command you to do this?” asked the margrave. “Or was it my younger brother?”

“Both, actually,” she replied. “The central Empire doesn’t much care for you.”

“Then this man has nothing to do with it,” he insisted. “At least let him go.”

“Unfortunately, we need him to be the criminal here. My hands are tied.”

I got the distinct feeling I’d been caught up in a squabble between Margrave Bertrand and General Troy. The pieces clicked into place—the margrave had taken so long to get me out of prison because the general had been keeping tabs on him and had chosen this day to set things in motion.

Considering the noble’s precarious position, I guessed his brother had requested the general’s help in order to take over his sibling’s title. What’s more, the elf apparently had a great deal of knowledge about Imperial affairs. I found myself wanting to ask her all my questions.

“My comrade, I apologize. I seem to have dragged you into this.”

“No, sir. Thinking back, I was the one who spoke to you first.”

“So much for these knights—they were supposed to be well trained in magic. We appear to be out of options.”

The margrave was in shock, completely resigned to his fate. The instant disabling of all his knights must have really gotten to him.

So instead, I took over and attempted to prolong the conversation as much as possible. “Excuse me, ma’am, but may I have a word?”

“Oh? Yes, what is it?” she replied in her characteristic elongated, leisurely tones.

“Why was someone such as myself chosen for this, er, role?”

“It could have been anybody. In fact, we were planning to use one of his knights at first.”

“Oh, I see.” That was a simpler reason than I’d been expecting. Essentially, it came down to rotten luck.

But considering Peeps’s and my objective, this wasn’t *all* bad. I continued questioning her, with the intention of bringing as much information as I could back to Count Müller and Prince Adonis. To the elf, it would simply look like I was weak and cornered, trying to delay my death as long as possible.

“But are you sure it was wise to bother with someone like me?” I asked.

“Whatever might you mean by that?”

“I’ve heard rumors among the soldiers that the border has been busy lately.”

“Well, I hardly think you need to worry about something like that. If you wanted to buy time, you might have picked a more tasteful topic—especially after you were so desperate to save me back at the inn.”

“That’s exactly why I’m deathly curious about your relationship with the general.”

She gave a low giggle. “We’re business partners. He’s not my type.”

“I see.”

“Now, then. Shall we bring this to an end?”

She directed a sweet, gentle smile at me. The moment I saw it, I felt my heart skip a beat.

Oh no. What do I do? For some reason, she’d started to seem *very* charming.

“You will kill Margrave Bertrand yourself,” said the elf. “I know you can use magic.”

I’d expected the elf to do it, then place the blame firmly at my feet. But she’d come right out and asked me to murder the guy. Normally, I would have refused—but her suggestion seemed especially alluring.

This wasn’t good. I *really* wanted to kill the margrave now. My head was full of the elf—she was all I could think of. I followed her instructions and took a step forward.

“*Step back.*”

And then I heard Peeps’s voice interject.

I couldn’t ignore an order from the Starsage. I wasn’t really sure why, but I figured it would be fine to take a *little* step back, right? The elf still dominated my mind, but the adorable Java sparrow had managed to wriggle into a tiny sliver of it.

A moment later, the stately dog appeared before us. He wasted no time; a magic circle appeared in front of his nose, and his spell fired.

“Ah...!”

A beam of light, glittering in a rainbow of colors, hurtled toward the elf. She raised her arms to block it. Magic appeared—a barrier—which caught the spell, and all the ones fired in rapid succession after it. I heard a sort of cracking noise as the onslaught continued, but she didn't seem the least bit affected.

The assault lasted only a few seconds. Once the elf realized Peeps was finished, she said, “I *thought* there was something in here. But why is it so *cute*?”

The golden retriever had a luscious coat and the gentlest eyes. And the woman had understood the full extent of his adorableness with but a single glance—her eye for beauty was excellent, indeed. At the same time, I was shocked. *She knew he was here all along?*

According to Peeps, such a feat would have been impossible for any ordinary magician. That meant she was extraordinary—and I was all the more convinced by how she'd withstood his attack magic.

At the same time, the overwhelming lust I'd felt toward her disappeared. That had been the Charm spell just now, hadn't it? I remembered the one-sided feelings that had welled up within me that time with Prince Lewis. Two incidents, now—and they'd made it abundantly clear how dangerous a spell it was.

“.....”

Oh, I thought. Peeps's tail is slapping against the floor. That was the signal we'd agreed on—the one that meant Use all the attack magic you have, no questions asked.

I was hesitant, but this instruction *was* coming from the Starsage, so I obeyed it without argument. Naturally, I chose the laser spell—the one ranked above the advanced category. Peeps and I had agreed on that beforehand, too.

With healing magic so widespread in the otherworld, she probably wouldn't die even if she lost a leg or two. Using that as my mental justification, I chanted the spell from memory and aimed one hand at the elf. Narrowing the output as much as I possibly could, I pointed my palm below her shins and released the spell. Just like before, she used a barrier spell to try to block it.

In the end, my magic pierced her defenses and struck her directly. The spell lasted a matter of moments. The flash of light lanced toward her, and everything below the elf's knees disintegrated.

As the light faded, the rest of her body fell to the ground.

“Aaaggghhh!”

After a short delay, I heard her scream.

Blood spurted from her wounds and covered the stone flooring in scarlet. It looked agonizing, and I almost averted my eyes. The knowledge that I'd caused this put a really awful taste in my mouth, too. But I kept my gaze on her, knowing I still couldn't let my guard down.

But then there was a change in her body: It suddenly gave off an intense, unsettling flash of light, like an incandescent bulb receiving a nonstandard voltage. I instantly closed my eyes, unable to look directly at her.

Her body shone for a few seconds. When I sensed the light fading through my eyelids, I opened my eyes again.

When I did, I saw the elf there, just like before. She seemed to have used healing magic—everything from her knees down, on both sides, had grown back after having disappeared. The hem of her robe was still gone, and the splattered bloodstains remained. But you could now see her fair white feet.

The more startling change, however, was what had happened to the rest of her body. For some reason, she'd shrunk. Just a moment ago, she'd been about the same height as me. Now, she was as short as Ms. Futarishizuka. The rest of her body had changed as well. Her large breasts had been clear even with her robe on, but now it was like they'd vanished entirely. Her facial features, too, appeared quite a bit younger than they had before. She was still pretty, but in a much more childlike way.

“W-wait, I recognize you!” the margrave exclaimed upon seeing her new form. “You’re one of the great war criminals—Maisie, the high elf!”

His eyes seemed to glitter as he looked at her.

I'd heard the term “great war criminal” before. It had been during Peeps's and my visit to the border after hearing Count Müller had died in battle. Right after Peeps obliterated the Ohgen Empire's forces, someone with purple skin had attacked him, and he'd given that figure the same title. According to him, there were seven of them—and they were all extremely powerful.

“Ah. So she's been altering her appearance via magic,” said Peeps as though all the pieces had suddenly fit together

in his mind.

Apparently, she'd been disguising herself with transformation magic the same way we had. It wasn't as extreme a change, of course. After seeing a Java sparrow turn into a golden retriever, this metamorphosis was a little lacking in thrill—boring, even. At least I'd had my skin and hair colors changed.

“You disguised your body well, but now I see. No wonder I felt as though I remembered your face.”

“Ugh...” The elf got off the floor and rose to her feet as we watched.

Though my spell had made her robe shorter, it now reached all the way down to her feet. The waist and sleeves had become baggy; if she put down her arms, you probably wouldn't be able to see her hands. Her shoes had disintegrated as well, so she was barefoot.

She turned to face us, speaking leisurely. “It's a very advanced spell, you know? Even altering one's build is a monumental task.”

Despite the physical differences, her tone was the same. *Now that's one tough little girl*, I thought. *Maybe her real age is totally different from her appearance, like with Ms. Futarishizuka.*

“Miss Maisie,” I said, “excuse my rudeness, but is that your true form?”

“Be silent, you. High elves take a long time to mature. Centuries, in fact.”

“I’ve heard that sometimes they don’t mature as humans do at all.”

“Yes, well! There are individual differences, okay?! Don’t try to paint us all with the same brush.”

“.....”

The immediacy of her objection betrayed a shadow of her true self. Apparently, she *was* much older than she looked—and she seemed to have a complex about it, too.

“In any case, who are you two, and where in the world are you from?” she asked us.

“My name is Pe—Pythagoras.”

“...I’ve never heard of you.”

The stately dog had chosen to keep the fake name I’d given him during our walk. Had he taken a liking to it?

As I watched him from behind, I noticed something—his fluffy tail once again started smacking against the floor. A second shot? In this situation? The Starsage was a total fiend. It did seem in character, however, for him to suggest such a thing. I couldn’t bring myself to object, so I lifted my arm once more.

“Tch...”

As I began to chant the spell, the elf moved, lunging backward across the floor. Then a magic circle appeared at her feet.

“Two against one? How rude! I’ll be taking my leave.”

The circle had a familiar design—was that teleportation magic?

I only had a moment to think about it. As I'd expected, she immediately vanished. She hadn't eschewed the incantation altogether, but she'd shortened it quite a bit. Teleportation was one of those crazy spells above the advanced level. The fact that she'd abbreviated a chant like that implied she was quite a skilled magician.

"It looks like we've driven her off."

There was a lot I wanted to ask Peeps, but we were right in front of Margrave Bertrand, so I had to watch what I said. We needed to get him somewhere safe first—then Peeps and I could have a little private time elsewhere.

Our encounter with the elf had given us a lot of useful information.

"How...how did you drive off a great war criminal alone...?"

"My lord, are you hurt anywhere?"

"Comrade—just who *are* you?"

I could make out caution in the man's face as he watched us. He was probably suspicious, considering we'd been sitting quietly in a prison cell for the last few days. I wasn't sure how much further I could push the lie about being a Lungian merchant.

But for now, I had to stick to my guns. "Please let us get you somewhere safe, sir," I told him.

“Will you not answer my question?”

“I promise you, sir, that I mean you no harm.”

“...All right.”

He agreed surprisingly easily. It felt like I was abusing my power to get my way, and I didn't like how it felt.

Now that we'd escaped the prison, we headed for the margrave's villa in the town of Erbrechen. Fortunately, it was only about an hour away by foot. It would have taken just a few minutes with flight magic.

There, we parted ways with the margrave. He wanted to welcome me into his home, but I politely refused, and we left town. Now that we knew the identity of that elf, we had plenty to look into.



After bidding farewell to the margrave, we vacated our lodgings in Erbrechen and headed back to the garrison using teleportation magic. We arrived on a grassy plain a little ways away from the site.

From there, we could see the garrison in the distance. We dispelled our transformations, and after changing back into my suit, I buried the otherworld clothes I'd been using. I felt bad for wasting them, but it was better than walking around with evidence of my transformation.

“So, Peeps,” I said. “About the general's elfin aide...”

“The woman? What about her?”

“Is Charm a common spell here?”

“The spell itself isn’t so unique. Many are able to use it. But I know what you’re thinking, and I agree —she might well have been the magician working with Lewis before.”

“Personally, I’m also suspicious of that ultra-talented magician manipulating the golems. The one who helped build the fortress.”

“The possibility is certainly there.”

The development of Baron Sasaki’s lands had been going awfully smoothly. If someone so crucial to that success had been an acquaintance of Prince Lewis with ties to the Ohgen Empire, everything would make sense. After all, they’d soon be seizing the place and using it for their own ends.

Having pumped so much capital into it, I must have seemed like a total sucker. I wondered if that was why the prince had made up a reason to come observe the site firsthand.

“What kind of people are these great war criminals anyway?” I wondered aloud.

“Society treats them as powerful nuisances,” explained Peeps. “They work individually, wielding their excessive might in public. To the people, they are akin to natural disasters. They’ve caused a lot of trouble in the world in the past; this is only the latest instance.”

“That’s definitely the impression I got from that purple-skinned person you fought before. And that would explain why everyone was so willing to accept the huge hole in the plains and all the vanished soldiers.”

Now I understood the basis for their ostentatious title of “great war criminal.” They must have caused a whole lot of problems in the past.

“Each of them operates under their own set of creeds and motivations. Some brandish their powers indiscriminately, while others work for more noble causes. Still, I hadn’t expected that elf to be working so high up in the Empire.”

“Wasn’t that purple-skinned person with the Imperial soldiers, too?”

“That one was, in many senses, a haphazard sort. I wasn’t surprised.”

According to the explanation Count Müller had given me, there were seven great war criminals in all. We now knew two of them were working for the Empire. “You just told me how *society* views these war criminals. Does that mean you see them differently, Peeps?”

“You’re very sharp about the strangest things.”

“Am I?”

“I have my own thoughts on the matter, but I’m not certain of anything.”

“Then I guess I’ll refrain from asking.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s surprising how many things the phrase ‘Ignorance is bliss’ can apply to.”

“You’re not wrong.”

Right now, I had to focus on Prince Lewis deploying troops against the Ohgen Empire. The first thing on our list was to find out the nature of his relationship with the enemy. The count's and Prince Adonis's future actions would change significantly depending on our findings, and as someone in Prince Adonis's corner, this was very much my business.

“Shall we go see Lewis?”

“Yes, let's.”

With the bird on my shoulder's agreement, we headed for the garrison, using teleportation magic to warp right onto the grounds.

The first thing we noticed was how few soldiers were about. Compared to our last visit, the population had taken a nosedive. Most of the people we saw were wounded soldiers, and the rest were noncombat personnel—such as merchants and young-looking women who were probably prostitutes.

“It would seem Lewis has already departed.”

“He told me he wouldn't be marching back to Herz in triumph, though.”

“Then there is only one place he could be headed.”

The sparrow's gaze seemed to pass through the outer wall of the garrison, toward the Ohgen Empire. Apparently, the prince and his army had already set out.

In which case, we couldn't afford to waste time. “Peeps, can you get us back to the count?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

At this rate, Prince Lewis would be a shoo-in for the throne. Whatever we decided to do from here, we'd need the help of his competitor—Prince Adonis.

With great haste, we left the garrison and headed to Baron Sasaki's domain.



Once at our destination, we first paid a visit to Mr. French. I asked after the location of the golem user and requested a meeting with them. That was how we discovered they were missing. Checking with all the relevant parties, it came to light that they had been absent from the site for the past few days.

I was now pretty convinced the elf had been the amazing golem handler all along—which meant she was almost certainly working with Prince Lewis.

“Sorry, sir,” said Mr. French, looking guilty. Maybe my eagerness had intimidated him. “If I see them, I'll make sure to say something.”

“Don't worry about it. I actually have a replacement in mind.”

As I made various excuses to him, we began to walk toward the fortress.

Before we parted, he informed me that Count Müller and Prince Adonis were inside, and I made my way over. As I was asking the knight at the front gate their exact whereabouts, they came out to meet me in person.

At their prompting, we then moved to the fortress's reception room. As soon as we'd exchanged greetings, we took our seats on the sofas. Count Müller and I settled on one side, with Prince Adonis across from us. Peeps was on the low table.

I explained the many suspicious circumstances to them, though it was all merely speculation at this point: that Prince Lewis's helper had been General Troy's aide, and that she'd been involved in the fortress's construction as well.

"I see," mused the prince. "Then there is a high probability my brother is working with the Empire..."

"You have my condolences, sir."

Prince Adonis nodded to me with a pained expression. He'd probably anticipated this but had tried his best not to think about it.

I certainly understood the feeling. The older I got, the more my triglyceride and cholesterol levels at medical checkups and examinations started to bother me. I tried not to think about them, preferring to keep eating things like ramen and chicken *karaage*.

"I'm sorry to deliver yet more bad news, sir," I continued, "but Prince Lewis has already departed from the Geschwür garrison. If his own words are to be believed, he plans to continue his invasion. I expect he will attack the town of Erbrechen next—and that he'll have similar results."

"But in that case, Sasaki, won't fighting near the town be inevitable?" said the count in response to my rapid-fire reports. This must all have been pretty shocking news to

him. If I wasn't with the Starsage, he may not have even believed me.

“Margrave Bertrand, the one in charge of Erbrechen, is on bad terms with General Troy, who the central Empire has ordered to lead the troops,” I explained. “I’ve also heard rumors about the margrave’s strained relationship with his younger brother. I would think this situation is beneficial for them as well.”

“I can’t believe you obtained so much information...,” said Count Müller, deeply impressed.

“You’ve done very well in your investigation—both of you,” added the prince.

It was easy to imagine what would happen next. Prince Lewis’s troops would clash with Margrave Bertrand’s soldiers. The margrave would struggle valiantly but ultimately die in battle, with his brother succeeding his position. Prince Lewis would nominally occupy Erbrechen, and Troy would “reluctantly” allow it.

If Prince Lewis betrayed them and used Herzian troops to take Erbrechen in earnest, the Empire had the elfin great war criminal on their side—she could easily turn the tide. And the prince, having worked with her, would understand how incredible she was.

When I thought about it like that, their plans seemed very thorough.

At the same time, I was curious about the elf’s place in everything. She was one of the most important pieces of the plan. She was a truly hard worker, considering she’d falsified her identity everywhere she went and carried out several

jobs at once. I felt a little bad for her, even though she was with the Empire. For a moment, I thought of a certain colleague with an energetic smile and an obsession with overtime pay.

“*What shall we do, Adonis?*” asked Peeps after we finished delivering our report and silence filled the room. The count and I had both hesitated to ask this of the prince, but the bird did so without a second thought. *He’s so reliable*, I thought.

“.....”

Prince Adonis, however, was now in a difficult position. He remained silent and bowed his head, clearly upset.

As Lewis’s competitor, he was the only one who could make this decision. That was why the Starsage had asked him. The prince understood, doubtless the very reason he was so troubled.

“Sir, how about we take a short rest?” suggested Count Müller thoughtfully.

But our leader boldly lifted his head and said, “If my elder brother is straying from the correct path, then it is my duty as his younger brother to put him right.”

The melancholy was totally gone from his expression, replaced by a sharp determination. The prince was already handsome, but this look made him appear even more radiant. He was the ultimate pretty boy—and he certainly had my stamp of approval as a genuine prince. Even as another man, I felt a sense of reverence gazing upon his noble visage.

In his youthful countenance—he was now in his midteens—I sensed a tough spirit, yearning to take flight as an adult. When I was his age, what sort of problems had I faced? What sort of expressions had I made? When I considered this, I couldn't help but respect him.

I looked at the prince again and felt it keenly—this was a man trying to carry the weight of a nation.

“Count Müller,” Adonis continued, “I'd like to pursue my brother immediately, if possible.”

“I understand completely, sir. I will prepare the troops at once,” replied the count with a nod before hurrying out of the reception room.

As I watched him go, I suddenly remembered something. At the Geschwür garrison, Prince Lewis had given me a message to pass on to Prince Adonis. Now that I reconsidered its contents—a request for his brother to wait in the royal capital for good news—it struck me that he might have feared the younger prince's interference.

Faced with the decision of whether to tell him, I decided to keep it to myself for now. Instead, I followed the count's lead and volunteered my own assistance.

“Sir, if there is anything I can help with, please, don't hesitate.”

“In for a pound,” agreed Peeps. *“If it is within my power, you need only say the word.”*

“You two just got back from the Ohgen Empire, correct? I'd like you to rest up while the count is making his

preparations. If you're up for it, I want you to accompany me to Erbrechen."

"Understood, sir."

"Then I shall serve as your guide."

Prince Adonis's intentions were clear, and our plans had been set.

And so the battle over who would accede to the royal throne of Herz was finally reaching its climax.



Soon, Prince Adonis, along with the rest of our group, set off from my barony toward Erbrechen.

On the way, we stopped at Geschwür. As previously confirmed, the place held no trace of Prince Lewis or any soldiers under his command. The scene awaiting us was the same as the last time we'd visited—one of inactivity and few people. Our forces were overwhelming in comparison, so despite the hostility between our factions, no disputes broke out, and everyone stayed the night at the garrison. We set off for Erbrechen again the following day.

A few days later, our destination was finally within sight.

"We've gotten quite close," remarked the prince. "But I see no signs of movement."

"I cannot imagine that the Ohgen Empire's forces would allow us this close to the town," added the count.

“Then we should assume that my brother has indeed allied himself with the Empire and taken command of the area.”

“Either way, our opponents must believe beyond a doubt that they hold the advantage over our troops.”

Prince Adonis and Count Müller were exchanging words on horseback. It was truly a sight to behold—the former rode atop an immaculate white horse, just like a fairy-tale prince.

I, meanwhile, was walking alongside them. The illustrious Baron Sasaki, you see, did not know how to ride. Before leaving the fortress, they had recommended a grand-looking steed to me. Getting on and off presented no issue, considering I could use flight magic. But no sooner had I begun the challenge of actually riding, than the aggravated horse flung me right off its back. I’d given up on the idea after that. It was just too big an obstacle for a modern man with no riding experience. Ever since, I’d been sitting in a carriage or using flight magic.

I made up my mind—after this whole mess was behind us, I’d set aside some time to practice horseback riding. Magic practice was important, but it seemed I had plenty of other things to learn as well.

“Whatever we do, I must first speak with my brother,” said the prince.

“Understood, sir. Let us press on.”

At Prince Adonis’s instruction, we set off once again, heading toward the town. Behind us were his and the count’s combined forces, walking in ranks. I hadn’t actually counted, but from what I’d heard, they numbered several thousand.

However, even that was apparently less than the troops Prince Lewis had under his command.

In the worst-case scenario, this mysterious otherworlder and his distinguished Java sparrow would have to join the fray. I'd discussed our backup plan with Peeps beforehand.

Eventually, Adonis's forces arrived at the town's entrance. There we found Prince Lewis himself—he was right at the front gates, on his horse, protected by several knights. He must have come out after learning of our approach. Many other soldiers were standing guard near the entrance, all of them flying the Herzian flag.

It hadn't been long since Prince Lewis deployed his soldiers; we were all shocked at how quickly they'd occupied the town. While we could see damage to the outer walls near the entrance as well as other signs of battle, there was no evidence a large number of soldiers had participated.

There hadn't been any along the way, either. If the fighting had involved thousands or tens of thousands of soldiers, the dead would have been all over. Their absence meant that the two armies couldn't have clashed head-on.

“Adonis!” exclaimed the other prince. “I never expected you to come here.”

“There is something I very much need to ask you, my brother.”

“Something that demanded you travel into enemy territory?”

“Yes.”

Prince Adonis's expression was tense as he faced his elder brother. Prince Lewis, on the other hand, replied with his usual composure. Even from atop his horse, his entire body gave off an aura of cynicism—or perhaps he was simply radiating the magnificence of a true ruler.

After a few moments, Prince Lewis turned to face me. “Baron, did you pass on my message to my brother?”

“Prince Adonis's feelings for his family are sincere, sir,” I replied.

“As are mine,” he countered, putting on a show of looking troubled. “That is why I would have preferred my precious brother stay somewhere safe for now.”

His precious brother spoke next, following up on my reply. “Is it true?” he asked. “Have you really captured this settlement in such a short time?”

“Does it please you to bear witness to your brother's brilliant exploits?”

“If it is true, I would be more than pleased. I would be the first to place the crown upon your head.”

“If you told me that my victories led you to panic, and you were here to steal what I have gained, I would find it easier to believe you.”

“I assure you, not a hair on my head wishes for such a thing.”

I'm terribly sorry, Your Highnesses. Baron Sasaki was thinking just that. He even discussed it with the Starsage.

“I will be straight with you,” said Prince Adonis. “Is it true you have taken the Ohgen Empire’s side?”

“What? Such a deplorable rumor. Who was it that whispered such lies into your ears?” replied Prince Lewis, his gaze returning to me. *He definitely knows*, I thought.

“We saw no signs of any battle with Imperial troops on the way here, sir,” I pointed out.

“Nor did you at the Geschwür garrison. The Empire’s previous losses were too great even for a powerful nation, and they couldn’t afford to replenish their troops on the border. It was after acquiring this information that I decided to mobilize our troops.”

“Did you meet no resistance from Margrave Bertrand’s personal forces?” the other prince followed up.

“Oh? You’ve done your research, haven’t you?” His elder brother looked at him, seeming impressed. Then, for a third time, he looked over to me. “I don’t suppose the good baron here put that idea into your head as well, hmm?”

I sucked in a breath. I was beginning to worry I was straining their sibling relationship even further. Was there a calmer, more peaceful way I could have conveyed the information? But that might well have put Herz’s future in danger.

Prince Lewis, having turned back to face his brother, launched into an explanation. “We did skirmish with those holed up in town. But the enemy was likely informed by lookouts that your forces had departed from the garrison for Erbrechen as well. The soldiers were mostly gone by the

time we arrived. In that sense, half the victory should go to you, Adonis.”

“Are you sure you want to admit all that?” asked the younger prince.

“Well, of course! We’re brothers, are we not? Linked by blood. I want you to take word of these historical achievements back to our father without further delay. I have more tasks ahead of me—I must make these lands the foundation of a new domain for the Kingdom of Herz.”

“.....”

There were no contradictions in what Prince Lewis was saying. Prince Adonis seemed to have lost much of his momentum as well. Knowing what I did of our faction’s understanding, sensible leader, I realized that should he return to the capital, it would mean certain defeat in the battle for the throne. Prince Lewis’s ascension would become inevitable. Five years would never be enough to surpass what Lewis had just achieved.

“I believe our conversation is at an end,” said the older prince.

“W-wait!” exclaimed Adonis.

“Get back to the capital, Adonis. There is no place for you here.”

“Are you saying there is a place for me at the capital?!”

“Yes, I am.”

Without leaving any room for argument, Prince Lewis gave his horse's reins a tug. The horse deftly turned around and made its way into town—the kind of scene you came across pretty often in movies. But for someone who had been thrown off his horse after only a few steps, it was almost surreal. *How did he get his horse to do that?* I wondered. I was dying to find out.

The knights nearby followed suit, turning to go with Prince Lewis. Only the rank-and-file soldiers remained to keep an eye on us. They would probably stay on high alert until we left town.

Eventually, once Prince Lewis was completely out of sight, Adonis spoke. “Count, Baron, I am sorry. I'd like to withdraw our forces.”

“Are you certain, sir?” asked the count without a moment's delay. Peeps and I watched them in silence.

“I am terribly sorry for compelling you two to indulge my selfish request.”

“Sir, there is nowhere else we'd rather be,” replied the count. “But will this decision dispel your doubts?”

“I'd like to get away from here first, in any case. Count, would you mind making preparations to withdraw?”

“At once, sir.” The count wasn't about to object to a direct order from his leader.

The Starsage quietly watched their exchange. As an outsider, I didn't think it was my place to butt in, either.

Our forces had been waiting in ranks ever since we arrived, so it was a simple matter to have them perform an about-face and set back off in the other direction. Listening closely, I could make out a few complaints among the soldiers. Everyone had come here fully prepared for something to happen.



A full day had passed since Prince Adonis's forces began their withdrawal from Erbrechen. Not a single soldier had entered the town, and now they were heading straight back to the Geschwür garrison along the same route. Unlike the outward journey, which had seen the soldiers worked up and ready for battle, the return trip was quiet, and weapons were sheathed. The ranks advanced over the plains in solemnity.

All except for their leader, Prince Adonis.

“Are you sure this is wise, sir?” I asked.

“Baron Sasaki, I apologize again for always putting you through such trouble.”

“No, sir, I don't mind at all. It's just...”

“I simply must hear my brother's true intentions from his own lips.”

“Yes, sir.”

Currently, Peeps, Prince Adonis, and I were all in Erbrechen. Count Müller had taken over the forces for their homeward march toward the garrison. The prince, meanwhile, had slipped away, and at his insistence, we'd turned back toward the town occupied by his brother.

We had explained away his absence by claiming that he had collapsed after so many trips back and forth—and was now confined to his carriage. The count was the only other person who knew the truth. As it happened, we'd planned a little undercover infiltration, one that would've been impossible without the ability to teleport.

The count had naturally been fully against this course of action. But we managed to secure his approval by assuring him that the Starsage would accompany us.

To Prince Lewis, it would appear that we had all meekly returned to the capital.

“Sir, I'd like to use this inn as our base of operations for the time being.”

“I understand.”

This time, with the prince accompanying us, we couldn't simply walk in through the front gates. Instead, we made use of Peeps's teleportation magic to sneak in. Peeps and I slipped in first. Using the transformation spell, we made a reservation at the inn we'd be making our base of operations. After that, we warped the prince directly into our room.

The inn we'd chosen was average, neither expensive nor cheap. After getting settled, we procured a set of clothes and other necessities in town to use for the prince's disguise. Then we spent the rest of the day perfecting his disguise and preparing for our mission.

The following day, we made our move.

“Our first course of action must be to ascertain Lewis’s location.”

“I bet he’s in the facility where we were held last time.”

“That seems likely.”

“Baron Sasaki, Lord Starsage, you were...being held somewhere?”

“Pay it no mind, sir. More importantly, we need to get you familiar with the town’s layout.”

“Ah yes. Thank you.”

We departed from our lodgings and took a look around Erbrechen. Unlike last time, we stayed in our true forms, save for our initial entrance into town. Peeps and I aside, Prince Adonis was unlikely to be able to withstand the spell. Instead, we wore robes and hoods to keep ourselves hidden.

In the end, though, we weren’t able to locate Prince Lewis. The main reason was the omnipresence of Herzian soldiers on the streets. The security around military facilities was especially tight; naturally, we’d never be able to get close in our suspicious-looking robes. Shelving our search for the prince, we took the opportunity to observe the town under Herzian control.

Citizens of the Empire still lived here as before. It appeared that they didn’t know what was going on, either; they all looked terrified of the Herzian soldiers. I spotted a lot of stores and restaurants that had temporarily closed up shop. The streets were emptier, too.

That afternoon, as we ate lunch, we heard quite a few people voicing their unease at the Imperial forces' withdrawal. As far as we could glean, there had been no plundering of the townspeople. Still, it seemed nobody from above had notified them about what would happen to the town. And with that, our second day came to a close.

On the third day, we decided to entrust the search for Prince Lewis entirely to Peeps. He'd made the suggestion himself. As a Java sparrow, he was able to fly around and conduct the investigation much more efficiently and safely.

"I'll be on my way, then."

"Sorry for asking so much of you, Peeps."

"It is nothing. This was my own idea, after all."

"Lord Starsage, I apologize for bringing you along on such a selfish mission."

"This is yet another of your duties as a prince. Have more confidence, Adonis."

The sparrow took off from the window of our room, leaving the prince and me behind to await his return.

I hadn't often been alone with Prince Adonis. Peeps had always been the one to figure out topics of conversation, and without him, I suspected things would be a little awkward as we passed the time until lunch. Once Peeps returned, we would spend the afternoon reformulating our plans.

But all that quickly fell apart; it didn't take Peeps more than a few minutes to return to the room.

“Peeps? Did you forget something?” I asked.

“Herzian and Imperial troops are clashing near the town’s entrance.”

“What?!” I exclaimed, shocked at this sudden announcement. Prince Adonis, who was right next to me, looked visibly disturbed as well.

“If you both agree, I’d like to go there and take a look for myself.”

“Then I’ll come along with you, Peeps.”

“Take me as well—”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but would you mind waiting here instead?”

“Why, Baron? If Herzian soldiers are there, my brother must be with them. If I don’t seize this opportunity, when will it come again? Isn’t this why you brought me here?”

“The Ohgen Empire has an extremely powerful magician with them, sir—one of the great war criminals. If combat has already begun, that magician is very likely part of the battle. Even for the Starsage and me, the situation could easily prove difficult.”

“Is...is that true?”

“We fought her when we last infiltrated Erbrechen.”

“I had no idea...”

“Would you allow us to scout out the area first, sir?”

Previously, when Peeps had taken on the purple-skinned person, their battle had lasted for some time. If the elf was just as skilled, it would be very difficult to fight her while protecting the prince. For his safety, we had to avoid such a situation.

“Will you allow it, Adonis?”

“...All right. I will.” The prince nodded reluctantly. The term *great war criminal* seemed to pack quite a punch in the otherworld.

“Then let us be off.”

“Right.”

At Peeps’s urging, we kicked off the windowsill and flew up and out of the building. Using flight magic, we rose high into the air. From there we could see that, just as the bird had said, a great number of soldiers had gathered near one area of the town’s surrounding walls—at the gates facing into the Empire.

We put some distance between us and the commotion, then lowered our altitude. Weaving through the buildings, we moved toward the center of the conflict. On the way, we passed spells and arrows hurtling through the air, as well as soldiers duking it out with their swords. We dealt with all of them using barrier magic as we flew.

Eventually, we arrived at a large stone-paved square just inside the gates. There, we saw two figures facing each other, surrounded by troops from both armies.

It was Prince Lewis and General Troy.

“Have you gone mad, Prince Lewis?” demanded the general. “I do not recall this being a part of the plan.”

“Of course you don’t,” said the prince. “I never told anyone about it.”

“You think you can get away with betraying the Empire like this?”

“Betray? What are you talking about? I am the prince of an enemy nation, remember?”

“There’s still time. Withdraw your troops at once.”

We watched them from the rooftop of a high building facing the square. The two groups were staring one another down, with their respective leaders in the middle. A little farther out, you could see fighting already starting. But most of the Imperial soldiers were outside the walls, watching what was happening inside.

“Peeps, how skilled is Prince Lewis in swordplay and magic?”

“He is a capable magic user, but his physical abilities aren’t that high.”

Then he was just as feeble as he appeared. I felt bad thinking it, but he looked even weaker than Prince Adonis.

“What if I said I didn’t want to?” replied Lewis.

“Then I will be forced to dispose of you for betraying the Empire,” the general repeated.

“Do you have the ability to do so, General Troy?”

“I should remind you that I earned my current position with my own blood, sweat, and tears.”

“Oh?”

“Are you sure that body of yours will even last until the end of the fight?”

As we watched, General Troy readied his longsword in both hands and began to charge. Prince Lewis remained standing upright and thrust one hand in front of him. The general’s blade came down, aimed at the prince’s neck.

However, something unseen sprang from the prince’s hand and blocked the strike. Apparently, he could use barrier magic. Now I knew why the Starsage said he was a capable magician.

The general swung several more times, with the prince easily deflecting each strike. This went on for a short while until, suddenly, a crimson glow appeared around the general’s longsword.

He struck again—and this time he shattered the prince’s barrier.

Lewis jumped back in panic as the sword grazed his cheek.

“Peeps—,” I began, turning toward the bird, unable to continue watching.

But just then, a voice rang out across the battlefield.

“Allow me to assist you, Brother!”

Someone burst through a group of Herzian soldiers—it was Prince Adonis. Evidently, he'd come running from the inn, unable to hold back.

He was covered from head to toe in a robe, but his hood was off, revealing his face. His silver hair—the same color as Lewis's—gave him away, even from a distance. He gripped a sword in his hand, its tip pointed straight at General Troy.

The general let out a grunt as he blocked the newcomer's downswing.

Not a moment later, Prince Lewis's arm moved. “General Troy, you have lost.”

“W-wait. Prince Lewis, if you do this, you'll—”

A lightning spell emerged from the prince's hand.

With a shrill crackle, the general went still. Eventually, his sword fell from his hands, and he collapsed. After a few moments, it was clear he wasn't getting back up. As soon as he fell, his allies began to cast healing magic, but it changed nothing.

Seeing this, Prince Lewis turned back to his forces and declared, “We have slain the Empire's great General Troy! We are victorious!”

At that, the Herzian soldiers began to clap and cheer in excitement. The Imperial troops, in contrast, began a slow retreat away from their reinvigorated enemies.

Prince Adonis sheathed his sword, then ran over to Prince Lewis. “Brother! Were you not allied with the Ohgen Empire?”

“Adonis, return to the capital right away.”

“H-how can you ask that of me now?” exclaimed Adonis.

“I do not have much time left,” Lewis said firmly.

Taken aback by the power in his brother’s words, Adonis fell silent.

A moment later, something happened to the elder prince. His body began to change.

“Agh...”

His back seemed to pulsate, and then his clothes ripped open as a strange mass of flesh burst out. It was gruesome, and it reminded me of Abaddon’s combat form inside the isolated spaces.

“Brother! That... Isn’t that a putrefying curse?!”

“Adonis, listen well to what I’m about to say.”

Lewis had always looked at others with derision. But now, as he spoke to Adonis, his face was dead serious.

“The enemy has infiltrated deep within our nation,” he said. “Go back to the capital now and tell Father of my betrayal and defeat here. Then assume the royal crown immediately—and rid our kingdom of the evil and corruption lurking in its shadows.”

“But you haven’t betrayed our kingdom at all!”

“Quiet. Let me speak!”

Adonis sucked in a breath.

There was an uncharacteristic desperation to the way Prince Lewis spoke. It was the first time I'd ever heard him talk like this.

“The nobles who support me are too far gone. You may cut them all out if you wish.”

“I could never! This is insane, Brother!”

“There are many among your own supporters who I suspect. But you may trust Baron Sasaki and Count Müller. And come to think of it, a certain oddball switched from my faction to yours soon after father's decree. I believe he may be trustworthy, too. But with all the others—be wary.”

“.....”

Peeps and I watched from the rooftop as the princes exchanged words in the center of the square. As we looked on, the Starsage said, *“That is the same spell I cast on that girl back in your world.”*

That girl? I thought. *Oh, he means Ms. Futarishizuka.* Peeps had engraved a curse on the back of her hand. If she ever became hostile toward us, he had said her body would warp into a horrid lump of flesh, and she would lose everything but her ability to think. This was very different from Abaddon's fleshy form, in which he could fly, jump, speak, and move around with all the aggression he wished. The spell was both more grotesque and more unbearable than I had imagined, and now that I'd seen it, I couldn't help turning to Peeps.

“Peeps, uh...”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Only the caster can stop the progression of the curse once triggered.”

“.....”

The bird looked down as he spoke, sadder than I’d ever seen him. Birds’ faces weren’t very expressive, so objectively, he didn’t look any different. But he moved around much less than a normal Java sparrow would, so even casual motions or changes to the angle of his head expressed multitudes.

“I-is this why you shut yourself away in the eastern tower for so long?” asked Prince Adonis.

“Never mind that. I only did what I could.”

“But that means I’ve misunderstood you this whole time...!”

I’d heard Prince Lewis had been shunned as a child. Perhaps the reason for that, too, was his relationship with the Ohgen Empire. He was biding his time, pretending to be incompetent so that the Empire couldn’t take advantage of him. And then he’d wound up in this competition for the throne with his brother... It all made sense, watching and listening to Lewis now.

How smart *was* this man?

He’d been fighting the Ohgen Empire all alone since he was a child.

“Adonis, now it’s your turn to do what *you* can.”

“Don’t give up! Please! I haven’t spent nearly enough time by your side!” pleaded Adonis, looking like he was about to

burst into tears.

In contrast, Lewis's voice was matter-of-fact as he continued. "And beware the Republic of Lunge."

"Why...?"

"And one more thing: I've always found the term *great war criminal* rather suspi—ah, aghhh..."

The curse plaguing Prince Lewis's body was spreading by the moment, even as he spoke. It had started on his back, then made its way around to his sides, and now it was affecting his arms and legs, too. His clothes tore and split, revealing the skin swelling within.

It was awful. Inhuman.



As the seconds passed, it began to rot away those parts of his body still unaffected, stealing away his human form.

Many of the soldiers—from both nations—looked terrified.

“Brother! Y-you’ll be fine. You are still beautiful!”

“You always have been terrible at flattery, Adonis.”

“Ah...”

“You’ll need to do better if you’re to be our next king.”

“I... I’ll do my best. I’ll devote everything to it! So please, Brother, I... I...!”

“Ah... I feel the end coming on.”

“Please! Don’t talk like that!”

“Adonis, I entrust our homeland to you... My...beloved brother...”

The metamorphosis destroying Prince Lewis’s body finally enveloped his head. His handsome features tore apart, swelling into another bulging mass of flesh. Not even a millimeter remained of his former self. His allies had been using healing spells over and over since the change had begun taking effect—but no amount of magic could return the prince to normal.

In his final moments, I thought I saw him smile—an artless, simple smile.

“Brotheeeeerrrrrrrrrr!”

Prince Adonis's cry rang out through the stilled battlefield.

<The Royal Succession>

Prince Lewis hadn't betrayed Herz.

We finally understood that just as he finished his transformation into a gruesome lump of flesh. As the Herzian and Imperial soldiers stared each other down at the gates of Erbrechen, Adonis embraced his elder brother, who would never speak again.

The soldiers around them, having witnessed the terrible sight, were very quiet. The only sounds were the one brother's cries lamenting the fate of the other.

But Prince Adonis couldn't afford to indulge in such feelings for long.

"The enemy leader has fallen! All troops, take back our town!"

A voice rang out, drowning out Prince Adonis's sobs. I'd heard that voice before, and I quickly scanned around for its origin. Soon, someone we knew appeared from the Ohgen Empire ranks, riding on a horse.

It was Margrave Bertrand.

"Soldiers of our glorious Empire!" he shouted. "Scatter these detestable troops from the Kingdom of Herz!"

The timing was far too good for this to be a coincidence. After all, the man had on a suit of plate armor; he was fully prepared. If he hadn't anticipated this situation, it wouldn't have been possible for him to ride out like this. He couldn't

have been co-leading the troops, either, given his relationship with General Troy.

At the same time, I had misgivings regarding the aide who hadn't gone to her general's side. A clash between their soldiers and those of Herz seemed inevitable, and yet the backbone of their combat power hadn't appeared. Why not? What could be a higher priority for her than striking down Prince Lewis for betraying the Ohgen Empire?

There was only one thing I could think of.

“Peeps, let's get Prince Adonis and go back to the garrison.”

“Mm. Understood.”

As we made our decision, the Imperial soldiers began to move. The Herzian troops responded in kind, though still disturbed by Prince Lewis's transformation. A few who appeared to be knights surrounded Adonis in a protective ring, practically forcing him to withdraw to the rear. The sounds of clashing swords and spells bursting began to blanket the area.

Taking advantage of the chaos, we descended from the rooftop, then hurried over to the prince on foot.

“Prince Adonis, we've come to collect you,” I told him.

“...Baron Sasaki?”

“It's dangerous here. Come with me to the rear.”

In order to keep the Starsage's presence a secret, we couldn't use teleportation magic. What's more, everyone

with the prince was a knight in full armor. Though they might be Prince Lewis's men, I would still need clear permission from the prince himself to take him away with me.

“Please, my brother! Help my brother!”

“I'm sorry, sir. But I can't.”

“Not even you? Neither of you?”

His gaze went to my shoulder. The Java sparrow didn't comment. He kept his mouth shut and watched the prince.

“I'm so sorry, sir, but no. I've asked.”

“Ah...”

His final, fleeting hope now dashed, Prince Adonis hung his head. Red liquid dripped from his tightly squeezed fists.

The brothers' parting had unfolded in the worst way imaginable. I didn't have any relatives I kept in touch with, so I couldn't begin to guess what was going through his mind right now. But if Peeps had fallen victim to something like that, I'd probably hole up in my room for the next few years, wrapped in a blanket.

“I'm so sorry for your loss, sir.”

“...I understand the situation.”

However, Prince Adonis proved even wiser than I'd imagined.

He only stared at his feet for a moment before he brought his face back up. His expression was sharp and determined. I couldn't see any signs of his previous tears. "We cannot afford to waste the chance my brother has won for us in exchange for his life," he said in a loud voice.

It seemed he had taken his brother's words to heart. His eyes were uncharacteristically fiery for someone so genial—they burned with an even greater sense of purpose than when he'd gone to save the village under attack from orcs.

"We will now retreat to the Geschwür garrison. Baron Sasaki, assist me."

"Yes, sir. I will lead the way."

The knights surrounding us all asked where we were headed. After commanding them to secure Prince Lewis's fleshy form and retreat from Erbrechen, Adonis left with us. We avoided people and distanced ourselves from the fighting.

Personally, I was concerned about the soldiers we were leaving here. But if what Prince Lewis had said was true, it wasn't clear how many of them were loyal to us. I didn't want to help them retreat through the fighting and risk having one of them slit my neck.

And above all, we didn't have the luxury to waste time. At this rate, the king of Herz himself was in danger.

We used flight magic to shake off the knights pursuing us, then dived into a back alley. After confirming that nobody was watching, Peeps used his teleportation magic. In a single breath, we'd escaped the chaotic town of Erbrechen and moved to the garrison.

When we got there, we saw the soldiers under Count Müller's command. While we'd been trying to figure out what Prince Lewis was up to in town, they'd safely made it back. As soon as we reached the garrison's entrance, the count, who had learned of our return, ran out to us.

He took us to a reception room, where we reported what had happened in town.

"I... I can't believe it..."

We told him everything we'd seen and heard. Prince Adonis did most of the talking. He spoke with firm composure; anyone could see the sense of duty shining in his eyes. Prince Lewis's final words must have truly moved him.

"And with that, Count, we will now be heading for the capital."

"Understood, sir. I will prepare the soldiers at once."

"Mm. I apologize for rushing you, but please do it as fast as you can."

Prince Adonis and Count Müller proceeded to discuss their plans from here on out.

Then, once that exchange was over, the Java sparrow perched on the low table between our seats spoke up. "*Adonis, do you have a moment?*"

"What is it, Lord Starsage?"

"*This is only speculation, but I am fairly certain the one we were fearful of is already at the royal palace.*"

“...What do you mean?”

It seemed Peeps had come to the same conclusion as me.

In that case, I decided to help explain. “General Troy had an elfin aide with him. She’s the one we were afraid of—a magician and one of the great war criminals. Naturally, sir, Prince Lewis would have been unable to kill the general by himself, had she been present.”

“I believe Margrave Bertrand predicted Lewis’s betrayal. The elder prince’s aid was crucial in the Empire’s political moves against the kingdom. Now that they have lost him—and considering she did not appear in the moment—she can only be in one other place.”

“Wait, then my father, and all the others, they’re...”

It was as Prince Adonis imagined.

If we were to take Lewis’s claims at face value and assume there were enemies among the Herzian nobles, the quickest play for the Empire would be to use them to gain control over the current king. Naturally, unlike their plan to use the succession contest, this would necessitate some internal strife.

But if the elf wished to take down the kingdom of Herz definitively, this was now her only option.

As for Margrave Bertrand, this was the perfect chance to raise his status in the eyes of the central Empire. He hadn’t just eliminated an enemy in General Troy—if the Kingdom of Herz quickly fell, the plan for his brother to replace him as margrave would likely be pushed onto the backburner.

“That’s correct, sir,” I said. “So please, let us go first to scout out the palace.”

“You are now the only heir to the throne,” added Peeps. *“We cannot afford to place your life in danger. Whatever our next move, the two of us should head out first to verify the situation at the palace.”*

“...All right. But please—I’d like to follow you there as soon as possible.”

“Very well. After dealing with the great war criminal, we will return at once.”

Now that we had Prince Adonis’s approval, our next task had been decided. Without a moment’s delay, we went straight to Allestos, capital of the Kingdom of Herz.



Using Peeps’s teleportation magic, we warped from the garrison to the royal castle. According to him, we were now in its courtyard. Indeed, I could see several well-maintained flower beds and trees between the covered outdoor passages spreading out in all directions around us. In the center sat a nice-looking fountain, with a pavilion-like structure right next to it.

The two of us moved through the trees near the courtyard’s edge, staying hidden. After ensuring nobody was around, I walked over to the fountain.

“Peeps, I have a suggestion.”

“What is it?”

“The castle is pretty big. Should we split up to search?”

“You’re not being serious, are you? If you’re worried about me, there’s no need.”

“If the prince’s family is in danger, that means the people who were good to you in your past life are in danger, too, right? I don’t really know who we’re up against, but I think we can still make it in time if we start now.”

I suddenly got a mental image of the Starsage’s portrait hanging in a prominent spot in the hallway to the audience chamber. This treatment was a display of the king’s feelings toward Peeps, and by extension, Peeps’s feelings toward the royal family.

He’d told me he simply wanted to live for his own enjoyment now, but he’d still been doing so much for the kingdom. I had a strong desire to help him—as his friend.

“...Thank you. I owe you so much.”

“Hey, we have to look out for each other.”

“But you must promise me not to act recklessly.”

“Don’t worry. I intend to live a lot longer yet.”

“I learned on the internet that such a phrase is called a death flag.”

“Huh. Are you the type who believes in stuff like that?”

“I’ve decided to believe only in what’s convenient for me.”

“What a coincidence. Me too.”

We still had the advantage against the elf after our last fight. If I used the beam magic Peeps had taught me, I was fairly sure I'd be able to buy myself some time. As long as the Starsage reached my side before I gave out, I trusted everything would be fine.

"I will search the eastern wing. You handle the west. Should you encounter the great war criminal, you must use your magic—even if you have to raze the entire castle to do so. In fact, make a show of it."

"Gotcha, Peeps."

"But once again, don't be reckless."

"Safety first. That goes for you, too."

"Indeed."

With that, Peeps and I split up.

Taking one of the outdoor passages from the courtyard, I headed into the castle, using flight magic to hover over the ground. It felt like I was riding a motorcycle. I was going pretty fast, too, so I had to be careful not to hit any walls.

Eventually, I saw someone in my path, walking down the hallway toward me. From his clothes, he appeared to be a noble, probably around my age. He was dressed better than a commoner, but his garb was modest for an aristocrat. I figured he didn't hold a very high position. My plan was to have a quick chat with him and ask about the status of the castle.

But as soon as the man saw me, he unleashed an attack spell. A giant icicle zoomed toward me.

“Ack...” Manipulating my flight spell, I dodged it. The icicle stabbed into the wall behind me with a thud.

“Olive skin, black hair,” said the man. “You must be Baron Sasaki.”

“If I say yes, will you tell me why you’re attacking me?”

“Oh, that’s simple. We need you dead.”

Our assumption had been right on the mark. Apparently, word of Prince Lewis’s betrayal of the Empire had already spread throughout the castle. Considering this world didn’t have any telegraphic communications, and factoring in the distance, the elf *had* to be here somewhere.

So I gave up on talking. Instead, I soared over the man’s head and continued down the hallway. He must have been one of the enemies Prince Lewis had told us about—the ones deeply rooted in the kingdom.

That process repeated a couple more times, and each person I met tried to chase me. Fortunately, they all seemed to be nobles involved in politics. I easily warded them off with the magic I’d learned from Peeps.

Fleeing from these hostile aristocrats, I wandered through the castle for a little while. Eventually, I came to a large set of double doors. It hadn’t been my conscious aim, but fate had brought me right to the audience chamber.

I couldn’t hear anyone behind me. My suspicions growing, I set foot inside. *This would make for the perfect stage, wouldn’t it?*

And there she was, again. As beautiful as ever.

“Ohhh?” she said. “And who might you be?”

Maisie, aide to General Troy and one of the great war criminals, was in the middle of an audience.

On the throne sat the current king of Herz. The elf stood next to him, waiting. Just like the first time I’d met her at the inn, she was using transformation magic to make herself into an adult woman. Unlike her true, juvenile appearance, this form was bursting with feminine charm and appeal.

I couldn’t see anyone else in the room.

“Your Majesty,” I said. “Excuse my rudeness, but who might this beautiful woman be?”

“.....”

I quickly greeted the king hoping to get a read on the situation. Unfortunately, he didn’t reply. Saliva dripped from his mouth. Looking at him, I realized how much danger we were in.

And noticing that I was steadily falling into the same trap, I chanted a spell. I felt like, at any moment, I might run over and bow deeply before her. She was just *that* beautiful. But I had to get word back to Peeps like I’d promised.

So I fired my laser beam spell out the window, making it as thick as possible, and aiming it high. That way, it wouldn’t hit anyone. It was like a signal flare. For a few seconds, the air in the audience chamber buzzed with energy.

This was the most conspicuous spell I had, and few others could even use it. If I wanted a meaningful way to distract the elf’s attention, I really had no other choice.

Her expression changed then. “I feel like I’ve seen that spell somewhere before,” she mused.

“Have you?” I replied. “I heard it was fairly commonplace.”

“An ancient dragonkin spell? Commonplace? How ridiculous.”

“.....”

It seemed the beam spell Peeps had taught me had a *really* cool backstory. And given the origin of the transformation spell, I had to wonder if the Starsage had been on good terms with dragons during his lifetime. *He didn’t have horns in his portrait, at least.*

During our exchange, the attraction I felt toward the elf diminished by about half. If I was lucky, I might have fooled her into thinking her Charm spell wasn’t working—that was the most fearsome spell in her arsenal so far, after all.

“Why do you keep getting in my way, hmm?” she asked. “First with Margrave Bertrand and now this...”

“I should ask you the same,” I countered. “Why do you keep making my job difficult?”

“You were the one who called himself a Lungian merchant, weren’t you?”

“I was. What about it?”

“Ah. I wonder if perhaps they have their own share of troubles...”

That was an odd comment, especially since I'd only been saying things at random to stall for time. Did she have some kind of contact with the Republic of Lunge? Wasn't she with the Ohgen Empire?

I really wished the mysteries would stop multiplying already. She reminded me of my boss at my previous job; he liked to give his most hardworking employees suggestive instructions in order to meaninglessly wring more work out of us. The fact that what she was saying now *didn't* seem meaningless made me extremely anxious.

“What have you done to His Majesty?”

“Oh, nothing at all. He's just a little, how to put it—*entranced* with me.”

“.....”

She'd definitely used the Charm spell on him.

That meant the king had resisted the elf as much as he could, a fact that brought me some relief. All of Prince Lewis's efforts and Prince Adonis's sorrow had meant something. All three of them had fought, and the Starsage had believed in them—and none of it had been a mistake.

I found myself turning toward the throne. “Your Majesty, Prince Lewis fought valiantly for this kingdom until the last. He sacrificed his life to invade the Ohgen Empire and kill General Troy. He had a magnificent end.”

“Oh?” said the elf. “General Troy managed to lose, hmm?”

“.....”

I knew my voice had reached the king, but he didn't respond. He simply sat there staring into space.

“Nothing you say will do any good,” said the elf in his stead.

Ignoring her, I continued my report, making sure to stress Prince Adonis's survival and his newfound determination. “Prince Lewis has ceded the right to the throne to Prince Adonis, sir. Please rest easy—Prince Adonis is alive. Your two children have grown up into wonderful men, and even now, Prince Adonis is fighting for the sake of this kingdom.”

And then, amazingly, the drooling king shifted.

“I...I see...,” he groaned. “My sons... They've done so much...for this nation...”

The elf's eyes widened in shock. This must have been completely beyond her expectations. I empathized—I knew what it was like to be under that spell's control. Even now that Peeps had given me his mana, and I'd become an elite human, her magic made me desperately want to court her. The king's situation had to be even worse.

And yet he continued to look at me and speak. “Baron Sasaki, t-take...care of...Adonis...”

The next thing I knew, his arm had moved from the throne's armrest. Revealing a dagger hidden inside his clothes, he stabbed it into his neck.

Blood spurted out, dyeing the audience chamber red.

“Your Majesty...!” I cried, immediately casting a healing spell. I was well within range.

But the king, now sunk back into the throne, didn't move a muscle. The blood silently continued flowing from his wound. But I wasn't ready to give up, and so I kept casting—as many spells as my mana allowed. After a while, I started to feel dizzy.

Eventually, Peeps arrived at the audience chamber. He must have spotted the signal beam. He dived in through the window I'd broken with my magic and passed by me as I continued to cast healing spells, heading for the king slumped on his throne and the elf standing next to him.

He rammed into the elf, his tiny body glimmering with light.

“Agh...”

His target careened into the wall, and it collapsed around her, burying her.

At about the same time, a magic circle appeared around the throne. It was three-dimensional—a sphere. I knew at once that it was healing magic. Next to it, Peeps had an uncharacteristically serious look on his face as he watched the king. Another magic circle was at his feet.

A moment later, his legs fell off—those tiny little Java sparrow feet.

In a panic, I ran over to him and touched my fingers to his back.

He'd told me once before that if he used magic beyond the advanced level, his tiny avian body wouldn't be able to endure it. He'd done so anyway, and it was clear what effect

it was having on him. Once I touched him, he stopped falling apart.

But the king displayed no change. We waited, and waited, but the healing spell never took effect.

“.....”

I wasn't sure how long that went on. Eventually, though, the magic circle faded. Even the Starsage couldn't bring back the dead. He'd told me as much himself.

Ceasing his efforts, Peeps turned to me, still floating in the air. I immediately supported him with my hand; he jumped right onto it.

“I would hear of his last moments.”

“When I told him about what his sons had done, he resisted the Charm spell and...well, finished the job himself.” I wished I could explain in more detail, but I couldn't speak properly. What came out was fragmented.

Peeps nodded slightly, seeming to guess the gist of what had happened. *“I see...”*

“I'm sorry, Peeps. I wasn't strong enough.”

“No, that isn't the case at all. In fact, you did extremely well to convey the truth to him.”

My heart was filled with regrets. What if I had spoken more eloquently? What if I had prioritized the king's mental state, even if it meant lying to him? I had no idea he was willing to go this far.



“Those who sit atop the throne have met far worse ends,” he added. It sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than me. This characteristically grave remark from Peeps only made me feel guiltier.

“Oh, great. If the king is dead, what am I supposed to do?”

The elf crawled out from underneath the collapsed wall of the audience chamber. Despite taking a hit from Peeps, she didn't seem to have sustained much damage. She was covered in dirt, sure, but I didn't see any wounds.

Her body, however, had shrunk. She'd probably lost control of her transformation spell. We were now seeing her true form—that of a very young girl. I'd seen it just the other day in the prison. She looked troubled as she studied the late king on the throne. Her nonchalant attitude was in massive contrast to her juvenile appearance. Her clothes were super baggy, too.

“The Blood Witch was defeated in battle a while back,” she mused. “Was that the two of you?”

“And what if it was?”

“Ugh, I couldn't have picked a worse opponent...”

No sooner had she said that than a magic circle appeared at her feet. I recognized that one. *The teleportation spell again?*

“I can't finish the job like this,” she said. “I'll be taking my leave now.”

In the same moment, Peeps fired a spell—without any incantation at all. It was the same one I’d seen in the prison. Rainbow beams of light shot at the elf one after another. There were more of them this time, too, pummeling at the barriers or whatever it was she had protecting her.

Eventually, her last protective layer shattered, and a beam plunged into her body. But that very moment, her teleportation spell finished, and she disappeared.

There was a reason someone of her caliber had stayed behind the scenes, only showing up in Herz like this once things got *really* bad. And that reason was Peeps’s fight with the purple-skinned person. *That must be why she didn’t bother the dragons on the border, either*, I thought.

I’d had my beam spell on standby, but I wasn’t able to chant it in time.

“...*She got away.*”

“That last one looked like it hit her.”

“*It will take more than that to kill her.*”

Suddenly we heard footsteps clamoring down the hallway. *When it rains, it pours*, I thought as a group of nobles stormed into the quiet audience chamber. They spotted us in front of the throne, and beyond us, the dead king of Herz. *I’m pretty sure I know what’s coming.*

“Y-Your Majesty!” shouted the first one to run up to the king when he saw the man’s corpse. A moment later, even more nobles and knights began to file into the room.

“Olive skin, black hair—you’re Baron Sasaki, aren’t you?”

“Villain! You’ve assassinated His Majesty!”

“Have you gone insane?!”

“I believe this man was one of Prince Adonis’s supporters, along with Count Müller.”

“Ah, how could this have happened...?!”

It wouldn’t matter *what* I said in this situation. The once-silent audience chamber had instantly erupted into chaos.

“They’re all supporters of Prince Lewis.”

“I see.”

In that case, getting them to listen to us was out of the question. It was possible *all* of them had connections to the Ohgen Empire.

“Peeps, if you would?”

“Of course.”

We had other priorities at the moment. We couldn’t let the king’s final act go to waste. Once I’d confirmed that the bird was on my shoulder, we soared into the air with flight magic, then flew out the broken window. The knights gave chase, of course.

But after throwing them off by hiding in the building’s shadow, we used Peeps’s teleportation magic and left the castle behind.



After departing from the royal capital, we returned to the Geschwür garrison. Nearby, we could see the soldiers ready to march back to Allestos, their preparations complete. There, I met up with Count Müller and Prince Adonis. We moved to the reception room, where I explained what had just happened in the castle.

As originally planned, we'd eliminated the threat from the great war criminal. But in the process, the king's life had been lost. We also mentioned the nobles belonging to Lewis's faction who had flooded the audience chamber.

"I see, so my father...died a glorious death as well...," croaked Prince Adonis. I heard him sob midsentence. I felt so bad for him.

"I was with him, and even I could do nothing. I apologize, Adonis."

"No. This must be far more difficult for you than it is for me, Lord Starsage."

"There is no stronger bond than that of a happy parent and child."

I listened as Prince Adonis and Peeps exchanged words. I doubted I'd ever understand what the prince was going through, having just lost his elder brother and now his father—I hadn't been blessed with great family relationships, myself. Count Müller and I both watched them in silence.

Eventually, the prince straightened up and said, "Now that my father has passed, I believe my brother's supporters will attempt to elevate my younger siblings."

“You have siblings other than Prince Lewis, sir?” I asked; this was the first I’d heard of it. The two brothers were the only ones anyone talked about in terms of royal succession. If this was true, then circumstances would continue to evolve.

“All of them are the children of concubines, but they have inherited my father’s blood. Still, they’re significantly younger; the eldest will be ten this year. The traitors will see them as easy puppets.”

“I see, sir,” I said. “I apologize for my ignorance.”

What a relief, I thought. That shouldn’t pose too big a problem. Prince Adonis wasn’t just a cut above them—he was two or three cuts, at least.

“Are you going now, Adonis?”

“I must not waste the opportunity my brother and father have given me.”

“Let us come with you, sir,” said the count.

“Count Müller, I’ve done nothing but pile burden after burden on your shoulders.”

“That’s not true, sir. Nothing could make me happier than to work for your sake—and for that of the kingdom.”

“Then first, we should head to the Rectan Plains fortress. There is no doubt the traitorous nobles will move to block us on our way to the capital. Few soldiers remain at the fortress, but they should prove an invaluable resource.”

“I will dispatch troops from Baytrium as well,” added the count.

“Then should we enlist the aid of Count Dietrich, too, sir?” I asked. “He’s apparently still confined at the capital, but they wouldn’t refuse a request from Prince Adonis himself.”

As soon as I made this suggestion, I realized something. Was *that* why Prince Lewis hadn’t immediately executed him, instead locking him away in the palace? Had he thought this far ahead? Considering his desire to put Adonis on the throne, I couldn’t discount the idea. We’d need to put a lot of thought into how we cleaned up after that purge.

“That is a good idea.”

“Thank you for your suggestions, all of you. I feel reassured with you at my side.”

With everything decided, we had to strike while the iron was hot. Along with the soldiers led by Prince Adonis, we departed from the garrison, quickly fleeing from the Empire and returning to Baron Sasaki’s lands.

The fortress on the Rectan Plains looked no different from before. Relieved, I walked toward the brand-new building. It wasn’t long before one of Adonis’s royal guards appeared before us. They’d been ordered to stay at the fortress for its protection and hadn’t ridden out with the rest of the soldiers.

The knight held out a fine-looking envelope with a wax seal. “Your Royal Highness, a letter has arrived from the castle.”

“A letter?” The prince took it and quickly opened it up.

Unable to peek in from the side, I silently waited for his response. Soon, he began to read the letter's contents out loud in front of everyone.

“Prince Lewis is a rebel who betrayed the people, shamelessly allied himself with the Ohgen Empire, and tried to use our nation as a bargaining chip for his own gain. Baron Sasaki assisted him in this, and by his dark deeds, His Majesty was killed. Prince Adonis, you must return to the castle at once.”

Unlike Count Müller, Baron Sasaki couldn't read this world's language. The prince was probably being considerate of this—and it meant I wouldn't need Peeps to reveal himself in front of the royal guard to tell me what was going on.

Over the days we spent traveling from the garrison back to my barony, news of the chaos at the castle had evidently spread. It was a little late to do anything about it, but I still felt uneasy being made into a villain.

“Sir, I have never seen a trap so transparent,” said the count. “Please pay it no mind.”

“They'd probably kill me as soon as I rushed back,” the prince agreed. “Even lacking experience in politics, I can understand that much.”

The prince and count calmly discussed the situation. Meanwhile, the knight next to them looked at me in shock. He reached for his sword. I couldn't blame him; if I'd been in his position, I would have silently taken several steps back.

“This only further proves that everything is as my brother said.”

“If we are to raid the capital, then we may want to hurry,” suggested the count. “The more time we take, the more obstacles we will encounter on our way. Even the neutral nobles may end up falling to their side.”

“You’re right, Count.”

The question of the route to the capital was a source of great vexation for Peeps and me, too. In fact, we’d debated it at length on our way back from the garrison. We needed some way to safely get Adonis to the palace without revealing the Starsage’s existence. Around half of the territories we’d need to pass through belonged to Prince Lewis’s supporters, and considering the prince’s future reign, we’d also have to whittle down their forces somewhat.

In contrast to our enemy, the prince’s troops numbered a few thousand at most. Even with the assistance of counts Müller and Dietrich, we couldn’t hope for much more. If we simply marched toward the castle, our forces would certainly collapse before we arrived.

“I have a suggestion, sir,” I said.

“A suggestion from you and *your adviser*, I assume?”

“Yes, sir. Could we move elsewhere to speak?”

“Certainly. I would love to hear it.” The prince nodded.

Finally, the knight spoke up, a ghastly look on his face. “Sir, from what we’ve just heard, this Baron Sasaki—”

“Ignore all further communication from the capital,” interrupted the prince. “That is an order.”

“But, sir!”

“Need I remind you that, as a royal guard, you are duty bound to heed my words?”

“Y-yes, sir. Of course, sir.”

The knight watched as we hurried into the fortress.



We decided that, once the soldiers were all set, we would depart from the Rectan Plains the following day, with Prince Adonis leading our mission to retake the capital. Our plans hadn't changed. We would crush the rival faction's nobles on our way and boldly march back to Allestos in triumph.

As the hour of our departure approached, Mr. French came to the fortress's reception room. “Prince Adonis, sir. The soldiers are assembled!”

Count Müller and I were in the room along with Prince Adonis, who had just finished tidying up his outfit in preparation for delivering his parting address. Mr. French had graciously taken on the more minor tasks, along with some of the knights under the Count's command, and was helping get the soldiers ready to go.

“Show me the way, if you would,” the prince replied.

“Yes, sir! Please follow me!”

We headed out to a veranda facing an area of the fortress resembling a courtyard. Beneath us we could see rows and rows of soldiers, each one of them standing perfectly straight, their eyes pointed upward.

While they hadn't faced any battles, they'd been dragged this way and that. It had been a hard journey for them, and they must have been exhausted by now. Considering what was to come, they needed some encouragement from their leader.

And that's exactly what we were all here for.

Standing in front of everyone, Prince Adonis began his speech.

“As you all know, the decline of our great Kingdom of Herz has been stark. Some of you may even wish to cover your eyes and look away from it. I have thought long and hard about the root cause. Some blame the royal family for dereliction. Others the nobles for exploitation.”

Count Müller, Mr. French, and I were all present with the prince. We stood alongside the royal guards and helped serve to make the man's presence more imposing. Mr. French, in particular, seemed so nervous he might faint. His legs were shaking badly, though I doubted anyone on the ground could see it. If not for my previous experiences here in the otherworld, I may well have had a similar response.

“But I say to you—none of these claims is the truth!”

Adonis's voice was sharp and ringing. His exhortations continued with such zeal I thought he might shout himself hoarse.

“Our enemies—pawns of the Ohgen Empire—have infiltrated our nation. Not just one or two—but a countless number. They lurk at the very heart of the kingdom, acting as they please with impunity. Thus does the Empire eat away at Herz, little by little, hour by hour.”

If I was being perfectly honest, I didn't personally care about this squabble between Herz and Ohgen. Peeps, however, had deep feelings for his former homeland, so I'd allied myself with Herz. I was sure those who had betrayed the kingdom had done so for similar reasons. Anyone would want to side with whoever treated them best—the only difference was whether that stemmed from a sense of duty or a desire for personal gain.

“Hear me! Only the other day, my father, the king of Herz, was slain by an Ohgen Empire spy!”

That remark sent a stir through the soldiers. We'd been concealing the king's death until now. The news must have been like a bolt from the blue for them.

“Now that my father has passed, the traitorous nobles are sure to support my younger brothers and sisters. They move with one aim: to wrest control of this nation from those to whom it rightfully belongs. Should we allow them to continue, the kingdom's very existence will be in danger. You, my friends, are the only ones who can save this country!”

The prince and count had discussed the speech's contents with Peeps the night before. I was certain it included some exaggerations and embellishments, but the ever-reliable Starsage had assured me that it was better to be bold in such situations.

“And now, here...”

The prince trailed off, seeming to suddenly realize something. He then turned his gaze from the courtyard to Mr. French, who was standing next to him. “My apologies. What is the name of this fortress?”

“Huh?! Oh, uh, it doesn’t have a name yet, sir...”

“Then what is your name? I hear you are the one in charge.”

“I-it’s French, sir,” the man answered with a look of consternation.

One could guess from his bafflement that he hadn’t been told what the prince’s speech would entail. The only ones who knew were the man himself, Count Müller, Peeps, and me.

“French? A good name.”

“I... I’m overwhelmed by your kindness, sir...”

“Here, at French Fortress, I lay claim to the rightful succession of the Herzian throne!”

“Wha...?” Mr. French grew even more panicked. He stared at the prince, then glanced between the count and me. He clearly never imagined the fortress would be given his own name. “M-my apologies, sir, but I am no noble! I’m nobody worthy of note!”

“Then from this day forward, with the authority vested in me as king of Herz, I grant you the right to rule this fortress and the title of viscount. While other nobles debase themselves for the benefit of the Empire, you shall be a true noble of this kingdom.”

“Wha—?!”

“Viscount French, together, we shall bring down the hammer of justice upon those deceitful imitations.”

“.....”

Mr. French went blue in the face as his nerves reached their limit. His mouth popped open and closed like an oxygen-deprived goldfish.

Prince Adonis ignored this and continued his speech. “This treatment will not stop with Viscount French. Any who accomplish notable feats during the reconquest of the royal capital shall be raised to the rank of knight. You, too, might earn a place among the nobility.”

Their exchange had caused even more commotion to erupt down below. The prince’s plan seemed to have touched the troops more than anticipated.

With so many Herzian nobles betraying the kingdom, Prince Adonis would need to fill all the empty seats after his coronation. Some of them would be court positions, while others would rule over various domains. But wherever they ended up, it would be an unprecedented promotion for any commoner.

That said, at the moment, the prince’s return to the castle was still a pipe dream. No matter how hard we might try, we simply lacked the necessary troops.

“And there is more I must tell you. We will not be alone in this fight—for we have a *very* dependable ally.”

With that, one of the dragons occupying the huge crater in the Rectan Plains made its appearance. At the prince’s mention, it soared magnificently overhead. We’d had it waiting behind the fortress until now; Peeps had hidden its giant body from everyone using magic. This was the plan the Starsage and I had proposed to Adonis earlier.

As the dragon floated lazily overhead, the soldiers cried out in surprise.

“I-it’s a dragon! A golden dragon!”

“Isn’t that one of the dragons living in the plains crater?”

“It’s huge! It’s even more gigantic up close!”

“Bigger than the fortress, even.”

“Are the dragons taking our side?!”

No matter how much we riled up the troops, our forces could only do so much given their current numbers. The encouragement, in fact, had mainly been to prevent any of them turning traitor. The *dragon* would be the main combat force in our retaking of the capital.

“As you all know, this is one of the dragons roosting in the crater near the border. Now, at last, I will reveal the truth behind them. My elder brother, in his graciousness, left them here for our sake. Though he was made a slave to the Ohgen Empire via a putrefaction curse, he remained determined to take the fight to them.”

We’d made up that story, of course, using Prince Lewis to hide the fact that the Starsage was here. Adonis, his relative, had approved of it, and we’d all agreed to make that the story going forward.

“He prepared for this moment years in advance, giving up everything he had to a certain renowned magician in exchange for these dragons. My brother, a traitor? Nothing could be further from the truth. Lewis was a protector of Herz until his very last breath!”

With the curse having transformed Prince Lewis into a hunk of flesh and said “great magician” already assassinated, there was no way to verify the story. And depending on Peeps’s inner feelings on the matter, it might not be that far from the truth.

Prince Lewis was becoming known as a traitor in his homeland, and letting the dragons play a major role could go some way to restoring his honor. I also trusted that if we claimed the Starsage had done it while he was still alive, nobody would think twice about it.

In addition, on the way back from Geschwür, we’d sent messenger familiars and magical express post to the town of Baytrium and Count Dietrich’s lands under the names of Prince Adonis and Count Müller. Perhaps we could expect modest reinforcements to meet us on our way to the castle.



“The time has come! By our hands shall we restore the Kingdom of Herz’s former glory!”

Prince Adonis raised his voice even higher to deliver his final line.

In response, the countless soldiers gathered below us began to cheer for the Kingdom of Herz and for King Adonis. We couldn’t have asked for higher spirits before our departure.

With the exception, that is, of Mr. French, who was still panic-stricken and blue in the face.



Adonis, spurred on by Lewis’s dying wish, advanced his troops steadily toward the capital.

After departing from the fortress in the Rectan Plains, we set off for the royal castle, the golden dragon at the head of our forces. The first stop on our list was Baytrium, at the heart of Count Müller’s domain. Once we’d arrived, we joined up with the troops he had assembled and resupplied for the journey ahead.

From there, it was a straight shot to the capital. We passed through each territory in the same manner, using the shortest path, regardless of whether their lords supported Lewis, Adonis, or were neutral.

Naturally, we were met with a variety of responses along the way. The itemized breakdown went something like this: Thirty percent of the nobles pretended not to notice us, 20 percent agreed to keep our advance a secret, and 50 percent

attacked without warning. The last group didn't hesitate to pelt us with arrows and spells, despite the prince announcing himself.

Tens of thousands of troops moved to block our path, descending upon us in grasslands, valleys, and forests alike. It was a series of battles the likes of which even the most experienced war veterans had never seen. Under normal circumstances, we would have quickly lost.

Our respected dragon was the reason we endured. With each breath, it scorched hundreds, if not thousands of enemy soldiers, forcing them to retreat. With a casual swipe of its tail, dozens would go flying. Though our opponents challenged it with skillful magic, most of their spells couldn't even scratch its scales. And when one did manage to pierce its armor, I simply used a healing spell to restore the creature to full health.

Meanwhile, the soldiers behind the dragon took up the role of scattering the enemy troops once they had lost their will to fight. Overall, the coup d'état progressed speedily—much faster than I'd imagined.

Peeps seemed very entertained as he watched the dragon battle the enemy forces. Personally, seeing him like that scared me a little. I felt like I was getting a glimpse behind the mask. I tended to forget how predatory he could be.

Thanks to all that, our forces traveled at an unprecedented pace, closing in on the royal capital so fast you'd never have guessed we met so much resistance. When Count Dietrich's soldiers came to reinforce us, they were astonished.

The dragon's efforts meant we reached the city with zero casualties—not even any wounded. We'd arrived at the boss fight with all our troops still raring to go.

“Count Müller, Baron Sasaki, our final step is to take the castle,” said Prince Adonis, gazing at the front gates leading into the capital. The soldiers had already formed ranks in front of them.

“We are with you all the way, sir,” said the count.

“Yes, sir,” I added. “The dragon seems to be doing quite well, too.”

In response, the dragon let out a roar. A moment later, it breathed on the entrance, reducing it to rubble.

The closed gates were no more, and the resulting hole was big enough for the soldiers to easily pass through. I couldn't help feeling like we'd overdone it, considering the repair work that would be necessary later. *Peeps gave the order, though, so I guess it's fine.*

“Soldiers! We march for the royal castle! You may cut down any who resist, be they warrior or noble. But you may *not* lay a hand on anyone uninvolved. We must take the castle as quickly as possible!”

At the prince's command, the soldiers charged.

The dragon's job was about 80 percent over now. We obviously couldn't have it spewing its breath all over the city. Its role at this point would be to fly around overhead to intimidate the enemy. Instead, the soldiers we'd been conserving up until now took the offensive.

They all rushed into the city, practically falling over each other to get in. We accompanied them as they headed for the castle. Skilled royal guards formed a perimeter around the prince—as well as Count Müller and me—and they proved themselves superior to the soldiers deployed in the capital. Following their lead, we ran through Allestos.

Mr. French was nowhere to be seen. He'd stayed behind at the Rectan Plains fortress to keep an eye on things. After Prince Adonis's rousing speech, he'd grabbed a spear and rushed to follow us, only for the prince to personally entrust him with the defense of the fortress. This was probably out of consideration for Peeps's and my feelings. From the prince's perspective, he was part of our in-group.

“Sir, the castle is in sight!”

“Our rear lines are keeping pace with us. We charge now.”

“Understood, sir!”

At the prince's instruction, the knights let loose a volley of spells. Giant balls of fire knocked away all the soldiers in front of the castle. They returned fire with their own magic, but our rear-line troops used barrier spells to block each and every blast. And then, as if in retaliation, our troops added their own offensive spells to the mix.

Soon enough, the enemy soldiers deployed near the castle began to scatter, intimidated by our charge.

“Ignore the fleeing soldiers. Storm the castle!”

Led by the prince and his guards, we all rushed inside. There, we saw knights and soldiers everywhere.

This was an opportunity for Count Müller and Baron Sasaki to show what they were made of. The castle was big, sure, but it was hard for troops to coordinate in its narrow confines. So as planned, we stepped out in front of the prince and dealt with each threat according to our individual skills.

I handled the more distant enemies with my lightning magic. Any who made it past my range, or whom we caught lurking in the shadows, met their ends at the tip of Count Müller's blade. Prince Adonis swung his sword at the count's side as well, though his abilities were less reliable.

“Baron, I am reminded of the incident with the orcs—your skills are a perfect complement to a warrior on the front line.”

“And I feel much more at ease having you fighting at my side, Count.”

With the Starsage's supervision, I was much, much calmer than I might otherwise have been. Depending on his guidance, I aimed my magic at the enemies' legs, despite the others not hesitating to cut heads clean off. I wanted to force the enemy to surrender without harming anyone so badly that healing magic couldn't fix them up. My moral compass had been cultivated by modern society, and it stayed my hand.

Aided by the royal guards' efforts, we swept through all the enemies before us and advanced deeper into the castle.

Eventually, we came to the audience chamber I'd visited only a few days before. We'd already checked the king's chambers, the chancellor's room, and everywhere else, arresting several courtiers along the way. The only one we

had yet to find was the person the enemy planned to use in their bid for power—Prince Adonis’s younger brother. *What do we do if he’s not here?*

But as we threw open the doors to the audience chamber, there he was.

“Emil!” Prince Adonis cried out when he saw the child sitting on the throne.

At a glance, the boy was about the same age as Ms. Futarishizuka looked. And as for his name, Adonis had just called it. But for some reason, a figure stood beside him—someone even I recognized.

“Duke Einhart,” exclaimed the prince. “What is the meaning of this?”

It was the noble who had been throwing his weight around in Adonis’s faction. Both Count Müller and I had met him before.

The duke looked at us, cool and composed. “Prince Adonis,” he said. “Why have you drawn your sword against the Ohgen Empire?”

“Why wouldn’t I? They are an enemy attempting to invade our kingdom!”

“But can you be certain what you are doing is truly for the people’s sake?”

“Wh-what?”

“Times have changed, Prince.”

Duke Einhart spoke with an air of solemnity. The boy on the throne, in contrast, had a look of absolute terror on his face. His eyes darted between Adonis and the knights positioned around him. Quite a few of us were covered with the blood of our enemies, no doubt a scary sight for such a young boy. It was easy to tell he'd been brought here against his will.

“Yes, things may be feverish and chaotic now,” the duke continued. “But look at the long term. Happiness for an even greater number of citizens lies beyond the possibilities you have rejected, Prince. Have you ever thought about that?”

“The citizens you refer to must be those of the Empire.”

“No, Prince. This is far greater than that.”

“You talk big, but it's all just self-justification. Am I wrong?”

Thinking back, Duke Einhart had been the one to suggest setting up a defensive position in the Rectan Plains. If he hadn't predicted Prince Lewis's betrayal, then one *could* surmise he'd suggested it in anticipation of Lewis ascending the throne.

“People come together to form settlements. Settlements come together to form kingdoms. Kingdoms come together to form one world. Many understand that sacrifices are inherent to this process. But even politicians and rulers reject the sacrifices needed to achieve something greater.”

“...Have you lost your mind, Duke Einhart?”

“Your Majesty, you *must* aim for ever loftier heights. If you do not, you will be powerless against an even stronger

enemy.”

“What enemy is that? Hold. Explain yourself.”

“One day, Your Majesty, you will understand.”

Duke Einhart’s calm demeanor raised my suspicions—but only for a moment.

“I pray that your chosen path will bring happiness to the greatest number of people.”

He gave a slight swing of his arm. A magic circle appeared at his fingers—fingers that he used to stroke his own neck.

Then Duke Einhart’s head separated from his body and fell to the audience chamber floor.

The spurting blood splattered the area around the throne with red.

“Ah...” The boy on the throne blurted out—the first sound he’d made since we arrived.

He cringed as blood sprayed over him. Nevertheless, he didn’t flee. Though he was the son of a concubine, he had clearly been educated in the ways of royalty.

Prince Adonis gasped as he watched Duke Einhart’s final act. Glancing at his expression from the side, I saw considerable hesitation.

But he quickly turned back to face the rest of us and raised his voice. “The evil traitor who plotted to deceive my siblings and bend this kingdom to his will has been slain!”

Even in this situation, Prince Adonis showed kindness toward the boy on the throne. Just like with Prince Lewis, he must have shared a loving relationship with his younger brother. I couldn't help but feel that such harmonious familial bonds were exactly what had led us here to this moment of triumph. At the same time, I recalled my neighbor's icy family situation.

“I hereby proclaim that I, Adonis Herz, have officially taken the throne as the forty-eighth king of Herz!”

Adonis's powerful voice rang through the audience chamber.

The knights waiting nearby all raised their voices in praise. This was a momentous, once-in-a-lifetime endeavor, and it had just borne fruit. It seemed they'd taken Duke Einhart's final remarks as utter nonsense. A moment later, all the soldiers behind us came running in, filling the chamber with victorious cheering.

Naturally, my eyes drifted to my shoulder.

“.....”

Peeps's gaze was on the dead Duke Einhart. Had the man said something that resonated with him?

With the younger prince, their intended puppet, now in Adonis's hands, the remaining enemy forces lost their will to continue the fight, and the royal castle soon quieted down, with our troops moving swiftly to suppress any remnants in the building.

News of the second prince's successful coup quickly spread through the capital. We began to receive reports from

several locations that enemy soldiers had retreated. Unlike our journey to the city, we had lost soldiers during the combat in the castle. Compared to the defeated army, however, our casualties were minor. Count Müller suggested that the dragon may have served as an effective deterrent.

And so, in just one day, Prince Adonis had retaken the royal capital.



The following day, Prince Adonis held his coronation ceremony. With this, he had officially succeeded his father and gained the title of King of Herz. From here on, we were to call him His Majesty Adonis. As he sat on the throne, he gave off a tiny bit more dignity than when I'd first met him.

The next day, he rewarded those who had participated in the coup. Thanks to Prince Lewis's last words, Count Müller received the position of chancellor. With so many nobles having sold out to the Ohgen Empire, you could count on one hand the number of people suitable for such important positions. As a result, the job fell to the count. In the near future, his children would assume crucial positions as well; the count's family seemed poised to exert considerable influence within Herz as a major faction.

And while a little earlier than planned, Lady Elsa's return to the otherworld was in sight. I wasn't sure, but I guessed she'd wind up marrying someone from the royal family. There was even a chance she might marry Adonis himself. *Actually, if you ask me, he's the likely winner.* She was Count Müller's only daughter, and she would likely assume a fairly high position in the kingdom after this. In that light, it seemed best to swiftly return her to her original world.

For similar reasons, Count Dietrich was given the stiff role of finance minister. He'd left his younger brother in charge of his lands and would be working side by side with Count Müller in the court for the time being.

Baron Sasaki received a position of his own—that of court minister. The specifics of the job were much like that of the inner minister in Japan prior to World War II. Essentially, my main task would be to support King Adonis in a more private capacity—basically what I'd been doing already. I guessed the promotion was out of respect for our position as frequent world hoppers. He asked me to give him time to assemble the group that would be working under me; unfortunately, King Adonis's reign was bound to run into significant staffing issues. Personally, I wasn't sure someone like me should be given that kind of authority at all. Perhaps it was due to the royal family's immense trust in the Starsage.

Thanks to my change in rank, everyone in the court now looked at me differently.

“It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Court Minister Sasaki. My name is Lipps. What an honor to meet a hero such as yourself, my lord. When I received word of His Majesty Adonis's enthronement, it moved me to my very core.”

“You flatter me. Everything we've accomplished is the result of His Majesty's excellent leadership.”

Now that Adonis's coronation ceremony was over and rewards had been doled out to his subordinates, it was time for a big face-to-face meeting of the next generation of nobles who would take on the kingdom's burdens. This party

was both to celebrate the accession and an important networking opportunity.

I, Court Minister Sasaki, had also been summoned to attend. Unfortunately, Peeps was elsewhere; the true hero of the hour was busy feasting on all the food the party had to offer.

“My house is a distant blood relation of Count Dietrich’s,” the man explained, adding that he was a viscount. “I came here today to express my thanks to you all for your kindness toward him while he was imprisoned by those traitorous nobles. If it would please you, my lord, I would love for you to grace my home with a visit. I promise to show you the utmost hospitality.”

“I only did what was expected of me as a supporter of His Majesty. Please, you needn’t trouble yourself.”

For a while now, I’d been exchanging introductions with one unfamiliar noble after another. I tried my best to remember the names of the first handful, but once things edged into the double digits, I gave up and just said whatever noncommittal, neutral things I could think of.

King Adonis, Count Müller, and Count Dietrich were doing much of the same. In fact, they were far busier with guests than me. Müller’s popularity in particular was astounding. I couldn’t even see the man beyond the throng of people surrounding him. Though I supposed he *was* the shortest route to getting closer to Adonis.

“Court Minister Sasaki, hello. I am Count Ludwig. I expect we will be working together at the castle in the future in support of His Majesty Adonis, so I wanted to make your acquaintance.”

“Allow me to apologize for my late greeting, Count Ludwig,” I replied. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. As you can see, I don’t hail from this kingdom. I may lack many skills when it comes to serving in the court, so I hope to benefit from your instruction.”

At least a hundred nobles were packed into this huge hall at the palace. The royal succession had seen momentous upsets right up to the conclusion, so everyone was frantic to secure a foothold. They had no idea what might become of their own titles, which they’d taken for granted up until now. This filled the hall with a strange sense of passion and enthusiasm.

The biggest promotion in our little group, however, had gone to Mr. French. He had inherited Count Müller’s position and now ruled over all his lands *plus* the Rectan Plains region. Adonis had said it was a fitting reward for the man’s accomplishments: supporting the exiled prince until the very end and providing him with a place from which to stage a comeback.

As we’d heard at the fortress, he was now Viscount French. He’d accepted the decoration with a pale face and shaking legs.

“Would you happen to be Viscount French? I am Viscount Mannheim.”

“Oh... I’m honored you would deign to speak to me, Viscount Manheim!”

“As word has it, you not only constructed a frontline base on the previously undeveloped Rectan Plains, but you also helped His Majesty Adonis and gave him an opportunity to

strike back at those traitorous nobles. It would have been a waste to leave someone of your talent a commoner.”

“Th-thank you, my lord. But I only accomplished it with the help of Baron Sasaki and Count Müller. My personal achievements are paltry. And so many others at the fortress helped as well.”

He was on pins and needles again today, practically jumping out of his skin whenever one of the more senior nobles said hello to him. According to Peeps, his promotion had been exceptional. But considering his achievement constructing that fortress on the Rectan Plains, I could understand why Adonis and Müller had decided on it. The man was on excellent terms with Baytrium’s most influential individuals, too. What’s more, he was trustworthy, and the land bordering the Ohgen Empire was of great tactical importance. I expected he’d be showing his skills on a more local basis than Count Müller, who would now be spending his days in the capital.

“Allow me to be frank, Viscount French,” continued Mannheim. “Are you friends with Count Müller?”

“The count? He’s been very good to me, my lord.”

“Is that right? I’d like to hear more, if you’re willing.”

“To tell the truth, he provided the very clothes I’m wearing in preparation for this event...”

“Really? Very interesting. Would you mind sharing more details?”

Other than us, a handful of soldiers who had accomplished great feats during the taking of the capital

were granted the rank of knight. Many of them had arrested or slain nobles acting against Adonis. In accordance with his speech at the fortress, a notable number of new noble families had been created.

The dragon who had done so much for us remained in Allestos for the time being. Many of the nobles aligned with the Ohgen Empire—the Imperialists, as they were being called for convenience—were still alive and kicking in Herz, and the new king wanted the dragon to help serve as a deterrent. His first task as ruler would be to wipe out the Imperialists.

“Court Minister Sasaki, might you have a moment or two?”

“Certainly. What is it, Count Müller?”

Eventually, as the stream of people began to die down, Count Müller came over to me. When he spoke, many of those nearby turned to look.

“His Majesty Adonis wishes to speak with us. And with Viscount French as well.”

“I understand, my lord.”

It never hurt to make a show of us getting along when those of our faction were watching—partly for our own sake. That was probably the idea anyway. The king looked like he was fresh out of high school, and yet he could handle exchanges like these with such ease. It really drove home the fact that he was royalty.

And so the new king’s societal debut went by with great fanfare.



Time flew after Adonis's coronation; there was always one social event or another, and the next thing I knew, several days had passed. Soon, I started to worry about how much time had gone by in modern Japan. Despite the slower temporal flow there, we'd been away for quite a while now.

"Would it not be wise to return to your world soon?"

"Yeah. We've been over here a long time, huh?"

I was discussing things with Peeps in our room at the court. This was basically the business office for my new post of inner minister. A pair of sofas and a desk, all extravagant, occupied the room of about fifty square meters. It reminded me of that high-class hotel Ms. Futarishizuka had procured for us in the past.

Nobody was present aside from the sparrow and me. While I sat at the desk, Peeps was perched on top of it. He looked like an adorable ball of mochi with his tiny little legs tucked underneath him. My mind painted a picture of him sitting in my palm one day in the same position—a dream I would never realize.

"But are you sure we should just...go back like this?"

"It will be fine. We've set everything in motion for them."

The king and Count Müller still had full schedules. Watching the two of them valiantly struggle to restore the nation, forgoing sleep, made me hesitant—it felt like I was running away. But Peeps was right, and I was concerned about what was happening back in Japan.

A full day had probably passed there. Possibly even more. And though I'd gotten some time off from work, I was probably supposed to be keeping an eye on my company phone. Apparently, employees of foreign-owned companies *never* checked their mail while on vacation. But I'd been steeped in Japanese corporate drone culture for so long that being away from my email was giving me anxiety.

“Personally, I’m concerned about what that elf is up to.”

“She won’t stage any sort of attack for some time.”

“Because of that business with the purple person?”

“Looking back on it, that one certainly appeared at an opportune moment.”

This made two straight victories for the Starsage against the great war criminals. The results spoke for themselves—they'd deterred the elf, despite the Starsage never revealing his identity. And I, as Baron Sasaki, had managed to intimidate one with my laser beam spell. Maybe Peeps was right; that *did* sound like more than enough reason to hesitate. She'd fled from the audience chamber when we attacked, too.

All this brought a question to my mind. Why had two powerhouses like them *both* allied with the Ohgen Empire? Weren't there only seven in the world?

I'd discussed this with Peeps already, but he didn't have any solid leads, either. I was still unfamiliar with this world, so I found it difficult to even contemplate. For now, everything would depend on whatever moves they decided to make.

“And if we don’t return, Julius’s daughter will be concerned.”

“Speaking of Lady Elsa,” I replied. “Shouldn’t we get her back to her family?”

“Yes, I was thinking the very same.”

“And considering the situation, I can’t envision her in any position but at the king’s side.”

“I believe you’re on the right track. The castle is still bursting with activity, but once things settle down, I expect Julius will reach out to us. When the time comes, we can stage another farce, just as we did when we took her away.”

“Lady Elsa is really being punted into a crazy position, huh?”

“It is the fate of all those born into noble families. Still, Adonis is an excellent choice. And if she moves into the castle, she will be able to stay near her father as well.”

“The new king is pretty handsome, isn’t he? And he’s earnest and sincere.”

“They’re also close in age. I’d consider it a perfect arrangement.”

As I spoke with Peeps, I got out of my chair. He fluttered into the air as well, landing on my shoulder and spreading his wings, the tips of which barely brushed my cheek. The sensation was ticklish, and brought me a twinge of happiness. I felt the urge to lean in. *Not that I would, of course. It’d probably creep him out.*

“Actually, one more thing before we go,” I said.

“What is it?”

“It’s about Prince Lewis...”

During the fighting, he’d been recovered from Erbrechen, then carried through the Geschwür garrison all the way to the Rectan Plains fortress unharmed. I’d heard as much when I’d gone to pick up Mr. French during all the title bestowment business.

Just as King Adonis had instructed them on the battlefield, the soldiers had taken good care of his brother the entire way back. The fact that over half of them had been levied from domains supporting Adonis had probably contributed greatly to their obedience. The exchange between the two princes in those final moments had been quite moving as well.

The king and Count Müller had also been made aware of these developments.

But at the moment, we didn’t know what to do with Lewis. I assumed they’d wait for the proper time, then carry him into the royal castle. They were probably holding back for now, with the court still in chaos, but I knew King Adonis would want his brother nearby.

“As I’ve said before, even we cannot change him back. That is the nature of the curse.”

“Right, I remember that. But what about Abaddon?”

“...Ah. I see what you mean.”

Everyone was already treating Prince Lewis as deceased. Even the great sage, who could wield as many spells as there were stars, couldn't undo his transformation. This putrefaction curse was a truly terrifying prospect for those of this world. But we had options that went beyond its scope.

Recalling all the strange things that had happened around us lately, I said, "I think it's still too soon to give up on him."

"Then we now have a reason to contribute to this so-called death game, eh?"

Though he'd claimed it was an exceptional circumstance, Abaddon had told us he'd once revived someone from the dead. Wasn't it plausible he'd be able to return the once-human prince to normal? *Though I suspect it would require significant contributions on our part,* I mused.

"Are you sure about this? It has nothing to do with you."

"I couldn't save the father, so I don't want to give up on the son."

"You were only a bystander wrapped up in our affairs."

"Hey, you saved us when that Kraken was on a rampage, didn't you?"

"That threat originated in this world."

"Well, as a pet owner, I can't help wanting to spoil my adorable pet."

"When you put it that way, I can't think of a good response." Peeps nodded—Peeps, the one who always had an answer to whatever you said.

He was still going all in on the whole bird act, so like always, I couldn't read his expression. In fact, I couldn't even tell where he was looking. But somehow, I felt as though his tiny face had softened, just a little.

One day, I hoped we'd be close enough that he'd share some old stories of Herz's former king with me.



The Starsage's magic brought us out of the otherworld and back to modern Japan. We landed in the hotel room we were renting near my old apartment.

I glanced at the display on the bed's headboard and saw that it was seven AM, two days after we'd left for the otherworld. I hadn't been counting, but that meant we'd spent over a month there. Peeps immediately headed over to the laptop on the desk, likely to calculate this most recent time difference.

I watched him go, then checked my company phone; I'd left it in the room. One missed call and one unread message, both of them from my boss. The call had come a little under an hour ago, and the message had been sent directly after.

The latter instructed me to come back into the office, starting today. It didn't include a reason. That made me very nervous.

“Peeps, it looks like my vacation ended yesterday.”

“Already? Only four days have gone by here.”

“That's a pretty good length of time, isn't it?”

“...Is it? I seem to recall you having worked the entire day for one of them.”

“Well, it’s pretty common to get called in during a vacation.”

“Much of this world’s labor situation continues to defy my understanding.”

“I agree things are rather busy over here.”

Without much of a choice, I went through the day’s schedule with my pet bird as I got ready. We’d eaten and slept in the otherworld, so despite my reluctance, I set off immediately.

“The treatment of commoners in my world is certainly no point of pride. But when you look at this world’s management of individuals and their time, it appears just as bad.”

“Could I leave explaining things to Lady Elsa to you?”

“Of course.”

With Peeps’s approval, I left the hotel to go into work.

It had been a long time since I’d set foot in a packed train, and it was stressful. I’d have to put more effort into mastering that going-to-work spell. My progress so far wasn’t very promising. In the station, I bumped shoulders with someone, earning a “get out of the way, old man” in response. My powers as a corporate drone were clearly waning.

It was a lot like this when I first moved to Tokyo, I thought wistfully.

Eventually, I arrived at the office, and the section chief called me up right away. I followed him into the adjacent meeting space. Miss Hoshizaki and Ms. Futarishizuka were already there.

The latter, who had been staying in Karuizawa, had probably returned to the city on her own when I didn't come back after a full day in the otherworld. I had a lot of respect for her when it came to things like this.

Our relative positions were the same as always—myself in between Ms. Futarishizuka and Miss Hoshizaki—with Mr. Akutsu on the other side.

“I apologize for calling you three in from your vacation,” said the chief, looking across the table at us. His usual laptop sat on the desk, ready to be used. “And, Sasaki, it seems your hair grows quite quickly.”

Naturally, my hair kept on growing, even in another world. I normally took better care of it, but with everything going on, it had slipped my mind. Still, it couldn't have been more than a centimeter or so longer. And he'd noticed it as soon as he saw me? *That's scary. Attractive guys must be extra sensitive to other people's appearances, huh?* I'd never had any success complimenting people on things like that, so I never even noticed little changes in people's hairstyles.

Pledging to be more careful in the future, I said, “...Does it, sir?”

“They *do* say the more promiscuous someone is, the faster their hair grows,” mused Ms. Futarishizuka. “What about you?”

I couldn't tell whether she was backing me up or just dishing out some more sexual harassment. Wistfully, I remembered hearing something like that back in my middle school days.

“Quit being stupid,” Miss Hoshizaki butted in. “Let's get this conversation moving.”

“Your hair seems to be a little longer than when we first met, too,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“Wh-what does it matter? It's my choice whether to grow it out.”

Is she growing out her hair? I wondered. Personally, I thought its current length was really working for her. “With excellent looks like yours, Miss Hoshizaki, I believe any hairstyle would suit you.”

“I, uh... Really? You don't say stuff like that very often, Sasaki.”

Ms. Futarishizuka had thrown me a lifeboat, and I'd eagerly climbed aboard.

Seeming to give up on the matter for now, the section chief moved a hand over to the laptop. After a few moments, the big screen bolted to one wall displayed an image.

“I'd like to draw your attention to the screen.”

At the boss's instruction, we underlings turned to look at the laptop's external output. Several videos were playing in a maximized window, all of them without sound. Next to each was the date and location they were recorded. They were all facing up toward the sky, so it was basically a bunch of blue rectangles.

The subject of the videos appeared to be a kind of aircraft floating high up among the clouds. Its silhouette was striking—angular, man-made. Due to its height, though, none of the videos reflected any finer details. It was hard to even tell what color it was.

Nevertheless, I recalled seeing the same thing myself. Some days ago, after my little verbal battle with the boss, I'd left the bureau, and as I was heading to the posh hotel Ms. Futarishizuka had reserved, I'd seen this exact object up in the clear skies. I remembered how, at the time, all the people around me had been snapping pictures with their phones.

“Rumors about this strange flying object have been everywhere lately,” explained the chief.

“I've seen it on the news as well,” remarked Ms. Futarishizuka.

While I'd known the object existed, I hadn't realized it was such a topic of conversation. After all, I'd been so busy for the last few days. Also, this sort of occurrence had happened many times in the past. I'd figured it would quickly disappear, and everyone would forget about it. So I was quite surprised to hear the chief bring it up.

“As you can see, there are eyewitness reports from areas all over Japan. And it's been spotted from other countries as well. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to when or

where it appears, but we're getting a steady stream of reports from the ground."

"I still haven't gotten a peek at the real thing yet," Miss Hoshizaki commented.

"I saw it when I went out for lunch the other day," replied Ms. Futarishizuka.

It seemed like people were seeing it fairly often. I could understand why it had made the news. This would be hell to clean up after the fact if anything were to happen.

"I'd like to ask something of the three of you," continued the chief. "When you hear the words *unidentified flying object*, what comes to mind? A classic Adamski-style flying saucer? Or a space battleship from a sci-fi anime?"

Uh, what? I thought. The chief's going off on a wild tangent again. Whenever he does this, there's usually trouble waiting for us.

"The true form of this mysterious object is...this," he finished, clicking to get to the next slide.

A single image appeared, taking up the middle of the screen. According to our boss, this was the same flying object. Unlike the videos on the previous slide, this one was zoomed in quite a bit. It showed the angular, pale object considerably more visible against a pitch-black background.

Its resolution was still quite low; in fact, we could see the pixels at this point. It had probably been cropped from a larger picture and enlarged.

Even so, we could see a much more detailed silhouette than before. It didn't bear the slightest resemblance to an Adamski flying saucer. If I had to say, it looked more like one of the space battleships you might see in an anime. I wondered how big it was. You couldn't tell from the picture.

“An image from a spy satellite?” said Ms. Futarishizuka. “Are you sure you should be showing this to us?”

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Did you hack into one of our own country's satellites? Or an allied nation's?”

“I would suggest not delving any deeper into the matter. It would risk not only your safety, but Sasaki's and Hoshizaki's as well.”

“Ooh, very scary.”

Apparently, a *lot* was happening above our heads. That was the very reason we'd been called in, of course.

“Wait, what do you even want us to do about this, hmm?” asked Ms. Futarishizuka.

“The background is totally black,” remarked Miss Hoshizaki. “Like it's in space or something.”

“Not *or something*,” countered Ms. Futarishizuka. “It must be completely outside the atmosphere.”

“I wanted to ask you all to do some information gathering on this unidentified flying object,” said the chief.

He didn't think we were somehow involved, did he? I understood that might be the obvious conclusion from his position, but... *Come on, that's just absurd. And this is a job for the Ministry of Defense, not us.*

I really, honestly didn't know anything about this one. I very much doubted any spaceships existed in the otherworld—or that I'd be able to get any information from Peeps.

"I'm sorry," replied Ms. Futarishizuka, baffled. "First a flying boat, and now a manned rocket? Is that where this is going?"

"Nothing in the bureau's regulations said anything about trips to *space*," agreed Miss Hoshizaki. "What kind of bonus pay would we be getting? It seems like a way harder job than just going overseas."

Hoshizaki? I thought. *Are you joking? Or are you being serious?* There was a good chance of the latter, and that frightened me a little.

Personally, this was an absolute no-go for me. I couldn't imagine how much time would pass in the otherworld if I went all the way to *space*. What if I came back and everyone I knew had already passed away? It wasn't hard to imagine.

"Not to worry," the chief assured us. "I'd like to keep you in Japan for this investigation, at least for the time being."

"Is this one of those orders from higher up the chain again, sir?" I asked.

"Feel free to think of it that way. A lot of other agencies are busy trying to piece all this together. I feel the possibility

of psychic involvement is low—but not low enough to dismiss completely.”

Now that I thought about it, maybe that psychic nerd was capable of creating a spaceship. And there was no telling when or where someone else might be born with a similar power. In that sense, I had to agree—I couldn’t fully reject the possibility of psychic involvement.

That was probably why the bureau had been called in. If the chief had declined, and it somehow turned out that it *was* a psychic pulling the strings, Mr. Akutsu would be in for a very hearty scolding.

As a result, our vacation ended after four days, which felt a lot more like three.

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

Ms. Futarishizuka’s words, not directed at anyone in particular, echoed softly through the meeting space.

Afterword

How did you like the story of the two princes and the battle over the royal succession? It's been a long time coming, and I'm happy that I was able to deliver the conclusion to the world in book form. In addition, as mentioned at the end of this volume, a major new world element will be introduced in the next installment. Unlike the octodragon that came from the otherworld, this will be something completely new.

As I take this chance to express my gratitude, I'd like to extend a thanks first and foremost to everyone who purchased this book. Thank you so much for taking notice of *Sasaki and Peeps*. I will devote myself even more to it to ensure that you continue enjoying the story in the future.

I also want to express my heartfelt thanks to Kantoku, the illustrator, for his many beautiful illustrations. He seems almost superhuman, the way he can pack so much information into each picture, especially the exquisitely depicted cover illustrations.

I couldn't be more thankful to my editor, O, as well as the editorial division of MF Bunko J. Ever since the first volume, they've been corresponding with me in a very warm, cordial manner. I'd also like to deeply thank the business division, the proofreader, all the designers, the bookstores both in Japan and elsewhere, online retailers, and all those who have graciously been a part of this work for their extraordinary assistance.

This has been *Sasaki and Peeps*, brought to you by MF Bunko J, originally posted on *Kakuyomu*. I look forward to your continued support of this series.

(Buncololi)

Mr. Joseph

“I hear you’re looking to stock a large amount of food.”



Faction Otherworld

The president of the Kepler Trading Company, a major commercial firm in the Republic of Lunge. Handles deals that would be difficult to carry out in the Kingdom of Herz. Along with Mr. Marc, he is one of Sasaki's main contacts in the otherworld.

Joseph

Magical Blue

"I'll do my best to serve my country!"



Faction Magical Girl

A child who became a magical girl at the request of a messenger from the fairy world (a small animal). One of only seven magical girls in the world. Under the protection of a large nation, she fights for peace and justice day and night.

Magical B