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D GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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And they were calling to one another:
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
The whole earth is full of his glory.







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“Omnia mala exempla ex rebus bonis orta sunt;”

——— *Julius Caesar, Bellum Catilinae LI, 27 / Sallustius Crispus*

**“Technological progress is like an axe
in the hands of a pathological criminal.”**

——— *Albert Einstein*

Prologue

A Certain Day in December, 2018 Imperial Hotel Tokyo, Hibiya

David Jean Pierre Garcia was in a foul mood that day. Despite having changed his indoctrination schedule to visit an island nation in the Far East, he hadn't learned anything of value.

"The organizers of that auction caused a huge uproar," David muttered to himself. "But other than their ridiculous name of D-Powers, no one knows anything about them?"

Enraged, he folded his arms, glaring down on the city from an upper floor of his hotel. The top members of this country's financial circles seemed to have no interest in dungeons, and that disgusted him.

David had built relatively strong connections in Europe's political and financial circles. By using Marianne's power, he'd won them over to his side, thereby gaining insight into various matters. Through these connections, he'd been introduced to similar circles in Japan. However, the people in Japan's political and financial elite hadn't given him any details. Much to his surprise, they'd regarded the orb auctions as being on the same level as art auctions.

"I need to win the JDA and the upper echelons of the SDF over to my side," David continued muttering to himself. "And perhaps someone related to the media."

The JDA managed dungeons, and the SDF focused on capturing them. Thus, these organizations would surely have more detailed information on the orb sellers. Furthermore, although those in the media were much the same as idiotic dogs—desperate to stick their noses into everything—sometimes they would come across unexpected windfalls. Winning them over to his side wouldn't hurt.

Where should I strike first? David wondered.

Once he identified the target, “Nightmare” could take center stage—so long as the target was a man.

David looked down on Hibiya Park. Despite being midwinter, the green foliage of trees covered the entire area. Buildings resembling lodges—their roofs green and red—stood around a large fountain. Like a colony of ants, people with black hair and black clothes busily walked around those buildings. As if to squash those ants, David pressed his index finger against the window, one corner of his mouth quirking into a smile.

Brussels, Belgium

“Tokyo is cold, isn’t it?” a woman asked.

In response to this sudden question spoken in French, Asha turned around. “What?”

There, Asha found a strangely sensual woman in a chic burgundy dress smiling at her.

“You’re Jain’s daughter, aren’t you?” the woman asked.

“Well, yes.”

Without thinking, Asha answered in French, which was quite suspect when compared to her English.

Who on earth is this person? Asha wondered. *Considering how much she stands out, I would definitely remember her if we’d met before.*

“Congrats on your recovery,” the woman said sarcastically. “Thanks to you, my vacation to Miami was changed to the boring city of Tokyo. David needs to chill out with these little whims of his. If we were going to Okinawa, that would’ve been slightly better, at least.”

“Sorry, but what are you talking about?” Asha asked.

“Oh, don’t worry your little head about that. Well then, give my regards to the sorcerer in Tokyo.”

Seeming satisfied with herself, the woman walked away, leaving Asha entirely clueless about the interaction. While Asha absentmindedly watched the woman go, a refined man in his thirties—whom Asha sometimes saw in European high society circles—called out to her.

“What’s going on?” the man asked.

“Oh, Monsieur Michel,” Asha said. “Good day to you.”

“Hello. So did something happen here?”

“No, not really, but do you know who that person is?”

Michel followed Asha’s line of sight. “She’s one of Garcia’s close associates.”

“Garcia?” Asha repeated. “Of Altum Foraminis?”

“You know of him? Oh, that’s right...”

Asha’s terrible injuries were a matter of public knowledge. As such, her father having approached the Church of the Deep Chasm—regarded by some as a healing cult—wouldn’t have been the least bit strange. But of course, her miraculous healing had taken place in Japan.

“If I recall correctly, she’s called Sarah Magdalena,” Michel said.

“That’s quite the name.”

According to legend, Sarah had served the three women who’d watched over the crucifixion and burial of Jesus Christ. Yet in later times, the theory of her being the daughter of Jesus and Mary Magdalene had been popularized within fiction.

Michel shrugged his shoulders in a playful manner. “But of course their holy woman is Marianne Thérèse Martin.”

Thérèse Martin was a popular patron saint of France, who held a rose and a cross.

“From what I’ve heard, that’s the actual name of Altum Foraminis’s holy woman,” Asha said.

“Yes, one’s name and nature often coincide. Even so...” Once again, Michel looked at Sarah, who was speaking cheerfully with another man slightly up

ahead. “Though she belongs to an upright religious organization, she’s a beautiful woman—bewitching and sociable enough to be called licentious. Be careful. I’ve heard some concerning rumors about her in certain circles.”

“Concerning rumors?” Asha repeated.

“Oops, I’ve said too much. Well then, have a pleasant day.”

The rumors of a Japanese sorcerer—spread by Asha’s father—had taken on an unexpected life of their own. Ever since her recovery, all sorts of people had questioned Asha about her story. Some of these people had seemed connected to Altum Foraminis. At times, their prying interrogations about the events in Tokyo had been so forceful as to be rude.

These people had approached her with a variety of questions, but in summary, they had all wanted to know “Who cast the enchantment upon you?”

If these people had shared Asha’s troubles and had been seeking information, she wouldn’t have minded. But instead, their attitudes had been overenthusiastic and creepy.

“What could be going on?” Asha wondered aloud.

According to Sarah, she’d planned on going to Miami, but now she had to visit Tokyo. What reason could a religious organization known for selling miracles have for visiting Tokyo?

I’ll have to discuss this with Kaygo later, Asha thought, making a mental note to herself.

Chapter 04: Heaven's Leaks

December 6, 2018 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

One day after we'd learned the shocking contents of the inscriptions, Miyoshi and I started preparations to confirm their claims. This included but wasn't limited to Mining. Of course, we couldn't do anything about the total number of explorers reaching five hundred million. And so, as the publication of Heaven's Leaks drew nearer, we decided to verify all the other information before things got busy.

That being said, most of our "preparations" consisted of waiting for the food we'd ordered to be finished. Since I had time to spare, I made plans to tag along on Mitsurugi and Saito's training during the weekend.

"Haven't you figured out by now that dungeon dates are the absolute worst?" Miyoshi quipped, but I ignored her. After all, this was training, not a date.

Also, I decided not to use party functions this time, seeing as the information hadn't been published anywhere. Though I didn't think anything would come of it, I didn't want to increase the chances of something unnecessary happening.

December 8, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi Dungeon

"Hey there, Producer Yoshi," Saito said. "It's been too long."

I found Mitsurugi in her usual, inconspicuous corner seat of YD Café, a haughty Saito sitting beside her.

"What's with the weird greeting?" I asked. "And anyway, it's only been two weeks, right?"

"You're incredibly lucky, getting to hang out with me twice in one month!"

Saito countered.

“Sure, sure. So what are we doing today?”

Since our last training session, Saito had become hooked on the compound bow, and she wanted to try hunting the many wolves on the third level.

“Since wolves are more agile than goblins, hunting them will be double the fun, right?” Saito asked.

“Well, considering your and Mitsurugi’s current strength, it shouldn’t be dangerous,” I said. “Sounds good to me.”

Unlike hunting real animals, defeating dungeon monsters felt more like playing a virtual reality game. They didn’t leave behind corpses, after all. Most people felt hardly any of the guilt associated with killing living creatures, and as of right now, no animal rights organizations had criticized monster extermination.

When it came to increasing one’s stats, hunting the first-floor slimes was far more effective. However, true slime hunters were practically Zen warriors. If you kept beating up slimes in a meditative state, you might just attain enlightenment, but if you simply wanted entertainment or to blow off steam, wolves were definitely more interesting.

In fact, levels one through four—usually called the “beginner’s levels”—were already used for this purpose. The alternate name of “amusement levels” wasn’t just for show either. Excluding the rather unamusing first floor, at least.

Yet even on the top floors, a dungeon was still a dungeon. Letting your guard down could prove fatal. Of course, the same could be said for hunting and fishing outside dungeons.

“This is so much fun,” a delighted Saito said at first. “Wolves are so much faster than goblins.” However, she soon changed her tune, remarking, “Wow, this gets old fast. These wolves don’t drop anything, and there’s nothing like the Goblin Treasure Boxes either.”

Once the total number of explorers reached five hundred million, even weak monsters would begin dropping food. But currently, exterminating monsters on levels one through four yielded no rewards. Obviously, this would kill the

adventurous spirit of relatively high-ranked explorers. Things might have been different if you could see your score like in a video game, but that didn't seem possible.

Or did it?

What if we created goggles—similar to military eye guards—with cameras that could recognize a monster's defeat, turn that defeat into a score, and display the points? Could we create an entertainment facility of some sort?

Though cities like Yoyogi and New York had dungeons, they were in developed nations without famine. Registering explorers for eventual food drops would be slow going. But what if these cities had popular entertainment facilities?

Such a business had probably never been established for two reasons. First, the return on investment would probably be too small when compared to the preparatory costs. Second, this entire model would endanger the lives of its clients. If someone died on the first day, the media would never stop lambasting the business. It could easily go out of business within a few months.

On the other hand, the business owner could point out that bungee jumping posed a similar risk to its clientele's lives. With that in mind, they could include an escort service staffed by explorers. In the end, such an entertainment facility could prove somewhat useful in increasing the number of explorers within developed nations.

While considering this, I continued stealthily exterminating monsters to ensure Mitsurugi and Saito's safety. After defeating a wolf, my kill count reached one hundred again.

Skill Orb: AGIxHP+1 | 1 / 7,000,000

Skill Orb: Super Sense | 1 / 500,000,000

Skill Orb: Danger Sense | 1 / 2,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Life Detection | 1 / 24,200,000,000

A wolf dropping Life Detection was certainly fitting. Still, I could probably obtain two or three copies a month by hunting kobolds, despite it being an extremely rare orb. And so I chose Danger Sense for now.

December 9, 2018 (Sunday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, First Level

On the next day, Mitsurugi and I wandered Yoyogi's first level like two Zen warriors seeking enlightenment. By beating up slimes, of course.

Come next year, her job as a professional model would begin in earnest. *Guess we can only hang out like this for the rest of the year*, I thought while we ate lunch together. Afterwards, we planned our next get-together and parted ways.

"My schedule should be flexible for the rest of the year," Mitsurugi had said. "Feel free to contact me at any time."

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Welcome back, Kei," Miyoshi said. "How was your date?"

"Does beating up slimes like a Zen warrior really count as a date?"

"You certainly do make an odd couple."

As I hung my coat on the office hanger and sat down, Miyoshi brought me tea.

"Speaking of which, I got a call from Asha," she told me.

"Really?"

We'd met Asha Ahmed Jain—the daughter of a wealthy Indian businessman—last month through the Super Recovery auction. From what I'd heard, she'd fully recovered and returned to high society. Since not even a month had passed since then, what could she have been calling about?

"She was mad about her calls not going through to you," Miyoshi said.

"Yeah, I was in the dungeon. But she's not experiencing any side effects,

right?”

“If that were the case, her Papa Bear would’ve called first.”

Ahmed Rahul Jain was an extremely capable and wealthy businessman. At the same time, he was an overly doting father who turned into absolute putty around his daughter, who greatly resembled his wife.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said.

“But anyway, she has an engagement here at the end of the year, and so she’ll be coming to hang out with us too.”

“The end of the year?”

“Apparently, her Papa Bear is attending some kind of party in the business world, and she’s tagging along,” Miyoshi explained.

“Wow. That’s the bourgeoisie for you.”

“From the sound of it, she has something to tell us that she couldn’t say over the phone.”

“Something to tell us, huh? Hope it’s not too much trouble.”

“Kei,” Miyoshi sighed. “She’s coming all the way to Japan from either India or Europe. This can’t be a simple conversation. Maybe she’s planning on proposing to you.”

“Stop right there. Her Papa Bear will maul me to death. Still, she’s coming to hang out at the end of the year, right? We can’t just loaf around in the office for hours on end. Where should we take her? When I think of Japanese places, Meiji Shrine and Naritasan come to mind.”

“You want to ring in the new year at a shrine? How traditional. Both of those places will have bloodthirsty crowds of three million people though.”

True enough. Every year, you could only see the heads of people at Meiji Shrine.

“Would Senso-ji be a better choice for a foreigner?” I asked.

Miyoshi shrugged. “In any case, we’re going to be up against three million people.”

“Yeah. Other than that... We could go to Disneyland, maybe?”

“Well, Asha didn’t say anything more specific than ‘the end of the year,’ and we don’t know how many days she’s staying. Let’s think of plans once we have a concrete schedule.”

I frowned. “That’s one way of doing things, but it’ll be hard to get reservations by then.”

“Even now, we wouldn’t be able to get reservations at busy places. If worse comes to worst, we can always wage war against the slimes like a trio of Zen warriors.”

“Listen here...”

Forcing someone who came all the way to Japan during New Years to beat up slimes? I could think of nothing crueller.

“Food will be the real problem,” I said.

Hinduism had even more complicated food-related taboos than Islam. And depending on the individual and their caste, these rules could be followed in a variety of ways. When serving food, even experts had to adjust their menus to a uniformly strict standard. Beyond that, you could only ask your guest directly about their dietary restrictions.

People of higher castes with strict diets wouldn’t even dine with people of differing castes, let alone with those who had consumed meat. Apparently, a meat-eater’s saliva was considered unclean. Needless to say, this made it difficult to bond with Western businessmen over a meal.

“We shouldn’t have to worry too much about food,” Miyoshi said. “I don’t know what Asha’s family does in India, but when traveling abroad, they seem to take a flexible approach according to the country.”

“You think so?”

“Ahmed invited us out to a sushi restaurant, remember?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he did say his family had no problem eating fish.”

“And usually, it’s not customary for Hindus to eat raw food.”

Of course, raw foods weren't considered either clean or unclean. Eating them simply wasn't customary.

"If I had to guess, Mr. Papa Bear is skillfully taking advantage of the Laws of Manu," Miyoshi said.

In Hinduism, eating meat had become taboo after the Laws of Manu had been established. In chapter five of the modern version, fifty-six verses summarized what foods could and couldn't be eaten. Since their establishment, these laws had exerted a great deal of influence on Hindu dietary customs.

These dietary laws were truly ambiguous, and based on your interpretation, you didn't have to give them much thought. A quick summary would be, "Killing is a no-go. Oh, but taking life to provide for one's family isn't killing. Neither are foods given as offerings."

Miyoshi was implying that Ahmed could avoid violating Hindu doctrine by interpreting these fifty-six verses in a flexible manner. But of course, issues of purity and impurity within Indian culture—as well as the caste system—had influenced dietary customs. As a prominent Indian man, Ahmed couldn't completely ignore these influences.

"Well, I call blasphemy," I said.

Miyoshi laughed at that.

When engaging in cultural exchange, two people of different faiths had to stay open-minded while explaining themselves to each other. If they couldn't understand one another, they would have no choice but to avoid or annihilate the other party.

Our meeting with whomever is on the other side of the dungeons might be similar, I thought, the idea suddenly occurring to me.

"So anyway, we're going back to Yoyogi tomorrow, right?" Miyoshi asked.

"Yep," I replied. "We've got plenty to do this time, so it'll be a marathon, not a race. First, we need to verify everything related to the party system."

"In that case, there are a few things I'd like to verify as well."

"Such as?"

“While we’re collecting magic crystal treats for the Arthurs, I want to figure out how LUC affects drops. There are a few other minor things as well.”

I nodded. “You want to start on the tenth level, then?”

“That should be our main focus at the beginning of the exploration, yes.”

“In that case, could you contact Naruse and ask her to come here early tomorrow morning?”

“Huh?” Miyoshi asked, cocking her head. “Naruse already has a key to the office. Even if we’re gone, she should be able to get in.”

“Before we leave, she needs to meet Cavall and the others.”

“Oh, right. If they suddenly meet in the office after we’ve left...”

“It *could* make for an amusing joke, but I don’t think she’ll laugh,” I finished.

“She definitely won’t.”

Even with Miyoshi and I acting as mediators, I couldn’t predict Naruse’s reaction to meeting the Arthurs.

“Can we even publicly keep hellhounds as pets?” I asked. “What’ll happen if she orders us to get rid of them?”

“Then I’ll have no choice but to live hidden away in the darkness.”

“You plan on turning into some kind of yokai?”

Miyoshi donned an unusually serious expression, seeming fired up about going to bat for the Arthurs. “Anyway, let’s do our best.”

December 10, 2018 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

It was a cold, windless, and slightly overcast day in Tokyo. You could see your breath in the chilly air.

Naruse arrived at the office earlier than usual. “Good morning,” she greeted us, then took a seat at the dining room table, her expression worried.

“You two are going to the eighteenth level this time, right?” she asked.

“That’s the plan,” I replied. “Is something wrong?”

“Well, about that...” At first, Naruse seemed conflicted about what to say. Then she began to speak again, choosing her words carefully. “Based on my investigations, there are a lot of rumors about the eighteenth level.”

“Rumors?” I repeated.

Naruse withdrew several documents from her bag. When you wanted to reference multiple pieces of information at once and didn’t need a search engine, paper still provided overwhelmingly better comprehension than tablets. After all, paper supplied a wealth of information outside text, such as the placement of the files, sense of touch, and so forth. These would act as triggers for memory.

Miyoshi and I looked over the several pieces of paper that Naruse had lined up, which all contained information on the eighteenth level. The middle document was a map of the floor.

“What’s this?” I asked. “The eighteenth level hasn’t been fully investigated?”

Quite a few of the territories on the map were blank. Starting from the stairs leading down to the eighteenth level, almost everything to the right was unexplored territory.

“There’s a cliff in that direction with a sea of clouds spreading below it,” Naruse explained.

According to her, the SDF unit had postponed their investigation of the area below the cliff, finding the prospect too dangerous. Beginning from the stairs leading down to the eighteenth level, they had conducted their survey in a radial path. Fortunately, the stairs leading down to the nineteenth level had been discovered above the cliff. Thus, the survey unit had continued down to the lower levels.

“And no surveys have been conducted since then?” I asked.

Curiously, I traced my finger along a line that deviated from the radially surveyed territory. This area—which stretched towards a mountain—had also been fully investigated.

“No, there haven’t been any surveys since the first one,” Naruse replied. “The reason for this is the route you’re looking at.”

Naruse pointed to the top of a mountain called “Batian,” at the end of the line I’d traced. This wasn’t an uninvestigated area. Instead, it was an off-limits area.

“Off-limits?” I asked, having never seen this sort of warning in a dungeon. “What’s this?”

After taking a breath, Naruse lowered her voice and began to recount the incident as if telling a ghost story. “There was a mountain climber in the first SDF unit to survey the eighteenth level.”

Upon seeing this mountain, he’d called it Batian Peak.⁽¹⁾ Afterwards, he and two other teammates had decided to survey the area around the summit.

“So that’s why the area around the summit has been thoroughly investigated?” I asked. “The area outside the circle is mostly unexplored, and surveying the mountain would require a lot of effort, after all.”

“Imagine those climbers sneaking away in the middle of the exploration to scale the mountain,” Miyoshi chimed in, amused. “If they received twenty-eight days of house arrest as punishment, that would be legendary!”

“Why?” I asked.

Point Lenana—one of Mount Kenya’s handful of peaks—had first been summited by three Italian men during the Second World War.⁽²⁾ However, they’d also been captives of the British army. Of all things, these men had escaped imprisonment to climb Mount Kenya, and after descending, they’d returned to the POW camp. Consequently, they’d been placed in solitary confinement for twenty-eight days.

“They turned themselves back in?” I asked incredulously. “Like the main characters from *We’re No Angels*?”

“Exactly,” Miyoshi replied. “But honestly, that movie rankles me a bit.”

“Why? The 1995 version is a nice Christmas movie. I like it better than *It’s a Wonderful Life* or *Miracle on 34th Street*.”

Upon hearing this, an overly enthused Miyoshi clenched her fist into a ball.

“Listen up, Kei. After the Christmas dinner scene, the cast leaves more than three fourths of an 1888 Château d’Yquem untouched! At that point, it was probably thirty years old! It was the same age as the protagonist, after all! How could they do such a thing?! For this, I swear vengeance upon the Ducotel family!”

“You need to change your movie-viewing perspective,” I said with a sigh of exasperation.

Sure, while watching *Dogs of War*, some viewers might get upset at Christopher Walken’s Glenfiddich being stolen. But only Miyoshi would concern herself with the brand of champagne being drunk by the soldiers in the final scene. By chance, we’d watched the movie together on satellite TV, and her final impressions had been “They’re using surprisingly nice glasses. Usually, you would drink straight from the bottle in this kind of situation.” In response to this, I’d nearly quipped, “Seriously? Is that what you should be focusing on right now?”

In any case, breaking out of prison to climb a mountain was certainly eccentric. Of course, if you did something similar in a dungeon, monsters would immediately surround and kill you.

Naruse—who’d been listening to our conversation with a smile—continued speaking, her expression not darkening. “Apparently, those team members were so absorbed with reaching the peak that they didn’t pay attention to anything else.”

Well, what climber could resist summiting the mountain after coming so far?

As I considered this, Naruse handed me a copy of a report.

“What’s this?” I asked.

According to the report, two of the three SDF soldiers who’d attempted to summit the mountain had received a two-rank promotion upon entering the area. In other words, they’d died.

I cocked my head. “Huh?”

“Because of this incident, the survey for the remaining area was put on hold,” Naruse explained.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Though I read the report in detail, it didn’t include their cause of death. “So no one knows how they died?”

Naruse nodded. “But there appears to be *something* at the top of the mountain,” she said simply.

“Something?” I repeated.

But apparently, no one had any details. The investigation report didn’t even include a cause of death, much less a physician’s statement on the deceased soldiers. Only the fact of their deaths and instructions not to approach the mountain were spelled out in a lifeless font.

“No need to worry, Kei,” Miyoshi said in a carefree tone. “We’re pretty good at avoiding trouble. So long as we keep our distance, everything should be fine.” She then turned to ask Naruse a question. “Whatever’s there, it won’t leave the mountain, right?”

“For now, at least,” Naruse answered.

Is this the reason for the eighteenth level having so few explorers? I thought to myself.

“Thanks for telling us all this,” I said. “We’ll avoid this mountain at any cost—”

“About that,” Naruse interrupted. “The genomos live in the underground caverns dotting the area around the mountain.”

“In that case...we’ll *do our best* to avoid the mountain.”

“Please be careful.”

When this lecture on the eighteenth level reached a stopping point, Miyoshi received digital versions of the files from Naruse. While observing this from the corner of my eye, I casually brought up another subject.

“So anyway... Um, how should I put this? Before we leave, we’d like to introduce you to someone, Naruse.”

“Introduce me to someone?” she repeated.

We needed her to meet the Arthurs. Unsure of what to say, I nudged the owner’s (was that the correct term?) side with my elbow.

“You’re up, Miyoshi.”

“Umm, Naruse,” Miyoshi hedged. “Please stay calm and hear me out.”

“Huh?” Naruse asked. “This is kind of scary. What’s going on?”

Her smile twitching somewhat, Naruse nervously refolded her hands on top of her knees.

Like a bus tour guide, Miyoshi pointed to the side with her palm. “Please look in this direction.”

“Yes?”

Still on the couch, Naruse turned to the right. Upon seeing Cavall sitting there rather adorably, she let forth an involuntary shriek.

“Whoa!” I shouted. “Keep it down!”

I raced over to cover Naruse’s mouth. This was a residential area, after all. Yes, we might have soundproofed this house, but if a piercing shriek leaked outdoors in broad daylight, our reputation would plummet.

Naruse continued to let out a muffled scream. Her eyes wide with terror, she pressed her body against me, simultaneously flailing her arms and legs to escape from Cavall.

“I-It’s okay!” I shouted. “Calm down!”

Despite feeling as though I’d kidnapped a woman, I somehow managed to pacify Naruse. Once she’d stopped thrashing about, I removed my hand from her mouth. After being released, she continued to flap her mouth like a goldfish stranded on land. She kept her eyes on Cavall, not turning in Miyoshi’s direction.

“Wh-What is this thing?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Umm... One of my pets?” Miyoshi answered.

In response to this, Naruse glared at Miyoshi. “Your *pets*?” she repeated skeptically.

“Yes, that’s right. Watch this.”

As soon as Miyoshi had uttered these words, Cavall licked Naruse’s cheek

with a wet tongue.

“Eek...!”

Her breath held, Naruse shot upright. She then turned her neck with an audible creak, meeting Cavall’s gaze. For a short while, human and hellhound stared at each other. Due to the odd tension dominating the room, Miyoshi and I also watched the situation unfold with bated breath.

After a while, Naruse finally let out a breath, nervously patting Cavall on the nose. “A-At second glance, he does have a sort of charm to him. He might even be cute.”

When the tension dissipated, Cavall also relaxed, his head and the outer corners of his eyes drooping.

“He also feels much nicer than I would’ve imagined,” Naruse added.

Indeed, the Arthurs’ fur was much softer than I’d first expected. Since it looked relatively stiff in battle, perhaps the hellhounds sent magic through their fur to increase its strength. In any case, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call them a ten out of ten on the fluffiness scale.

As Naruse gradually grew used to Cavall, she began rubbing him all over. From the looks of it, she’d regained enough composure to enjoy his fluffiness.

Once Naruse had fully calmed down, she told us that the WDA didn’t have any rules regarding permits or quarantines. Until now, no summoners or tamers had ever appeared, so such regulations had been unnecessary. Also, hellhounds didn’t appear on any notable lists, such as ones for dangerous or invasive animals. So even if we sent a notification to the government about keeping them as pets, those rules wouldn’t apply to the Arthurs.

In other words, we simply needed to send in a notification for dogs, receive a permit, and have them receive their rabies shots. Of course, we couldn’t predict what sort of effect rabies shots would have on the Arthurs. That did pose a problem.

“At any rate, you do have a fair amount of leeway,” Naruse said. “In the meantime, I’ll make inquiries at all the right places. For now, keep the hellhounds hidden, and keep a close eye on them.”

“Thanks a bunch,” I said.

That’s our full-time supervisor for you. She’s one dependable woman.

If it became known that we were raising hellhounds, some research institute might try to take the Arthurs and use them as lab animals. However, forcefully taking someone’s property in Japan would be difficult. The owner simply had to refrain from handing over their pet. Long live the Land of the Rising Sun.

Still, someone could kidnap them, I thought. But upon seeing Cavall sitting adorably on his haunches, I reconsidered. *Nope, not possible.*

Dungeon-related rules had been playing catch-up for the past three years. Whenever a new problem arose, authorities had no choice but to come up with an impromptu solution. The hellhounds were yet another example of this.

“Anyway, one of the hellhounds will always be guarding the grounds,” I told Naruse. “So you can continue translating without any worries.”

With that, Miyoshi and I left the office.

Yoyogi Dungeon

“Honestly, I didn’t expect her to be so surprised,” Miyoshi said.

“If *you* turned around and found a hellhound sitting there, surprise would be the normal reaction. In fact, I’m impressed she didn’t pass out.”

And that wet lick to the cheek must have felt like a taste test before being gobbled up.

“I guess,” Miyoshi said. “But they’re so cute.”

“All owners think their pets are cute.”

Objectively speaking, the hellhounds were frightening. But since they acted exactly like puppies, they grew cuter over time.

After descending into Yoyogi Dungeon’s first level, we moved into a room with no other people.

“Well then, shall we test out the party system first?” I asked.

“Sounds good.”

Parties formed through the dungeon system still hadn’t been announced to the general public. When Heaven’s Leaks went live on Christmas Day, we would use this party system to authenticate the site’s claims. Thus we hadn’t formed a party with anyone since our initial tests. And during this exploration, we would be running more tests.

Admit, I thought in English while touching my D-Card to Miyoshi’s.

Nothing stimulated my visual or auditory senses, but just like last time, I felt as though a strange link had been established between me and Miyoshi.

“Is this ‘sense of connection’ a UI that signals joining a party?” Miyoshi asked while looking at the back of her D-Card.

“Probably,” I replied. “It’s more of an instinctual feeling than a UI, though.”

Of course, the back of one’s D-Card also had a party member list. By looking at that list, you could visually confirm you’d joined a party.

While verifying our telepathic abilities, the XP distribution rates, and our party order, we headed down to the tenth level.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Level

Though hearing this might have caused most explorers’ eyes to bulge, Miyoshi and I planned to spend the night on the tenth level, which was relatively safe for us. After all, none of the monsters there could overturn Dolly, and there were no explorers around to see us. Finally, since Miyoshi could attack from within Dolly, this floor was a veritable paradise for her.

“Should we exterminate another 373 zombies?” Miyoshi asked.

“About that. If the Wandering Manor doesn’t disappear until midnight, those monsters will chase us around all evening, even if we’re on the other side of the gates.”

If other explorers were around, the situation could turn into a gruesome MPK train. [\(3\)](#) And unlike in a game, the slaughtered people wouldn’t come back to life.

“Then even if we do cause the Wandering Manor to appear, let’s make sure it’s close to midnight,” Miyoshi said.

During this conversation, we ambled down the shortest possible route to the tenth level. By the time we reached the stairs to the tenth floor, around six hours had passed.

As a general rule, most explorers despised the tenth level, but honestly, it was a great place for running experiments. The graveyard overflowed with monsters that possessed standard drop items, and they would approach you without any effort on your part. Plus, since there were very few species of different monsters, we wouldn’t struggle to exterminate a high number of the same kind. All in all, this would be the perfect level to verify what effect LUC had on the drop rate of standard items and magic crystals.

While casually mowing down undead, we headed in the opposite direction from the eleventh level stairs. At the same time, we moved a sufficient distance from the stairs leading back up. Finally, we arrived—as usual—in a place devoid of people. We then took out Dolly and climbed aboard her.

“Phew,” I sighed.

Closing my eyes, I slumped down onto the dinette sofa. Miyoshi booted up an array of monitors, allowing us to keep watch on our surroundings.

“Keeping track of my kill count is difficult,” I said. “Do you think we could use camera footage to count the number of monsters I’ve defeated?”

“Since all the recognition APIs that might be useful are in the cloud, we couldn’t use them in the dungeons. And even if we *could* use them, sending the videos would take a whole lot of time, so in actuality, it wouldn’t be practical. If we had an AI learn to recognize monsters, we might be able to make do with a stand-alone application. But after taking angle changes into account, determining through video footage whether you’ve killed a monster would be pretty difficult, right?”

Even if the application could recognize that you landed a direct hit on a monster, it wouldn’t know if the monster had truly died until its body disappeared. But what if the monster disappeared when the camera angle shifted? The application wouldn’t be able to distinguish between a live monster

moving out of frame and an exterminated monster vanishing.

“Do you think a less accurate judgment might be possible?” I asked.

Miyoshi cocked her head. “Like simply knowing if the attack landed or not?”

“Exactly. Afterwards, if the monster disappeared from the camera, the application could judge it as being dead. It doesn’t have to be that strict.”

“If strictness isn’t an issue, it might be possible.”

During this conversation, Miyoshi had been activating all the sensors. Now, she sat on the three-person sofa to my left, leaning forwards and donning a smile that seemed to say, “All right, spit it out.”

“Well then, Kei. Where are you going with this, exactly?”

“A-About that,” I stammered. “I went dungeon diving with Saito and Mitsurugi the other day, remember?”

I then explained how Saito had been enjoying hunting wolves at first, but after a little while, she’d grown tired of it.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Miyoshi said.

If someone dreamed of becoming a professional explorer from the outset, their goal could be enough motivation to continue grinding. On the other hand, hunting goblins and wolves might excite casuals at first, but once they grew accustomed to it, the boredom would set in. This was probably inevitable, what with there being no incentives or ways in which to stand out. But at this rate, the number of people working towards the capture of dungeons wouldn’t increase.

“So what if we made goggles that displayed points when you defeated a monster?” I asked. “The number of people who made a game out of leveling up their stats would increase, right?”

“And as a by-product, we could utilize urban dungeons in order to reach five hundred million total explorers,” Miyoshi said. “Is that the idea?”

“More or less.”

When food drops became public knowledge, I could easily imagine regions

experiencing food shortages—and those expecting to in the future—increasing their number of explorers as a national policy. Yet as things currently stood, the number of registered explorers in developed countries wouldn't see much growth. Furthermore, there weren't even one hundred dungeons in the entire world.

"If we added a million people to each dungeon, we wouldn't even reach one hundred million new explorers," I said.

Miyoshi nodded. "Even if ten to twenty thousand new explorers registered each day, we wouldn't reach ten million in a whole year."

"Exactly. But speaking of registered explorers—once we publish the party information, their numbers will probably increase dramatically, even in urban areas."

You could gain telepathic abilities, after all. Everyone would want to try that. Yet in terms of capturing dungeons, the total number of explorers who ventured beyond the beginner levels would continue to pose a problem.

"Still, having a small set of goggles perform all these functions would be difficult." After a short pause, Miyoshi began turning our conversation into something realistic. "On the second floor of Yoyogi, you could probably run electric cables from above. And so, if you brought in a server and connected it to Wi-Fi, you might be able to create a facility that matches your vision."

In Yoyogi, the first level's entrance and exit were very close to one another. Even if those cables extended to the second level, you ran very little risk of slimes melting them, so long as you posted guards.

"This sort of game would be a bit too large-scale to play by yourself," Miyoshi said. "But if the JDA or a private company operated the facility, they could charge a fee for thirty-minute sessions. And if you matched players together, it could become as widespread as Airsoft. Minigames like 'Wolf Hunting Co-op' could become a thing."

"Also, if you turned points into rankings and created a site to view them, that might motivate people to play," I added.

"Even so, we're talking about dungeons here."

“But it sounds fun, right? Like a real VRMMO. Wait, like real virtual reality? That doesn’t make sense.”

Miyoshi chuckled. “That aside, it would also be a *real death game*, remember?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“If you didn’t receive a written pledge from the players, and someone died, you wouldn’t be able to avoid responsibility.”

I frowned. “True enough.”

Even if you received a written pledge and avoided legal responsibility, enthusiasm for the game would inevitably plummet.

“Wait, who the hell would willingly play a game like that?!” I cried. “If you could log out of *Sword Art Online*, everyone would have done so the minute an incident occurred!”

“No arguments there.”

I was at a loss for words, but eventually wondered, “Did we both get hit over the head with the stupid hammer?”

“Don’t be overdramatic, Kei. The idea itself is interesting. When you hear ‘real death game,’ it doesn’t sound so great, but if you call it an esport, it suddenly sounds acceptable, right? Even in boxing and F1, accidents can lead to death.”

“So first, it needs to be established as a sport or form of recreation,” I said. “And if it’s made to be as safe as possible, we’ll be okay?”

“People wanting to be promoters might even pop up.”

“You make it sound like someone else’s problem.”

“I mean, do *you* want to get into this business, Kei?”

Now that she mentioned it, I just had a small desire to play this game myself. I hadn’t even considered using this idea for a business. The entire premise seemed like way too much trouble in every possible respect.

“Not in the slightest,” I replied.

“Right?! Developing the game and participating as a grassroots player sounds

fun, but profiting from a real death game? That'll be a hard pass from me."

In the end, we decided to try developing the fundamental technology just for fun. After having a meal, we stood up, preparing to fulfill the original purpose of this dive.

"Guess we'll just have to count our kills the old-fashioned way," I said while moving over to the bunk beds. "For now, let's each defeat one hundred skeletons and compare the number of bones we end up with."

"You got it."

"Oh, and we need to check your LUC before that."

Checking Miyoshi's stats was somewhat of a hassle. But put simply, she would Appraise me, and I would adjust my stats to the smallest value at which the result became zero. Since we already knew Miyoshi's stats from the previous measurement, I could find this value relatively easily by starting with her previous LUC. Then I would increase the value by one point at a time.

To prepare for this, I called up Making.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 674.029

HP: 250.00

MP: 190.00

STR: [-] 100 [+]

VIT: [-] 100 [+]

INT: [-] 100 [+]

AGI: [-] 100 [+]

DEX: [-] 100 [+]

LUC: [-] 100 [+]

->> Azusa Miyoshi

“What the heck?!”

Upon seeing a different display than usual, I couldn’t repress a shout. The name “Azusa Miyoshi” had appeared beneath my statuses.

“Could this be...?” I muttered to myself.

Timidly, I tapped Miyoshi’s name, and the exact display I’d anticipated appeared.

Name: Azusa Miyoshi

SP: 2.863

HP: 21.70

MP: 32.50

STR: [-] 8 [+]

VIT: [-] 9 [+]

INT: [-] 18 [+]

AGI: [-] 11 [+]

DEX: [-] 13 [+]

LUC: [-] 10 [+]

“M-Miyoshi, look at this.”

I leaned over the side of the bunk bed and pointed to the screen. But of course, Miyoshi couldn’t see anything related to Making.

“What is it?” Miyoshi asked. “Did something happen?”

“No, um... Tell me—how much SP have you gained so far?”

“Huh? Hold on a second.” Miyoshi pulled up the records on her PC and checked the value. “About 4.86.”

The Making screen read “SP: 2.863.” In other words, around fifty percent of

her SP had been naturally distributed to her statuses.

“What is it, Kei?” Miyoshi asked. “You’ve got me curious.”

“To tell you the truth...”

I told Miyoshi about her name appearing on Making’s status screen and what happened when I tapped it. In short, this function would allow me to tweak the stats of my fellow party members.

“Are you serious?!” Miyoshi cried.

“Seems like it.”

Miyoshi’s eyes lit up for a single moment, but she soon regained her senses, speaking calmly. “But Kei...” Tilting her head, she continued speaking as if to confirm her doubts. “When you gain SP, it’s naturally allocated to your statuses according to your actions, right?”

“Seems that way.”

Based on what I’d seen from Mitsurugi and Saito, that hypothesis seemed correct.

After the rebar incident, my SP hadn’t been naturally distributed, but perhaps my acquisition of Making had something to do with that. Still, considering the short amount of time between the rebar incident and my actual use of Making, maybe it took a while for SP to transform into stats. The process could be similar to ingesting nutrients, which our bodies took a decent amount of time to actually absorb.

“You’ve talked about the status editing function before,” Miyoshi said. “As I recall, you can’t return distributed points to the SP pool, right? So in this case, wouldn’t the ability to edit be meaningless?”

Certainly, being able to weaken someone but not strengthen them seemed almost pointless.

“Actually, here’s the thing,” I said.

I then explained to Miyoshi that she had 2.863 SP remaining. Likewise, around two points had been naturally distributed.

“In other words, around fifty percent of the SP you acquire is naturally distributed?” Miyoshi asked.

“If we’re judging from this one example, it definitely looks that way. The remaining half might turn into actual stats over a longer period of time.”

“Then does that mean...?” After trailing off, Miyoshi began speaking with renewed excitement and vigor. “When someone joins your party, you can distribute half their SP to their desired status?!”

“Y-Yeah, I guess so.”

“Kei!”

“Hold on, Miyoshi. We can’t use this to make money or to help explorers we barely know.”

After all, those people would need to form a party with me. That alone would be a high bar to clear. Other than Miyoshi, it would only feel natural to form a party with Mitsurugi, Saito, and perhaps Naruse.

I could never walk up to a stranger in real life and say, “Hey there, buddy. Wanna join my party?” Even in a game, that sounded like an impossible task for me. And in the rare case that someone *did* show interest, they would inevitably ask to see my D-Card to verify my abilities. And obviously, I couldn’t show my D-Card to anyone.

Miyoshi considered this for a moment before speaking. “I think it depends on how you bring the offer to them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s see... You could call what you’re doing a ‘dungeon boot camp.’ After joining your party, that person will participate in mystery activities for the next few days.”

“Uh, mystery activities?” I repeated skeptically.

“Those can be anything, so long as they seem likely to result in death. And when the boot camp comes to an end, you can add SP into the participants’ desired statuses. ‘Oh my, what’s this?’ everyone will ask. ‘Your boot camp leveled me up in the exact way I wanted it to!’ But of course, you’ll want to

level them up a little bit at a time, not all at once.”

“Wait, did you just say, ‘seems likely to result in death’?”

“Which one are people more likely to be satisfied with?” Miyoshi asked.

“Power they gained easily, or power they gained through repeated hard work?”

If you asked me to pick one, I would definitely choose the former, but I couldn’t argue with the latter being more convincing.

“Guess you have a point,” I conceded.

But if the boot camp produced dramatic results, I would be flooded with applications from all over the world. And to a certain extent, I wanted to enjoy my freedom. Getting mixed up in something like that sounded awful to me.

“I’ve gotta be honest,” I said. “Being forced to run that boot camp day in and day out? Sounds like a terrible life to me.”

“Hmm. We could narrow down the participants by applying some set of conditions.”

“And what would those be?”

“For example, they would have to help with Yoyogi’s exploration for a whole year.”

“Why use the word ‘exploration?’” I asked.

“Saying ‘capture’ gives the impression of needing to be on the front lines, and only a handful of people are capable of that, right? And unlike with Evans, the actual disappearance of Yoyogi would probably cause problems for a huge number of people.”

“That does seem likely.”

After all, urban dungeons had close ties with their cities. The sudden disappearance of something integrated into a system both socially and economically would cause a whole host of problems.

“Even if the pretext is to capture Yoyogi, our condition being to ‘explore’ it should be fine,” Miyoshi concluded.

“Not a bad idea,” I agreed. “If all goes well, that should reduce the number of

applications from foreign countries. But in the end, only seven people can participate at once. If we receive two hundred applications a month, and the program ends in a single day, it'll still take that entire month to get through everyone."

"We talked about setting up a foundation before, remember? We could coordinate this boot camp with that foundation. If it became a large enough business, we could hire someone else to do the actual training after you've formed the party." At this, Miyoshi laughed. "Unless you want to imitate Sergeant Hartman, that is." [\(4\)](#)

Yeah, that could be fun, but do I have the mentality to act like Sergeant Hartman? Nah, probably not. And anyway, that sounds like a good way to get killed by a graduating participant.

"And if the participants kill monsters during the training, you could hog all the XP to yourself," Miyoshi said. "You would level up like crazy."

"Whoa, how heartless can you be?"

"Consider it a reward. A single person's XP won't amount to very much, anyway."

Occasionally, there were stories of people embezzling less than a yen of interest from countless bank accounts and making a killing. Miyoshi's suggestion felt pretty similar.

"If you're going to hold this boot camp, you should be proactive about it," Miyoshi declared. "Being able to screen the participants yourself will make things easier."

In other words, I needed to be deliberate with my selections.

"Suppose the pretext of this boot camp is to capture Yoyogi," Miyoshi continued. "In that case, giving preferential treatment to veterans who actively explore the dungeon makes perfect sense. And even if beginners did participate, they wouldn't see any results."

Since the main purpose would be to distribute excess SP, explorers without any excess SP would gain nothing. Consequently, allowing beginners to participate would put us in a tight spot.

“But what if someone important pushes for a certain explorer to participate, and they have zero chance of growth?” I asked. “Not being able to produce any results will look bad on our part.”

“If it comes to that, I can tell the world about Appraisal.”

“Seriously?”

It would be one thing to tell an applicant, “I can’t accept you because you have zero chance of growth.” But to say, “I know this because of my Appraisal skill” would be the killing blow. After all, how could you argue the point?

“Oh, and as the front woman of D-Powers, I’ll take a huge share of the profits,” Miyoshi said. “Seeing as I’m already famous, applicants will come flocking to us.”

The world already knew Miyoshi as the one-and-only, legendary orb hunter. Thankfully, she had a much older WDA ID than me. If she’d seemed fresh off the farm, it would’ve caused an even bigger stir.

This development had followed our first conversation in that Italian restaurant to a tee. The increasing danger to Miyoshi’s person did complicate things, but currently, she had a group of hellhound puppies to defend her. Ones capable of defending against snipers, no less. And as Duke Togo had proven, if your usefulness outweighed your threat level, people would turn a blind eye to you. In fiction, at least.

“And with the Appraisal requests I receive from around the world, I’ll be rolling in dough!” Miyoshi cried. “Oh, and I can wear the scouter during those Appraisals. That’ll give us a reason to develop them, killing two birds with one stone!”

Though Miyoshi spoke playfully, I knew this to be her characteristic way of putting on a brave front.

“Sounds good,” I said with a wry smile.

I had a slew of other questions, such as “What will you do if another Appraisal user appears?” But since we would be a private organization running a private camp that privately selected participants, it wouldn’t make sense for anyone to complain.

“In any case, we can start laying the groundwork once I’ve figured out if Making can be used on child parties,” I declared.

“Yeah, that would definitely make things easier. It would also increase the number of people we could recruit at the same time.”

“If it doesn’t work, the limit would only be six people at a time.”

“Not seven?” Miyoshi asked.

“Not including our hired instructor within the party would be inconvenient, right?”

“Oh, that’s true.”

There were plenty of other things I needed to verify. For instance, while the camp was being conducted within Yoyogi Dungeon, could I maintain the party from the surface? Regardless, I would figure these things out later.

“But anyway, we’ll continue this conversation after returning to the surface and testing things out on our friends,” I said. “Our goals for this exploration are to acquire Mining and figure out how LUC affects drop rates.”

“Roger that.”

Afterwards, we ventured out into the field to investigate the latter. My LUC being exactly ten times Miyoshi’s proved convenient for these tests.

As a result, we learned that the drop rate for standard items—in this case, skeleton bones—had very little connection to LUC. By and large, around twenty-five percent of defeated skeletons dropped bones.

“Our drop rates for bones seem pretty similar,” Miyoshi said, “but there’s a huge difference for magic crystals.”

For the drop rate of magic crystals, you multiplied the quotient of $LUC / 100$ by the drop rate for standard items. Compared to me, Miyoshi acquired one tenth the number of magic crystals.

“Only getting three magic crystals for killing 125 skeletons is a bit of a downer,” she said.

When it came to rare items such as first-ranked healing potions, we couldn’t

even calculate the drop rate, as Miyoshi hadn't been able to acquire one.

"But there must be some sort of connection to LUC," Miyoshi continued. "After all, you got three first-ranked healing potions while I got zero."

We'd both defeated 125 skeletons. Why not an even one hundred, you ask? We simply hadn't been able to stop. And since we'd exterminated quite a few skeletons in the past, we were able to include those numbers in constructing the following hypothesis.

Monsters had a base drop rate (BDR). By our current estimation, it was around 0.25.

Monsters also had a rare drop rate (RDR). By our current estimation, it was around 0.02.

Standard drops weren't contingent on LUC, conforming to the BDR.

Tentatively, rare items had a drop rate of about $RDR \times (LUC / 100)$.

Magic crystals had a drop rate of about $BDR \times (LUC / 100)$.

"I think that sums things up," Miyoshi said.

"Yeah, me too," I agreed. "I'd like to collect more data from a variety of explorers, but...I can't imagine many people having diligently recorded the number of monsters of each different species they've defeated."

"True. We do it because quantification motivates us, but if even two species get mixed together, it can turn into a real problem."

This hadn't been the case on the first level, seeing as there were only slimes. Yet on the tenth level, skeletons and zombies appeared together. Counting them separately had turned out to be a much bigger pain in the ass than I'd first imagined. If Making displayed a history of defeated monsters, things would've been simpler, but unfortunately, that function didn't exist.

Miyoshi sighed. "Presumably, the WDA hasn't even announced the base drop rate because asking explorers 'How many monsters have you killed?' would be impossible."

That seemed likely. Even if the WDA did ask this question, the answers would be full of errors, which would lead to inaccurate statistics. Since the SDF had led

the initial explorations, I could imagine them having their own set of statistics, but those were probably military secrets. I couldn't foresee the SDF actually releasing them.

Our objective for tomorrow would be the eighteenth level. Thus, I gave up on asking for the impossible, took a shower, and immediately started counting sheep.

December 11, 2018 (Tuesday)

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Azusa Miyoshi is keeping hellhounds as pets?" Saiga asked.

Yesterday, Miharuru had promised to make inquiries at all the right places. Thus, she'd immediately decided to consult with Saiga on the matter, simultaneously using this opportunity to deliver a report. Saiga responded to this news with wide-eyed shock, covering his face in a crestfallen manner.

"Yes," Miharuru replied. "However, the JDA doesn't have any rules on summoners or tamers."

"Of course we don't."

Up until now, there'd been no explorers in possession of such skills, and dungeon associations were always one step behind. Consequently, anticipating hypothetical skills and setting up legal frameworks in advance wasn't feasible. The resources for such work just didn't exist.

"Since hellhounds aren't on the lists of dangerous or invasive animals, we have no choice but to treat them like regular dogs," Miharuru said.

Yes, her statement was in accordance with the law. However, the law simply hadn't caught up to reality. That being said, Article 39 of Japan's constitution guaranteed the non-retroactivity of laws. So long as those pets didn't cause any problems, the JDA couldn't immediately ban the ownership of hellhounds.

"I-Indeed," Saiga answered. "Do these, erm...*dogs* seem okay to you?"

"What do you mean by 'okay,' sir?"

"I mean, they're monsters, aren't they? They're not going to attack you,

right?”

“Doubtful,” Miharu said. “In fact, they’re pretty cute.”

“Cute?!”

While Miharu had been translating, a hellhound had stayed by her side the entire time. In the end, she’d completely fallen for its charm. Once again, fluffiness had proven to be the ultimate justice.

“I-I see,” Saiga continued. “Well, it might be okay to think of them as slightly large retrievers.”

Even if they had purportedly come from hell.

“I suppose so,” Miharu replied, “but when measured at the shoulders, they’re about three times as tall.”

“Three times?!”

When measured at the shoulders, Labrador retrievers were around fifty to sixty centimeters tall. In other words...

“They’re 150 centimeters?!” Saiga cried.

“I believe so.”

When measured at the shoulders, standard hellhounds were around one hundred centimeters tall at most. In that case, these summoned hellhounds were rather large for their species.

The largest Bengal tigers weighed around three hundred kilograms and were one meter tall when measured at the shoulders. Likewise, Siberian tigers were around 350 kilograms. Some horses—the Shire breed, for instance—could exceed one ton. But hellhounds were supposed to be dogs.

“Can we even call these creatures dogs?” Saiga asked.

“Appearances aside, they act like dogs.”

His unease getting the better of him, Saiga wanted to ask, “What the hell do you mean, appearances aside?” Yet at the end of this quip, he felt a dark future lying in wait. And so he ignored Miharu’s statement through sheer willpower.

“So what are you going to do?” Saiga inquired instead.

“For now, I’ve looked into the legal formalities for their ward,” Miharu replied. “After that, I was going to look into whether the JDA or WDA had any preexisting formalities of their own. If they did, I obviously would follow them.”

“Well, that makes sense, but I doubt that such formalities exist in any of the dungeon associations. After all, *we’re* the department with jurisdiction over such matters in Japan.”

If such formalities didn’t exist in the Dungeon Management Section, they wouldn’t exist in Japan as a whole.

“Understood,” Miharu said. “Also, to avoid any trouble, D-Powers would like to keep their hellhounds hidden until we’ve taken care of all these legal formalities.”

“Keep them hidden?” Saiga repeated.

“If the hellhounds become public knowledge before they’re officially recognized as pets, various research institutes might try to lay claim to them. D-Powers is wary of that happening.”

Saiga nodded. “Oh, I see. Then you have my approval. Outside of D-Powers, I doubt that anyone will have the same problem for some time, so as their full-time supervisor, I leave this matter in your hands. Please report back after making any decisions.”

“Yes, sir.”

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Level

“Holy cow!” Miyoshi and I cried simultaneously.

When we descended to the eighteenth level, the scenery overwhelmed us. A desolate landscape unfolded before us—large boulders strewn across the blackish earth. Below the steep cliff at our feet, a sea of clouds stretched out as far as the eye could see.

“Does the dungeon extend all the way beneath that sea of clouds?” I asked. “Because that would be mind-boggling.”

“It looks to be several dozen kilometers down,” Miyoshi said.

“No wonder the map of this level hasn’t been completed.”

“But just in case, I still copied the data.”

Miyoshi took out a tablet displaying the map of the eighteenth level. Just as we’d seen on paper, the surveyed area extended in a radial shape starting from the ascending stairs. The surveyed area then came to an end at the descending stairs, almost as if the investigation had been discontinued. The single exception was a protrusion in the direction of the mountain summit.

I looked down at the vast sea of clouds beneath my feet. There was a collapsed slope, which seemed possible to climb down.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I can imagine how the scouting team must’ve felt.”

You couldn’t see the end, after all. The view being so good was only more discouraging. And when you looked up, a row of glacial horns towered sharply upwards. The most conspicuous of these large peaks rose steadily, resembling the growing amalgam of mercury dropped into a hole carved out of aluminum.

Using the tips of my toes, I kicked one of the black rocks at my feet. “Looks like basalt to me.”

Nodding, Miyoshi looked up at the mountain. “And that’s definitely Mount Kenya.”

I squinted my eyes and looked up at the mountain as well.

“Anyway, the caves we’re looking for are located around the base of that peak,” Miyoshi continued. “Apparently, it goes by the name of ‘Batian.’”

“That’s the off-limits area we talked about with Naruse, right? According to her, there’s something up there.”

“Ding, ding! Correct answer!”

After seeing this peak, one SDF soldier’s love of mountain climbing had overcome him, ultimately leading to his demise. Even now, the exact cause of death remained a mystery.

“Something up there, huh?” I repeated thoughtfully. “Rather than make people cautious, wouldn’t that ignite their curiosity? I can just imagine the media and thoughtless newbies rushing down here.”

“Kei. You might have forgotten, but this is still the eighteenth level of a dungeon. No TV station staff is going to brave a place like this. And if some amateur did try to force their way down here, they could kiss their life goodbye around the tenth level.”

“What about someone like Haruki Yoshida?”

I’d first heard the news about Evans Dungeon being captured during a radio interview with him. If things went Yoshida’s way, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear of an expedition project with him at the helm. He would travel to dungeons across the world, uncovering their secrets and hunting down mysterious life-forms.

“Based on the rumors I’ve heard about Yoshida, he’s surprisingly serious,” Miyoshi said. “He’s probably opposed to making a mockumentary. And even if he did want to come here, programs on dungeons don’t draw numbers these days. It probably wouldn’t be possible.”

Bringing the equipment all the way here would require a large number of explorers to serve as guards. The whole endeavor would cost too much money. Similarly, there were hardly any programs taking place in space or the deep sea for this very reason.

“Still, color me intrigued by the whole thing,” I said. “Think there’s a unique boss up there, like the Hound of Hecate I fought a while back?”

“Probably. And if this boss follows Mount Kenya’s folklore, it’ll be a god.”

I frowned. “A god? Seriously?”

Miyoshi looked up at the peak once more. “Another name for that mountain is Kirinyaga, after all.”

The indigenous Kikuyu people referred to Mount Kenya as Kirinyaga, which meant “the mountain of god.” Come to think of it, I had read about this in a novel by Mike Resnick. If I recalled correctly, that god bore the name of Ngai.

“Allegedly, the sun god Enkai sits upon a golden throne at the summit,” Miyoshi said.

“A god, eh...?” I repeated again, still skeptical.

“Also, Enkai is pronounced Ngai in the Kikuyu language. Nyarlathotep might make an appearance!”

“If this were a forest in northern Wisconsin, maybe.”

The Wood of N’gai was the name of a forest in which Nyarlathotep resided. According to one short story, that forest was in northern Wisconsin. But of course, none of this had anything to do with Enkai.

“But when it comes to the dungeons, we can’t totally disregard wordplay,” Miyoshi said.

That was probably true. Since the ancient days of *Wizardry*, Western games had always been riddled with wordplay. Whether the dungeons were based on Western games had become a matter of debate, but I had definitely picked up on those vibes.

I shook my head. “If Nyarlathotep appears on the eighteenth level, I’ll scurry home with my tail tucked between my legs, hide underneath my covers, and swear to never approach the mighty dungeons again.” Following this statement, I let out a deep breath and stretched. While shifting my mental gears, I looked up at Batian. “Well then, let’s leave the exploration of the summit and its terrifying resident to someone else. The two of us will take on the base of the mountain ever so stealthily.”

“Sounds to me like you’re triggering a death flag,” Miyoshi said.

“Don’t even go there.”

In response to Miyoshi’s quip, a bad feeling came over me. Thus, I withdrew a single orb from Vault and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s the Danger Sense orb that a wolf dropped the other day. I want you to use it, just in case.”

“And what about you?”

“According to your previous Appraisal, this skill detects danger to the actual user. Even with this skill, I might overlook dangers that are only a threat to you.”

Seeming convinced, Miyoshi nodded and raised the orb high overhead. “Sooner or later, I really am going to reject my humanity!” she cried while using the orb.

True—the number of skills in our possession might soon become a cause for concern.

“How many orbs do you think we can use?” I asked.

“Most games would limit the number of acquirable skills, partly due to balance issues. Even so...”

“Yeah?”

“Reality is usually a shitty, one-star game,” Miyoshi complained. “If each orb does something like shorten your life span by a certain amount, I’ll be mega pissed.”

“A penalty, huh? I never even considered that. But if there *are* penalties, wouldn’t they show up in inscriptions or Appraisals?”

“But skills seem to have levels, remember?”

In other words, a low-level Appraisal might not display those penalties.

“That’s one unpleasant hypothesis,” I said.

“But up until now, there haven’t been any problems, so we’re probably fine!”

Yeah, but if the penalty’s a shortened life span, you wouldn’t realize that until you died, I thought. But of course, if such a severe penalty did exist, it would probably show up in Appraisal.

While having this trivial conversation, I followed Miyoshi, who had begun climbing up an incline. We then headed towards the underground caverns, where the genomos lay in wait.

“There really is no one here,” I said. “Naruse wasn’t lying when she called this place deserted.”

“The first level, the tenth level, and now this one. Lately, fate’s been leading us to levels devoid of people.”

“Let’s consider ourselves lucky on that front.”

And fortunately, our fighting styles still worked on this level. After an hour of defeating monsters that resembled ibexes and walking alpine plants, we arrived at what appeared to be the underground cavern entrance.

“This seems to be the closest cavern to Mount Kenya,” Miyoshi said.

Apparently, the density of genomos increased with one’s proximity to the mountain. And since we needed to defeat a relatively high number of genomos during this excursion, we’d chosen a place with as many of the creatures as possible.

The cavern opening resembled the entrance to a slightly large gama.⁽⁵⁾ Since I’d been expecting a larger entrance, its size surprised me.

“I’m impressed that anyone found this cave,” I said.

Miyoshi looked around the area surrounding the entrance warily, judging its safety. “And I’m more impressed that anyone ventured inside.”

“In addition to the mountain climber, maybe the survey team had a spelunking enthusiast.”

“Japan does have a caving union and National Speleological Society.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked.

“Nope. When the dungeons first appeared, they received a lot of attention.”

“I see. A dungeon is a sort of cave, I guess.”

Even before the dungeons had appeared, exploration clubs, subterranean research clubs, and cavern research societies had existed at various universities. Since the last one belonged to Yamaguchi University, it must have originally been a research society for Akiyoshido Cave. After the dungeons had appeared, those experts (did they really deserve that title?) had been hounded by the media.

Miyoshi and I donned our headlight-equipped helmets as we crossed the threshold. There, we found a rather narrow conduit that resembled a lava tube.

“Could this be a massive lava tree mold?” Miyoshi asked.

Indeed, the walls did look basaltic, and basaltic lava had a low viscosity. If this

tunnel had been formed while the mountain had been an active volcano, there was a good chance this was a lava tree mold.

“Mark my words,” I said. “Farther inward, we’re going to find a tsuchigumo yokai lying in wait and tokijiku flowers in bloom.”

In the Hieda Reiji manga series illustrated by Daijiro Morohoshi, the main character crossed through a lava tree mold in Mount Fuji, finding tokijiku flowers on the other side. And this path felt exactly like that one. At least, until the cavern opened up a short distance ahead.

When my field of vision expanded, I stared at the scene in front of me with wide-eyed amazement.

“Miyoshi, sorry to contradict you,” I said. “But no matter how you slice it, this is a man-made cave.”

“No arguments there.”

As the space suddenly opened up, the unexpected and majestic nature of what we encountered caused us to go slack-jawed. A large plaza leading into a clearly man-made, underground temple stood before us. Despite being underground, the area was dimly lit. Crystalline objects dotted the plaza here and there, glowing faintly. Likewise, something akin to lichen produced light.

“Kei, those stones aren’t radioactive, right?” Miyoshi asked.

Yes, this sight did bring to mind the scene in Madame Curie’s biographical film in which refined radium emitted a blue light. However...

“I don’t think radium is that bright,” I said.

Miyoshi’s Danger Sense didn’t produce a warning either. Thus, I put my trust in Super Recovery and touched the blue substance, which didn’t feel particularly warm. From what I could tell, it would be safe to think of it as simply a pale light.

The dignified stone pillars had been ornamented with fine decorations which made the place feel more welcoming. I also spotted pointed arches and flying buttresses here and there. If you looked closely, architectural elements from all of human history had been mixed together, but overall, the room possessed

something close to a Gothic style.

While looking around this monumental structure, Miyoshi asked me something in a whisper. “Kei, genomos are supposed to be monsters, right?”

“Yeah, they are.”

“But this place looks like the product of cultural activity.”

She was right about that, but we couldn’t be certain that the genomos had built this structure themselves. Similar to producing flavor text, the dungeon could have erected a grand temple underground, and the genomos had simply taken up residence there. That seemed entirely possible to me.

At that moment, a number of writhing, childlike shadows appeared on the other side of the temple.

“Kei, how close are you to a hundred kills?” Miyoshi asked.

“I need another seven!”

“Got it.”

I began firing off water lances at the small silhouettes, which were racing towards us from the other side of the temple. As Miyoshi rained iron balls upon our enemies, she also summoned the Arthurs, ordering them to guard our flanks and rear. Since one hellhound was protecting our office, only three were present.

Almost as soon as the battle began, the first orb selection window popped up.

Skill Orb: Mining | 1 / 10,000

Skill Orb: Dexterity | 1 / 1,000,000

Skill Orb: Night Vision | 1 / 8,000,000

Skill Orb: Earth Magic | 1 / 90,000,000

After seeing the display, I couldn’t stop myself from doing a small fist pump. Though I’d anticipated this, the drop rate for Mining was exceptionally high for a skill orb. If someone else had already acquired a copy some time ago, I

wouldn't have been the least bit surprised.

"Only a few explorers have ever come to this underground area!" Miyoshi cried. "But more importantly, you need to take this seriously, Kei!"

A seemingly infinite number of genomos continued springing forth from the underground cavern.

"Hey, Miyoshi!" I yelled. "I'm going to hit 373 kills in no time at all!"

If the same events happened as before, the genomos would vanish when the mansion appeared. And midnight was still a while off. I wanted to avoid being chased around by the manor's monsters until the date changed.

"This is just a guess, but I don't think the mansion will appear," Miyoshi replied.

"What gives you that idea?!"

I posed this question while mowing down the army of genomos—which exuded more and more pressure—with Water Magic and the Sword of Deserts. I was reluctant to use Ultimate Flame Magic's Inferno incantation within an enclosed space.

"When I Appraised a genomos, there was an asterisk before its name!" Miyoshi called back.

"An asterisk?"

When Appraising a monster once before, Miyoshi had noticed an asterisk appearing before its name.

"And that monster was a zombie," she elaborated.

Since zombies had already caused the mansion to appear once, they wouldn't cause it to reappear, no matter how many of them you killed.

"So in other words, monsters with asterisks have already caused the mansion to appear?" I asked.

"If someone already used genomos to manifest the mansion, that might be the case," Miyoshi replied. "But simply put, monsters with asterisks probably don't cause the mansion to appear, for whatever reason."

At that moment, the second orb choice window popped up. Almost no time at all had passed.

“Feels like I’ve seen this type of game before,” I said. “Way back in the day.”

Oh, right. I’m thinking about First Queen.

First Queen had been released long before Miyoshi or I had been born. This game had revolutionized a system in which large-scale battles took place between player and enemy armies. At times, those armies would overwhelm the entire screen. With the exact same vigor, a large number of genomos continued springing forth from the plaza’s inner depths.

But just as the second orb selection window appeared, the genomos halted and began murmuring to each other.

“What’s going on?”

No sooner had I muttered these words than a stone appeared from out of nowhere, sailing through the air. It landed at my feet and rebounded dramatically. This simple rock was about the size of a newborn’s fist, but if it had struck me, I probably would’ve been injured. Depending on the point of impact, the wounds could have been severe.

“Miyoshi, this is bad,” I said. “Get behind me.”

“R-Roger that!”

After making Miyoshi take cover behind me, I retrieved a shield from Vault, holding it in both hands. While guarding against the flying rocks, I examined my surroundings.

“Guess we have no choice but to retreat,” I observed.

But a horde of genomos had already circled around, blocking the road leading into the plaza.

Miyoshi pointed in the direction of the temple. “That looks like our only chance of escape!”

Due to the rumors surrounding this mountain, I hesitated for a moment. But if Miyoshi and I dawdled here, we would merely find ourselves isolated in a sea of genomos. No matter the case, we had to avoid that.

“Guess we have no other choice!” I shouted. “Let’s take shelter in the temple!”

After storing the shield in Vault, I scooped Miyoshi up under my arm and began sprinting towards the grand temple at full speed. Behind us, the three Arthurs were still on a rampage.

“Pull back before you’re surrounded!” Miyoshi called to them.

If that much mass surrounded them, even hellhounds might end up crushed. *Whenever you can, get the hell out of there, you guys,* I thought.

The encircling mob of genomos closed in, attempting to envelop us. Fortunately, I managed to race up the temple stairs much faster.

Though the outside decorations appeared Gothic, the interior made heavy use of columns, which gave off a Greek or Egyptian air. While shooting a sidelong glance at the relentlessly pursuing genomos, I leaped through the front door and slammed it shut with all my might.

As the bulky door closed with a bang, complete darkness fell over the room. Apparently, flying rocks had broken the headlights on our helmets. From outside, I could hear something beating against the door, but after a while, even those sounds receded.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Level, Underground Temple

Three pairs of golden eyes floated within the surrounding darkness. From the looks of things, the trio of hellhounds had managed to escape.

“It’s gone quiet out there,” Miyoshi observed.

Indeed it had. But unfortunately, my Life Detection was still picking up signals from a large number of creatures stopped outside the door.

“Sorry, but we can’t go back through the door,” I replied. “A huge number of genomos are still out there.”

“In that case, should I try spraying them randomly with iron balls?”

“No. If we provoke them into breaking down the door, that would be a huge

pain in the ass. Let's save that as our last resort."

I withdrew an LED lamp from Vault and turned it on. Being an LED, this lamp only had an output of around one thousand lumens, which wasn't strong enough to illuminate the entire room in great detail.

After handing Miyoshi a spare headlight, I put on another one myself. From what I could see, a narrow corridor extended far into the depths of the room.

"Aethlem, can you go check if there's anything up ahead?" Miyoshi asked.

Nodding fervently, Aethlem began padding down the corridor. We could probably count on hellhounds having good night vision.

"Welp," I said. "If we can't go back through the door, I guess we have no choice but to continue further inwards."

I fastened a string to the small LED lantern and tied it around Drudwyn's neck. With that done, I then had him walk a little farther ahead of us. Since Drudwyn had been guarding me from my shadow for some time now, I had the closest relationship with him of the four.

Though we still had time until sunset, it was already late in the afternoon. With our preparations finished, we began walking farther into the depths. All the while, we followed Aethlem, who had taken the lead. After continuing down the corridor for a while, we came upon a rather spacious room, with pillars forming orderly lines throughout its interior.

"This reminds me of the Great Hypostyle Hall in the Amun-Re Temple," Miyoshi noted.

The Amun-Re Temple was a large collection of hypostyle halls that had been expanded as the Egyptian pharaohs increased their power.

Each time we moved, the shadows of these pillars swayed back and forth, seeming to dance like strange creatures. Nevertheless, Life Detection didn't react to anything, and the Arthurs didn't pick up any scents.

"If this temple has the same structure as an Egyptian one..." Miyoshi trailed off.

"Then what?" I asked.

“We’ll eventually reach the inner sanctuary.”

“And what can we expect from the inner sanctuary, exactly?”

“Who knows?” Miyoshi asked, a playful note to her voice. “But it’s the holy place of a temple hidden beneath Kirinyaga—the mountain of god. I’m practically trembling with anticipation.”

“Yeah, and I’m about to wet my pants,” I agreed with a dry chuckle.

Though we circled the entire room, we found no side roads. The single path continued straight into the depths.

I glanced down at my watch. Strangely enough, dungeon levels with day and night matched the time outside.

“We have less than an hour before sunset,” I said. “But anyway, let’s go as far as we can, I guess.”

We continued walking for a while, but as expected, we didn’t run into any monsters. Holy place indeed. After passing through several courtyards and pillared corridors, we came to a narrow road that resembled a birth canal. Stooping down, we continued onwards for a few meters, entering yet another room.

“So this is the inner sanctuary?” I asked.

The room was octagonal and little larger than fifteen square meters. Around 4 m x 4 m, if I had to guess.

“Figuratively speaking, this would be the womb,” Miyoshi replied while looking around the room with great interest. But in the end, she found nothing noteworthy.

Except for the strange magic circle hidden from sight.

“What the hell?!” I shouted.

Shortly after we’d entered the room, the magic circle had activated. Perhaps we’d touched a switch, or perhaps it activated automatically whenever someone set foot in the room. Either way, a beautiful pattern appeared on the floor, and all of a sudden, an unpleasant floating sensation came over me. It reminded me of—

“This feels like riding an elevator in a high-rise building,” Miyoshi said, finishing my thought.

While standing on top of the shining magic circle, we began moving upwards.

“Well, what do you think our destination is?” I asked, unable to stop myself from looking up.

“Somewhere with a huge death flag,” Miyoshi replied in a half-impressed, half-resigned tone. “And if it’s Enkai waiting for us up there...”

“Yeah?”

“There’s an anthropologist of Maasai descent named Naomi Kipuri. In 1983, she published a book of stories collected from the Maasai people in which Enkai appears.”[\(6\)](#)

I see. “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles,” eh? One battle is more than enough, though.

“Enkai had a wife named Olapa,” Miyoshi continued. “At first, they got along, but when Olapa made a small mistake, Enkai assaulted her. There’s a line in the book that goes, ‘In just the same way women are beaten by their husbands.’ When I first read that, I thought, ‘Oh, so even in the Maasai society, men beat women.’”

Wait, what’s the point of all this? I wondered while listening to Miyoshi’s carefree impressions of the book.

“Being extremely short-tempered herself, Olapa struck back at Enkai,” Miyoshi said. “At that time, Enkai sustained a terrible wound on his forehead.”

Did she throw a square ashtray at him or something?

“Enkai retaliated by tearing out one of her eyes,” Miyoshi continued with another frightening statement. “Apparently, Olapa is the moon, and the craters are her missing eye. Similarly, Enkai is the sun. Ashamed of his wound, he began to shine brightly so that no one would be able to see it.”

“I see. And the sun is still shining because his wound hasn’t healed. So in other words, his forehead is his Achilles’ heel. Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

“Nope. Honestly, I just wanted you to know about the ‘Ol’ in Olapa.”

I cocked my head. “What about it?”

This story isn’t about Enkai’s weakness? Then what the heck is she trying to tell me about?

“‘Ol’ is a masculine prefix!” Miyoshi cried. “In other words, this is a boys’ love story! Shocking, right? Do you think Maasai people enjoy BL too?”

“I don’t give a shit!”

I felt like a complete ignoramus for taking her story seriously. Still, Enkai’s male spouse had injured the god’s forehead during a marital quarrel, and he’d responded by tearing out the man’s eye? That painted a brutal picture.

But wait, why are we talking about the Maasai people?

“Hold on, Miyoshi,” I said. “Isn’t Kilimanjaro—not Kirinyaga—the Maasai mountain?”

The Maasai people lived on the border between Kenya and Tanzania. There, the only mountain tall enough to house a god would be Kilimanjaro.

“Enkai is a Maasai word, and Ngai is a Kikuyu word,” Miyoshi explained. “Apparently, the gods residing on top of Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya are the same deity, but this story doesn’t exist in Ngai’s mythology.”

I see. Well, that sort of thing happens a lot in myths originating from nearby regions.

“So anyway, I should aim for his forehead, right?” I asked.

“If the myth is reflected as I just described, then I suppose so.”

Based on other phenomena we’d experienced in the dungeon, the myth being reflected in a monster’s characteristics seemed highly plausible.

Abandoning her playful air, Miyoshi began speaking with a serious expression. “The SDF soldiers who lost their lives here were killed as soon as they reached the mountaintop. According to the ones who survived, they couldn’t even comprehend what had taken place, despite it happening right in front of them. Whatever’s up there, you need to make the first move.”

“You got it. But about my kill count...”

“Kei. Even if Enkai has minions, don’t get greedy.”

Apparently, Miyoshi’s Danger Sense had been blaring a warning at her for a little while now. If we continued going upwards, her life would probably be in considerable danger.

“Well, if the Queen of the Merchants herself says so, this must be pretty serious,” I said. “Don’t worry. Getting out alive is the most important thing.”

The next half minute felt like an eternity. Yet once it had passed, our ascent seemed to decelerate, and cold air immediately flowed down from above. Looking up, I could see a reddish sky beyond a small hole. The sun had finally set.

Life Detection alerted me to the presence of *something*.

“There don’t seem to be any minions for now,” I said.

One by one, Miyoshi had the hellhounds poke their heads out of the shadows. After removing the lanterns from their necks, our battle preparations were finished. Speaking of which, even items attached to the hellhounds could sink into the shadows? I’d had no idea.

Finally, the elevator arrived at its final destination.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Level, Mountaintop

A golden throne stood partially backlit beneath the setting sun. More importantly, a silhouette sat upon that golden throne in a relaxed pose, his fist propping up his face. I could faintly sense this silhouette—Enkai, perhaps?—raising his head.

As soon as we arrived, Miyoshi launched an iron ball at the sun god. Even with an AGI of 100, my eyes could barely follow what happened next. And like the first SDF members to have seen Enkai, Miyoshi probably couldn’t perceive his movements at all.

With a light wave of his arm, Enkai repelled the iron ball. In a single instant, he’d moved in front of Miyoshi, swinging his fist down in her direction.

“Miyoshi!” I cried.

A hellhound wedged itself between Miyoshi and the fist, saving her life, which had been mere moments away from ending. As a result of this rescue, the hellhound pushed Miyoshi backwards, sending her flying.

By twisting its body, the hellhound narrowly evaded the full impact of Enkai’s fist. Even so, the sun god’s attack still grazed the hellhound, and that alone sent it flying. After rolling dramatically across the ground, the massive dog came to a stop, not even twitching.

Enkai’s diverted fist slammed into the ground, producing a loud bang and forming a crater one meter in diameter. Upon seeing this, I quickly booted up Making and added one hundred points to my AGI. At this rate, I’d be killed in a matter of seconds.

“Aethlem!” Miyoshi cried while racing over to the hellhound.

At the same time, Enkai tried to land a follow-up blow on her, but two more hellhounds appeared between him and Miyoshi. One bit down on the sun god’s arm, while the other acted as Miyoshi’s shield. In the midst of this brawl, I fired off several water lances at Enkai. I then approached him faster than the water lances could travel, kicking him in the side with everything I could muster.

Merely by shaking the arm that Cavall had bitten down on, Enkai flung the hellhound away. Cavall soared through the air, several of his teeth having broken. Not long afterwards, my water lances hit Enkai and dissipated.

I couldn’t tell if my attacks had even fazed Enkai, but the kick to his side must have drawn his ire, as he shifted his attention to me. The sun god turned in my direction, simultaneously raising his fist to strike me.

Is this guy a tank character?

Judging from the crater and Aethlem’s condition, a Kevlar shield probably wouldn’t be able to ward off Enkai’s fists. With an AGI of 100, my eyes had barely been able to follow the sun god’s attacks. But at 200, he seemed to be moving in relatively fast slow motion. All hail statuses!

I dodged Enkai’s attack in a smooth motion and circled behind him. Next, I summoned all my strength, launching an iron ball at his medulla from a short

distance. Despite this producing a loud *crunch*, Enkai merely staggered a little. He then cracked his neck, checking its condition.

During this opening, I fired off a flame lance, but just like the water lances, it dissipated upon hitting Enkai. His magic resistance appeared to be extremely high. Though he might have been a dungeon-created copy, I should have expected that much from a “god.”

While the opening remained, I added another one hundred points to my STR. I then charged forwards with an eight-centimeter iron ball gripped in my hand. False or not, Enkai was still a god. If I allowed the battle to drag out and he used ranged offensive magic, I would have no way of countering him. For now, I would gamble everything on striking his forehead.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” I bellowed.

Before, I’d considered yelling during battle to be idiotic. Yet now, the shout naturally tore from my throat. Something about furious roars and battle cries touched upon a primitive part of the soul.

As I continued charging towards Enkai, he thrust his right fist towards me with perfect aim. Using my left hand, I brushed his fist to my right side. I then countered with all my might, slamming the bottom of my palm and the iron ball into Enkai’s jaw. The impact caused the sun god’s head to bend backwards, his feet leaving the ground ever so slightly.

Time stretched out, and the very air seemed to cling to me. Amidst this, I used my momentum to leap upwards. Not sparing any strength, I thrust the iron ball downwards, aiming for Enkai’s forehead.



Enkai raised both arms in front of his face in an attempt to block my attack. However, my palm strike—which contained far more power than the iron ball thrown by Miyoshi—broke Enkai’s guard, closing in on his forehead.

At that moment, several dozen iron balls bombarded Enkai through his slightly open guard. These projectiles had originated from Miyoshi, who had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. With his feet off the ground and his arms repelled, Enkai had no way of defending himself. Thus, the entire barrage of iron balls struck him on the forehead.

Helpless against gravity, both Enkai and I fell towards the ground together. The sun god’s neck bent backwards, and when our eyes met, I remembered a story in which he’d said, “The summit of my abode—Kirinyaga—is the pinnacle of the world. I will not permit anyone to fly above my head.”

Seemingly drawn towards Enkai, the iron ball in my hand moved with such great speed that it appeared to change shape. As soon as the back of the sun god’s head hit the ground, the iron ball plunged into his forehead with nothing to obstruct it.

As the back of Enkai’s head rebounded against the ground several times, the delayed sound of something being crushed finally reached my ears. Then my opponent ceased to move. The sun had already sunk beneath the sea of clouds, and in that moment, its final afterglow quietly faded away. At the same time, Enkai’s body transformed into black light.

“The death of a sun god coinciding with nightfall,” Miyoshi said. “Pretty poetic situation, don’t you think?”

As I gasped for air, Miyoshi approached my side with three hellhounds in tow. From the looks of things, Aethlem hadn’t died. Miyoshi must have poured a potion over him in a desperate attempt to save his life.

While examining the ground where Enkai had disappeared, I scrunched up my face in displeasure. “Does that mean he’ll revive tomorrow morning like nothing ever happened?”

Smiling weakly, Miyoshi shrugged. “That sort of thing happens all the time in myths.”

Don't even joke about that.

This time, we'd come out on top by instantly striking Enkai's weak point. Still, I couldn't imagine that fight having reflected a god's full strength. After all, he hadn't used anything resembling magic during the battle, and I had a sneaking suspicion he could fly. Going up against a godlike enemy who might be concealing all manner of crafty techniques? One battle would more than suffice. If possible, I wanted to keep my distance from Enkai for the rest of my life.

While gathering Enkai's drops, we also performed a cursory investigation of the mountaintop. Afterwards, we quickly exited the peak, following the map created by the SDF squadron. After a short descent, we found an open space behind a slight fold in the mountain. Deciding to camp there, we took out Dolly.

Unlike the tenth level, the eighteenth level was home to four-legged, relatively large monsters that resembled ibexes. If we placed Dolly in an open area, those ibexes would ram the RV, plunging us to the bottom of a cliff in the blink of an eye.

After boarding Dolly, I immediately lined up Enkai's drops on the dinette table and asked Miyoshi to Appraise them.

"Whoa, these are god-tier drops," Miyoshi blurted out. "Guess I should've expected that, right?"

Bangle of Ngai

AGI +50%

MP + 50%

Magic Damage Reduced by 80%

90% of Damage Taken Goes to MP

Auto Adjust

A bracelet created by Ngai to protect himself.

Ring of Ngai

All Statuses + 20%

Auto Adjust

A ring created by Ngai to protect himself.

Based on Miyoshi's notes, these items were broken as hell.

Decrease magic damage by eighty percent? Was that insane magical resistance because of this bracelet?

But of course, distributing ninety percent of damage taken to your MP would be a double-edged sword.

"The ring is more geared towards you," Miyoshi said. "My stats going from ten to twelve wouldn't make me the least bit happy."

"In that case, you can use the bracelet. It'll make you slightly more durable."

"Got it. But still, these look like a matching set, and their designs seem likely to draw misunderstandings."

While making these lighthearted remarks, Miyoshi slid her left hand through the bracelet. Immediately, the piece of jewelry changed in size, fitting around her wrist.

"Wow, that's incredible!" she cried. "Is this what Appraisal meant by auto-adjust?"

I nodded. "If this technology spreads, it won't be long until clothes and sneakers are equipped with the same function."

"That does sound convenient, but when is that supposed to happen, exactly?"

"In a better time line, this tech should've been implemented in 2015."[\(7\)](#)

"But unfortunately, there's no Dr. Emmett Brown in our world."

I picked up the ring between my thumb and forefinger. Despite being somewhat large, it would probably fit on any finger thanks to the auto-adjustment. But seeing as it would be a hindrance on my right hand, I chose to wear the ring on the little finger of my left hand, where it would least get in the way.

“Male pinky rings give off of a playboy vibe, don’t you think?” Miyoshi asked.

“Wait, really? This ring isn’t really pink though.”

Miyoshi had used the English term “pinky ring,” which I wasn’t familiar with. In any case, the Ring of Ngai—which was fairly wide—had been decorated with an elaborate African design.

“Pinky rings are ones worn on your little finger, not pink-colored rings,” Miyoshi explained. “According to some people, they’re considered stylish or sexy, but I’m not so sure about that...”

I nodded. “Oh, I see. But they only give off a playboy vibe when good-looking, trendy guys wear them, right? I should be fine. I’m just wearing it on the most convenient finger, after all.”

Having said this, I ignored Miyoshi’s opinion. But really, who’d decided that wearing a ring on the little finger of your left hand signaled wanting to sleep around? The fashion industry had way too many ambiguous rules.

I then opened up Making to check on the ring’s effects.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 523.448

HP: 432.00

MP: 240.00

STR: [-] 200 [+] [240]

VIT: [-] 100 [+] [120]

INT: [-] 100 [+] [120]

AGI: [-] 200 [+] [240]

DEX: [-] 100 [+] [120]

LUC: [-] 100 [+] [120]

>> Azusa Miyoshi

“Whoa,” I said. “Looks like I really am getting a twenty percent increase.”

“Kei, Kei, what about me?”

Name: Azusa Miyoshi

SP: 50.937

HP: 22.25

MP: 33.05 (49.575)

STR: [-] 8 [+]

VIT: [-] 9 [+]

INT: [-] 18 [+]

AGI: [-] 11 [+]

DEX: [-] 13 [+]

LUC: [-] 10 [+]

“Looks like all the perks have been applied, but...” I trailed off. “What’s this?”

“Is something wrong?” Miyoshi asked.

“No, but you have 50.937 excess SP.”

“You’re kidding me! This must be thanks to the god, right?”

“Probably.”

The first genomos had yielded 0.13 points. Miyoshi had defeated around one hundred of the creatures, but even then, her total SP would have been a mere 1.551. And despite the number of genomos being vague, she’d accurately recorded the exact number of other monsters she’d defeated. If we calculated backwards from there, Enkai had yielded around forty-five points.

“Wow, talk about god-tier SP,” Miyoshi said. “If we both received that many points, Enkai must have yielded ninety SP in total. In other words, the number of this level—eighteen—multiplied by five. Think that’s the ‘god coefficient’?”

“That would be one hell of a coefficient,” I agreed. “But anyway, what statuses do you want to increase?”

Miyoshi could only do what she wanted with her statuses for a short period of time. After a while, half the points would be naturally distributed.

“Let’s see,” Miyoshi replied. While considering this, she tossed karaage into the waiting mouths of the Arthurs, who were alternately sticking their heads out of the shadows. “I have to go with INT, right?”

I frowned. “You’re not thinking that with forty more points, you could summon ten more hellhounds, right?”

“Um, whyever would you think that...?”

“Because I’m not an idiot.”

How the hell would we take care of ten more hellhounds? I could only foresee a grim future in which the skyrocketing consumption of magic crystal treats bled us dry.

“Let’s think this through,” I suggested. “Wouldn’t it be better to raise your LUC or something?”

“I’ll leave the good fortune to you. Plus, my current LUC is perfect for running tests. We can estimate the drop rate for normal people, remember?”

“True enough.”

“And even if I raised my STR or VIT a bit, any opponent like Enkai would still kill me instantly, so why not go with an even distribution?”

In games, evenly distributing stats was one of the best ways to end up with a horrible character.

“In that case, why don’t we increase your AGI so that you can at least dodge those attacks?” I suggested.

“An INT and AGI build, huh?” After considering this for a little while, Miyoshi seemed to remember something all of a sudden. “By the way, are the Arthurs growing stronger?”

Yeah, I’d like to know that too.

Though a glancing blow from Enkai had nearly killed Aethlem, the Arthurs could still bite genomos to death. And genomos yielded twice the SP as hellhounds.

“From the very beginning, the Arthurs haven’t seemed at all like normal hellhounds,” I said. “Can you Appraise them?”

“I tried that, but at most, I could only figure out their current conditions.”

According to Miyoshi, Appraisal had displayed something like the percentage of their current HP and MP.

“Do you get similar readings on other monsters?” I asked.

“Currently, yes,” Miyoshi responded. “But for monsters, I can see their names and the remainder of a division problem—similar to when I first Appraised you.”

“Well then, did you learn anything about Enkai?”

“Nothing concrete.”

Skills developed over time. I didn’t know what Appraisal might be capable of in the future, but for now, it didn’t seem like much of an asset in battle.

But if the Arthurs couldn’t grow stronger, we would eventually arrive on a floor on which they couldn’t support us in battle.

“In games, summons usually grow stronger in accordance with their master’s stats,” Miyoshi said. “Or they naturally acquire XP. Certain events and rare items can level them up as well.”

I considered this for a moment. “So, feeding them magic crystals might make them stronger?”

“Something like that.”

“Why don’t we just ask the hellhounds in question?”

On a fundamental level, the Arthurs seemed to understand us. Thus, if we artfully strung together a series of “yes or no” questions, we might be able to gain a surprising amount of information.

“Oh, that makes sense!” Miyoshi cried.

Immediately, Miyoshi began asking the Arthurs a series of questions. Wait, had she forgotten about her stat distribution?

Having nothing else to do, I absentmindedly examined the outside of Dolly through the monitors, thinking about what would happen after tomorrow. “Since we’re going to be diving for a while, feel free to use the office however you like,” I’d told Naruse.

“Well, she does have Glessic with her,” I muttered to myself. “She should be mostly safe while in the off—”

Before I could finish my thought, a hellhound’s head popped out of a shadow in front of me. He then tilted his head as if to ask, “You rang?”

“What the...” I trailed off. “Hey, Miyoshi. Is this Glessic?”

To be honest, I could hardly differentiate between the four hellhounds. I only knew that Drudwyn had taken a liking to me.

“That’s right,” Miyoshi replied while turning towards me.

“Nope, nope, that can’t be right,” I argued. “Shouldn’t Glessic be on guard duty at the office? Does that mean Naruse is defenseless right now?”

“No, Aethlem should be there right now.”

“Uh, what?”

Hadn’t Aethlem been struck by Enkai while defending Miyoshi?

In response to my confusion, Miyoshi provided a detailed explanation. According to her, the hellhounds were performing office guard duty on rotation.

“None of them would agree to being the only one on guard duty,” she added.

Yeah, I can sympathize with that, but still...

“Hold up,” I said. “What’s going on here? Does their ability to move through shadows work when going inside and outside of dungeons?”

“From what I understand, they can move by switching places with each other at a certain distance. But it’s not all-powerful or anything.”

“Do you not see what’s going on here, Miyoshi? This will allow for

communication between the inside and outside of dungeons.”

“What do you mean? You know these puppers can’t talk, right?”

“Yeah, but they sank into the shadows while wearing lanterns,” I pointed out. “If we attached letters to the hellhounds, they could deliver them to the other side. And if we attached data storage devices to them, we could send as much text or video as we wanted.”

“Oh, you want them to be couriers?” Miyoshi asked. “Still, I don’t know if the items attached to the hellhounds will switch places with them. Without trying, I can’t say anything for certain.”

“But if this is possible, we won’t have to mount an attack on the colonial worms for an item of dubious existence!”

“You don’t want to go anywhere near those things, do you?”

“Of course not.”

Only trained soldiers could face down those disgusting monsters without vomiting. On the other hand, I could never handle anything so grotesque. Not in a million years.

During the Otherworldly Language Comprehension uproar, explorers from across the world had fought enough colonial worms to suffer lasting trauma. Despite this, none of the creatures had dropped any interdimensional communication items. In that case, why would I willingly subject myself to such horror?

“You guys might just prove useful,” I said.

Glessic stuck out his tongue, panting happily. However, when he realized that I wouldn’t give him anything, he sidled over to Miyoshi, only his head sticking out of the shadows. What a calculating fellow.

Miyoshi finished questioning Cavall about how to strengthen the Arthurs, and though his answers were vague, they did provide a guideline. What we’d learned could be summarized in the following three points:

Their stats would probably increase in tandem with Miyoshi’s MP.

Their stats and skills would probably increase by eating magic crystals.

They could probably level up through combat.

“Yeah, that’s pretty vague,” I said.

“Can you blame him? Even when our stats change a small amount, we can’t feel any noticeable differences.”

“I suppose so.”

If your stats suddenly doubled, that would be a different matter. But with an increase of one point at a time over a long period of time, you certainly wouldn’t notice any differences.

“Based on Cavall’s impressions, MP seems important,” Miyoshi said. “Should I focus on INT then?”

“Sure, but for now, don’t summon a huge number of hellhounds. That’ll probably come back to bite us in the ass.”

Currently, we couldn’t intentionally send back hellhounds that had been summoned. If we wound up with too many of them, someone demanding that we donate one to research would inevitably appear. Also, the Arthurs looked so much alike. If I couldn’t tell four of them apart, I would never be able to remember ten.

“I guess so,” Miyoshi said. “But about my AGI. Aside from dodging attacks, it’s also difficult to keep up with you as things currently stand. If you don’t mind, I’d like that status raised too.”

“So it’s a problem of speed, huh?” I asked. “True—it’s pretty difficult to run with you under my arm when there are people around.”

“Actually, I can’t stand that, even when there are *no* people around.”

“All right then, I’ve increased your AGI to 20 and your INT to 40. Do you feel anything different?”

Name: Azusa Miyoshi

SP: 19.937

HP: 23.60

MP: 69.60 (104.4)

STR: [-] 8 [+]

VIT: [-] 9 [+]

INT: [-] 40 [+]

AGI: [-] 20 [+] [30]

DEX: [-] 13 [+]

LUC: [-] 10 [+]

“Oh, wow!” Miyoshi cried. “I might feel a little lighter!”

“Accounting for the bracelet’s effect, your agility has nearly tripled all at once. If you get too carried away, you might run into a wall.”

When I’d first increased my AGI to 100, that had actually happened to me. Since I’d already raised my VIT to 100 as well, it hadn’t been a grave error, but Miyoshi’s VIT was still on par with a normal person’s. I didn’t want to see her turning into ketchup splatter.

“I won’t be running into any walls,” Miyoshi countered. “That’s something *you* would do, not me.”

“Sure, sure. Oh, and to make Appraisal easier, I’ll set your STR and VIT to multiples of ten.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Miyoshi said while looking at her statuses written down on a piece of paper. “Well then, let’s set my STR and VIT to 10. Then set my INT to 50, and my remaining points will go to DEX.”

“Sounds good.”

“I should round out my remaining one point pretty quickly, so if you would, please add that one to DEX too. I’d like that status to reach 20 somewhere down the line.”

“You got it.”

In the end, Miyoshi’s current stats were as follows. The parenthetical numbers represented the values after item buffs.

Name: Azusa Miyoshi

SP: 0.937

HP: 27.00

MP: 86.80 (130.2)

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 10 [+]

INT: [-] 50 [+]

AGI: [-] 20 [+] [30]

DEX: [-] 19 [+]

LUC: [-] 10 [+]

Miyoshi's HP still worried me, but thanks to the bracelet, her MP would absorb ninety percent of all damage taken. Thus, she would probably be okay.

"Let's hope this strengthens the Arthurs," I said.

"Yeah, that would be great," Miyoshi agreed.

"But speaking of items... You swiped that throne, right?"

Miyoshi responded with overdramatic surprise. She then folded her hands behind her back, attempting to hide her guilt with a laugh. "Oops, am I busted? I was just wondering if you could acquire an item that wasn't a drop."

"How could I overlook you making off with something that huge?! But anyway, you've already Appraised it, right?"

"Yep, did that when placing it in Storage. Its name is the Throne of Ngai. But since it's real gold, it's too heavy for me to take out in the RV."

Having said this, Miyoshi wrote out the contents of her Appraisal. Sharp memory.

The Throne of Ngai

Created From the Gold of Ngai

Regenerate HP +200%

Regenerate MP +200%

You who would attempt to sit upon this throne, prove yourself to be of worthy strength.

If you cannot do so, this throne shall reject you.

“Whoa, it really is the Throne of Ngai,” I said. “And yeah, it did look to be around one hundred kilograms, but still...”

“Kei, if this thing only weighed a hundred kilograms, I could take it out inside Dolly. The relative density of gold is around 19.3. If we rounded up to twenty, one hundred kilograms would only be five thousand cubic centimeters.”

Five thousand cubic centimeters was 10 cm x 10 cm x 50 cm.

I took a moment to do some mental math. “Then if this throne is made entirely of pure gold, one hundred kilograms wouldn’t be more than a single leg?”

“Exactly,” Miyoshi said. “So the entire throne is probably more than six hundred kilograms.”

“I see. But if you sat on a pure gold throne, the legs and backrest would probably bend.”

“That must be why Appraisal specifies it being made out of ‘Ngai’s gold.’”

I chuckled. “But based solely on its effects, this looks like one of those chairs that’s good for your lower back.”

“It does seem rejuvenating.”

In some cases, gaining triple recovery speed for HP and MP just by sitting down could prove convenient.

“So what’s with this flavor text?” I asked.

Miyoshi crossed her arms and furrowed her brow. “It’s definitely tricky. If anyone other than Ngai sits on this throne, it sounds like they’ll be cursed.”

“C’mon, this isn’t the mask of Tutankhamen. Believing in curses in this day and age... Well, I can’t say it’s completely ridiculous.”

The very notion of curses was absurd. But three years ago, the very notion of monsters strutting around dungeons was absurd too. At this point, anything might be possible.

“If we interpret the text literally, you won’t necessarily be cursed, but you won’t be able to sit on the throne,” I said.

“The part about ‘proving yourself to be of worthy strength’ is pretty suspicious. As soon as you sit on the chair, will something appear to fight you, like if you rubbed a genie’s lamp?”

“Don’t even start with that.”

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances. Since this seemed all too likely, we vowed not to sit on the chair for the time being.

“So are these all the items we acquired at the summit?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s not from the summit, but I actually have one more.”

Miyoshi pulled out what appeared to be a tree branch from Storage.

I raised an eyebrow. “And what do you have there?”

“Muhuhu,” Miyoshi answered in a strange laugh, wearing an unnecessarily smug expression.

“I need you to wipe that creepy, blatantly sinister smile off your face.”

“Creepy? Now that’s just rude. This branch comes from the muhuhu tree. Kind of sounds like a haughty laugh, doesn’t it? Maybe we should call it ‘treeheehee.’”

“Uh, treeheehee?” I repeated.

“Its proper name is *Brachylaena huillensis*, but it’s also referred to as muhuhu. The latter is a Swahili word, apparently.”

According to Miyoshi, muhuhu lumber was often used as flooring in places containing heavy equipment due it being an extremely hard wood.

“Usually, it grows in dry lowland forests,” she continued. “But it also grows

here, just like on Mount Kenya.”

“And why exactly do you have it?” I asked.

“When I cut off this branch, it didn’t turn into black light.” Miyoshi placed the muhuhu in Storage, readjusted her sitting posture, and suddenly adopted a serious expression. “Kei. We can’t bring monsters back to the surface because they disappear after being defeated, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“So in that case, can we take stones and wood from the dungeons back to the surface?”

Now that she mentioned it, I hadn’t really considered this matter. After a dungeon dive, your dusty clothes didn’t magically become clean upon returning to the surface. Thus, we could probably think of anything comprising dirt as being transportable.

“If I had to guess, we should be able to,” I said.

“Then after we’ve brought these things back, what happens to the missing wood and stones inside the dungeon?”

I more or less understood what Miyoshi was getting at. A monster would respawn, but what about moveable objects within a dungeon? Walls might have been indestructible, but the plants growing here and there could be cut down. In that case, would the plants respawn as well? What about a rock that someone picked up?

“From a commonsense perspective, everything would stay as is,” I said.

“But in all likelihood, no one has ever verified this.”

Miyoshi’s 3D mapping tool had inspired this line of questioning. She’d first noticed something after we’d started descending to the second level and beyond. On our usual route, the shape of vegetation rendered by the 3D mapping tool always looked the same. Perhaps no one had exerted any influence on the vegetation, but would it truly be possible for no one to have ever broken a branch? Not even by fiddling with them?

“I see what you mean,” I replied, “but if a felled tree suddenly revived one

day, it would be pretty noticeable. And I've never heard of anything like that happening."

"That's probably just because no one has investigated this matter in the past three years. And to begin with, why hasn't the forest undergrowth grown or died in these past three years? Because I doubt anyone is taking care of it."

She was exactly right. I'd never heard of anyone saying, "The grass on the forest level pathways is growing too tall—we should probably mow it."

Speaking of which, I had similar questions about minions summoned during boss battles. The Hound of Hecate's defeated minions hadn't disappeared until they were resummoned or the boss died. In that case, could you bring the defeated hellhounds back to the surface? Imagine one explorer drawing out their battle with the Hound of Hecate, refusing to defeat the boss or conclude the fight. In the meantime, could another explorer conduct an autopsy of the hellhound minions on the surface?

In a sense, the dungeons had "allowed" humanity to bring drop items back to the surface. However, the extent of these permissions hadn't been thoroughly investigated.

"So you cut off that treeheehee branch to see if it would regenerate?" I asked.

"Since it was right next to Dolly's entrance, yes. I decided not to use a rock because we'd be completely out of luck if it didn't respawn in the same place."

Monsters didn't immediately respawn in the exact same place they'd been defeated. Most likely, they reappeared in a different location on the same floor. Yet in a dungeon as large as Yoyogi, there was currently no way of confirming this. Obviously, the same logic applied to a rock.

"Even if the branch you cut off does regrow, what good would come of it?" I asked.

Yes, there were relatively large trees in dungeons, but there weren't enough of them to use as sources of timber. At most, you could sell single pieces of furniture crafted from dungeon-produced wood at a premium. Still, this probably wouldn't have a very large impact on society.

“Remember our conversation about food drops?” Miyoshi asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

“For starving regions, that will be a wonderful thing in itself.” At this, Miyoshi shrugged. “But since the number of explorers will pose a problem for some time, another idea occurred to me. Dungeons house a wide variety of environments, don’t they?”

“That’s for sure. In Yoyogi, the eleventh level is a lava environment. Then levels nineteen and twenty are a frosty climate.”

Miyoshi nodded. “Even in cold or arid regions where farming is impossible, their dungeons could have levels with environments suited for agriculture.”

Yeah. Other dungeons might be similar to Yoyogi, where levels two through four are grasslands and forests.

“What if it were possible to farm extensively on those levels?” Miyoshi asked. “If we could grow wheat in a certain environment, would the dungeons allow us to bring it back to the surface?”

“In other words, if we can cut down a tree and bring it back to the surface, we should be able to harvest wheat that grew in the same place? Without it turning into black light, of course.”

“Exactly.”

“But even if that *is* possible, Yoyogi only has a radius of five kilometers,” I said. “And it’s considered a fairly sizable dungeon. Large-scale farming would be impossible, right?”

“You’ve hit the nail on the head, Kei. And that’s why the results of this experiment are so important.”

“Wait, don’t tell me...”

For the time being, we were merely verifying whether plants cut down inside a dungeon would respawn. However, the next step would be finding out whether plants brought in from the outside could be “adopted” by the dungeons.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “If we can grow foreign plants inside a

dungeon, and they respawn perfectly—”

“That’s right,” Miyoshi interrupted me. “Say we brought in grain seeds from the outside and cultivated them in a dungeon. If the dungeon recognizes this crop as originally belonging to its interior—”

“We could continue harvesting that grain indefinitely,” I interrupted. “We would basically have a magic field!”

“Sounds amazing, doesn’t it?”

Yeah, it did. If this were possible, it would be the greatest discovery of the century.

But hold on a second.

“What does this have to do with the Throne of Ngai?” I asked.

Miyoshi stood up, her eyes widening. She then clenched both hands into fists, waving them up and down as she gave her impassioned explanation. “Are you serious, Kei?! If that throne is made of gold and it always respawns with Ngai, we can help ourselves to another six hundred kilograms of pure Au every day! In a mere ten days, we’ll produce as much gold as the Hishikari mine does in a whole year! At that point, we can straight up ignore the fiftieth level!”

That still has nothing to do with agriculture. Not to mention...

“That plan comes with a huge problem!” I cried. “A completely unavoidable, life-threatening problem, at that!”

What kind of battle-obsessed maniac would fight Ngai every day?! Well, the throne aside, the ninety status points are a pretty enticing reward. But on the other hand, there must be a reason for him to yield so much SP. That god definitely has an ace up his sleeve.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Miyoshi said with a giggle.

“Yeesh. Let’s just pray that Ngai doesn’t actually revive on top of his throne.”

Miyoshi looked unusually flustered at that. “Oh crap. I hadn’t considered that at all.”

December 12, 2018 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor

Upon waking up the next morning, Miyoshi raced out of Dolly before even washing her face. Presumably, she was going to check on the brachiosaurus branch she'd cut yesterday.

"Brachylaena huillensis isn't a dinosaur," she admonished me.

"Never mind the details. So anyway, what happened to the muhuhu?"

"Treeheehee."

When I looked to where Miyoshi was pointing, I found a branch—the same shape as hers—growing from a tree without a care in the world.

"Is that where you cut the branch?" I asked.

"I believe so."

On her tablet, Miyoshi showed me a picture of the tree with that branch cut off.

"So it did respawn?" I asked.

"Yep. Talk about one giant leap towards our perpetual harvest field!"

"Well, the real problem is whether the dungeon will recognize foreign plants as its own. And based on what you said, plants don't even grow inside the dungeons, remember?"

Even if the dungeons recognized sown seeds as belonging to them, our plan would come to nothing if the seeds didn't grow. And even if the seeds *did* respawn, searching an entire dungeon for them would be impossible.

"About that," Miyoshi said. "Do you think there's already wheat growing somewhere in Yoyogi Dungeon?"

I frowned. "Maybe, but in that case, would we only be able to farm the wheat where it's already growing?"

"It's a possibility."

"Either way, without running a variety of tests, there's a lot we won't know."

For now, let's go accomplish our original goal for this dive."

"Sounds good. Onwards to the foot of the mountain then."

Fortunately, Enkai didn't revive on top of the throne. If I had to guess, he *probably* revived in the inner sanctum at the end of the birth canal. Again, probably.

That day, we continued hunting genomos with the same zealotry as Zen warriors exterminating the first-floor slimes. We needed a certain number of Mining orbs so that a decent number of people and countries could verify the skill's effects. Of course, we still planned on auctioning off these orbs.

Since Mining had a drop rate of one in ten thousand, Making's cool time was only 8.64 seconds. Considering the total lack of problems this caused, it might as well have been zero.

Having learned our lesson from yesterday, we didn't enter the open area before the temple. Instead, we had the Arthurs act as decoys to lure out our enemies. Attacking like this posed no real danger.

We used several layers of bed comforters to defend against the thrown stones. Who would've guessed that blankets made for such great armor? Luckily, there were no monsters around that used fire, but objectively, we must have looked quite strange, hurling magic and iron balls with comforters draped over our heads.

No matter how many of the genomos we defeated, they continued to appear without end. In fact, I began to suspect these incessant waves were a means of forcing explorers to acquire Mining.

I also acquired one copy each of Earth Magic, Night Vision, and Dexterity. After manifesting the seventh copy of Mining, I turned to Miyoshi to ask a question. "Should we go to the twentieth level soon and test out its powers?"

"That's a good idea," she replied. "I'm a little worried about your MP."

"It recovers quickly, but against this many monsters..."

Just once, I'd wanted to launch an Inferno incantation from the entrance. However, because I always had to consider my MP recovery and the next wave

of genomos, I hadn't found the right time to use it. Too bad.

"After testing out Mining on the twentieth level, should we head back up?" Miyoshi asked.

"Sounds good," I agreed.

Miyoshi and I dashed away from the cavern entrance. The genomos stopped halfway down the passageway, as if they were under some kind of restriction.

"Couldn't you take advantage of that trait to stand at a safe distance and hunt them to extinction?" Miyoshi asked.

"Maybe they don't appear until you reach that open area," I replied. "When we first entered the passageway, they weren't there, remember?"

"Oh, that's right."

"But anyway, it looks like we can make our getaway."

During this conversation, we followed our map down the shortest possible route to our destination, descending to the twentieth level.

"All right," I said. "Time to determine RU22-0012's authenticity."

Miyoshi and I had both used Mining in order to verify the connection between LUC and the drop rate of minerals.

"I'll let you take the commemorative first shot," Miyoshi offered, politely deferring to me. "Some of the inscriptions had subtle differences, after all."

The nineteenth and twentieth levels of Yoyogi were tundra. Yetis, abominable snowmen, ice crawlers, and snow almirajs appeared on this floor. [\(8\)](#)

When a snow almiraj appeared right in front of me, I immediately Detected the monster, hurling an iron ball at it. The projectile tore through the creature's upper body without the slightest resistance, as if it were paper. The snow almiraj then exploded into black light, the particles scattering away.

"Talk about overkill," Miyoshi smirked.

I nodded. "Two hundred STR might've been a bit too much."

"Yeah, that sort of strength can kill a god. Albeit one on the eighteenth level."

In any case, the snow almiraj dropped a silvery ingot.

“Whoa,” I said. “We’re already getting silver?”

When I picked up the ingot and saw its display name, I furrowed my brow. After all, I had quit my job over a conflict surrounding this element.

“Vanadium?” I asked.

“Yep, it’s vanadium.”

The vanadium ingot was around the size of a 113 mm x 52 mm gold bullion. However, it was about three times as thick as a gold bullion. The relative density of vanadium was a little less than that of gold. In other words, this ingot probably weighed one kilogram.

While my drop rate for vanadium was one hundred percent, Miyoshi’s was thirty-three percent. And since all monsters on the twentieth level had roughly the same drop rate, this seemed connected to LUC as well.

After confirming all this, we immediately began preparing to return to the surface. Even inside Dolly, neither of us wanted to spend the night in this frigid waste.

The next day, we arrived back in Tokyo.

December 13, 2018 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

By the time we’d raced back to the surface, it was late afternoon on December thirteenth.

“We’re home,” I said.

“Oh, welcome back,” Naruse replied. “How did everything go?”

Now completely at home in the office, she welcomed us home with all the naturalness of an employee who had worked here for a long time.

“We verified quite a few things,” Miyoshi replied.

Perhaps taking notes for a report, Naruse withdrew a pen and wrote something down on a piece of paper.

“First of all, everything written about the party system was correct,” Miyoshi continued.

Naruse nodded. “This should guarantee the authenticity of Heaven’s Leaks.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed. “What a huge relief.”

“Also, the genomos did drop Mining,” Miyoshi added.

Upon hearing this, Naruse dropped her pen with a dumbfounded expression. Flustered, she picked up the pen again and asked, “Y-You already acquired it?”

She’s still surprised at how easily we get our hands on unregistered skills?

“Somehow or another,” I answered.

“Oh, and we also confirmed the twentieth level’s mineral drop!” Miyoshi cried.

She yanked out a silvery ingot from her bag and placed it on the table.

“What?” Naruse asked. “You’ve already used Mining?!”

Using unknown skills came with risks. Since Miyoshi and I had Appraisal, this wasn’t the case for us, but...

Hold on. Before acquiring Appraisal, didn’t we casually use skill orbs after just looking at their names? Now that I think about it, Super Recovery could’ve been a trap similar to Undeath. Oh crap, what if I’d turned into a slime?!

Throughout history, many scientists had used their own bodies as test subjects. Yet in most cases, the qualifier of “crazy” had preceded “scientist.” Still, when scientists truly wanted to test something and were certain of the results, they tended to become risk takers. And as long as a person used their own body, they wouldn’t be violating the Declaration of Helsinki. [\(9\)](#)

In 1956, Werner Forssmann had won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for developing a procedure that allowed cardiac catheterization. During his residency, he’d inserted a urinary catheter from the vena cava of his left arm into the right atrium of his heart. Despite being fired from his hospital for this experiment, he’d gone on to win the Nobel Prize thirty years later.

More recently, when the dungeons had first appeared in 2015, a man named

Michael L. Smith had used himself as a test subject while conducting research. What kind of research, you ask? Well, he'd been testing the most painful location of honeybee stings.

Apparently, the nose hurt the most.

For this research, he'd received an award in Physiology and Entomology, as well as ten trillion dollars. But alas, the award had been the Ig Nobel Prize, and the prize money had been in Zimbabwe dollars from 2015. And of course, this wasn't the Canadian Michael Smith who'd won the real Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1993.

In hindsight, using unknown skill orbs might have been imprudent. However, in matters where thinking wouldn't lead to a conclusion, you had no choice but to test things out for yourself.

"Yep, already used it," Miyoshi confirmed. "But other than causing mineral drops, it didn't seem to have any effects."

Naruse breathed a sigh of relief. "But wow, you even managed to verify those drops," she said in surprise.

"Only on the twentieth level though," I said, placing a silvery ingot on the table. "The mineral drop there is vanadium."

"Vanadium?!" Naruse repeated in a shout.

Vanadium was a rare metal that was used in chemistry-related fields, such as my former workplace. Its use as a steelmaking additive made up the majority of its demand. As I recalled, one kilogram of vanadium cost a little less than ten thousand yen. On the other hand, gold was a little less than five thousand yen per single gram. Quite literally, these were different orders of magnitude.

"Why are you yelling?" I asked. "Sure, vanadium's seen steep price increases, but it's still not that expensive."

"Kei, that's the price of low-purity vanadium," Miyoshi explained. "Since the dungeons are producing these minerals, they'll probably be in the four-nines class at the very least."

Four nine represented 99.99% purity and was sometimes written as 4N. Back

in the day, audiophiles had used 6N or 7N speaker cables.

Still, Miyoshi was probably onto something. After all, this was a dungeon drop item, and its name had been written as “vanadium.” Considering this, I decided to voice a possibility.

“Yeah, you might be right,” I said. “These might even be one hundred percent pure vanadium ingots.”

“Exactly,” Miyoshi replied. “And outside dungeons, one hundred percent vanadium doesn’t even exist on Earth.”

Though a fair amount of vanadium did exist on our planet, the ore deposits had a low grade.⁽¹⁰⁾ Furthermore, an efficient and revolutionary method for obtaining high-purity vanadium had never been discovered. As the purity increased, so too did the value.

“From 99.7 to 99.9% purity, the difference in price ranges from eighty thousand to one hundred ten thousand yen per kilogram,” Miyoshi said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Wow, that’s a pretty big difference.”

“But that’s also the purchase price per ton. The retail price from Kanto Chemical is one hundred thousand yen for a one-hundred-gram 4N cube.”

One hundred thousand yen for a single kilogram? That was insane. In that case, a single vanadium drop would fetch about the same price as a first-ranked healing potion. But still, that was ten times the value of low-purity vanadium. No, vanadium didn’t hold a candle to gold, but that was still pretty crazy.

“But price aside, vanadium is mostly found in China, Russia, and South Africa,” Miyoshi observed. “So in terms of stable supply and national security, this is huge news.”

Yeah, that was another way of looking at things. This would definitely be important for the state.

“But in the end, this is only a one-kilogram ingot,” I pointed out. “Filling a large part of that demand would be difficult, right?”

“According to some fairly old documents at our former workplace, their annual demand for vanadium was one thousand tons,” Miyoshi answered. “But

of course, this isn't including ferrovanadium, which makes up the core of the demand."

Considering Miyoshi's words, I did some quick mental math. "If you wanted to supply that much vanadium through monsters, you would have to defeat three million of them just to get the metal."

Upon hearing this, Naruse donned a curious expression. "Huh? Where did you get that calculation from?"

"Usually, the drop rate is one ingot per three monsters," Miyoshi explained.

Hunting eighty-two hundred monsters every day? No thanks. Even if a team of one hundred took on this challenge, each member would have to average eighty-two kills per day. That seemed pretty difficult. The twentieth level was freezing, after all.

"If you tried to fulfill the demand through Yoyogi alone, that might be true," Naruse said. "But there are quite a few dungeons in Japan."

The number of dungeons in Japan was a mystery in itself. Around eighty dungeons had been found in thirty-six or thirty-seven areas around the world. If you included the incredibly minor-depth dungeons that had already been fully traversed, a total of nine dungeons existed in Japan. Though there must have been a reason for this uneven distribution, it wasn't well understood at this point.

Since other countries had plenty of unexplored regions, perhaps more dungeons simply hadn't been found yet. Yet even with that in mind, this distribution seemed far too unbalanced to be random.

"All that aside, we've proven the contents of RU22-0012," Miyoshi stated.

"In Yoyogi's twentieth level, at least," I amended.

At that moment, Miyoshi's cell phone vibrated. "Oh, hold a second. It's Midori."

She then left for the dining room.

"So you're going to publish Heaven's Leaks on Christmas?" Naruse asked.

Since Naruse also had to think about the timing of her report to Saiga, she

must have been a bundle of nerves.

“All our preparations will be finished around then,” I answered. “Monica—or America, I should say—will probably be publishing their own material around that time.”

“I see.”

“If we’re patient, quite a few Mining orbs should come out of Yoyogi.”

Mining had a drop rate of one in ten thousand, after all. The dungeons were practically giving away this particular skill orb. Plus, those genomos appeared in endless droves. Anyone with high-leveled ranged magic would have no trouble exterminating ten thousand of them. Bringing powerful firearms into that open area seemed entirely possible as well.

“How do you know that?” Naruse asked.

“Umm...” I hedged. “Well, we both managed to get our hands on Mining in a few days, y’know?”

“Isn’t that only possible because you’re D-Powers? No, never mind. I’ve finished sorting out almost everything on my end as well.”

Having said this, Naruse brought a tablet filled with translation files from the neighboring room. Of the 266 registered inscriptions, 161 were part of the “dungeon manual,” eighty-two resembled a history book, and the remaining twenty-three were ambiguous in nature. Also, around forty percent of the inscriptions appeared to have overlapping content.

“Two hundred sixty-six inscriptions is more than I would’ve expected to exist,” I mused.

Naruse nodded. “Based on this number, it would seem as though an average of one inscription is found in each dungeon per year.”

Oh, right. If eighty inscriptions were found per year, that would add up to 240 in three years.

“When you put it like that, 240 seems kind of low.”

“As explorers have traveled deeper, the frequency of discovery has also increased. The pace might pick up from here on out.” Naruse shrugged. “But

the number of overlapping inscriptions might increase as well, which could cause confusion.”

While some inscriptions had been dropped by monsters, others had been hidden on certain floors. There had even been cases of inscriptions found simply lying on the ground.

“I noticed something based on the discoverers’ notes of the inscriptions you’ve translated,” I said. “Many of the inscriptions that were found around rare monsters—or area bosses—contain important information.”

RU22-0012, which described mineral drops, had been discovered around an area boss. Likewise, BF26-0003 had been discovered around a rare monster that had appeared from out of nowhere, much like the Hound of Hecate.

Naruse pointed to a page that read “GB26-0007.”

“This one is similar,” she said. “It came from the Isle of Man, and it describes safe zones in dungeons.”

According to this inscription, safe zones and safe floors would begin to appear on the thirty-second levels and beyond.

“Does a safe floor mean that the entire level is a safe zone?” I asked.

“It would seem that way,” Naruse replied.

Having finished her call, Miyoshi rejoined the conversation. “Kei. Once those levels are found, people are definitely going to build towns.”

“What did Midori say?” I inquired, changing the subject.

“She was calling about the device we asked them to develop,” Miyoshi answered. “We’ll go look at it tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” I assented before changing the subject back to safe zones. “But the issue around using land in dungeons is going to get dragged up again. Naruse, your department might want to establish the rules sooner rather than later.”

Naruse nodded fervently. “I’ll bring this to my superiors.”

All in all, there were too many important inscriptions to count, including

US01-0001, which supported the dungeon passage theory. There was also AU10-0003, which described the purpose of dungeons.

While skimming these documents, I noticed a certain word appearing several times. One that I wasn't accustomed to hearing in reality.

"What are these 'magicules' that you keep alluding to?" I asked.

"In a fictional context, they would be the base material for magic, right?" Miyoshi answered immediately.

However, this word would be the result of Naruse—an Otherworldly Language Comprehension user—replacing the original word with a concept of our own language. Thus, this translation was probably a reflection of Naruse's personal vocabulary.

"Naruse, what impression do you get from the original word?" I asked.

"Let's see... A small component that manifests the dungeons' powers, perhaps?" After a short pause, she added in a reserved manner, "I thought of using 'atom' or 'element,' but both of those seemed likely to cause misunderstandings. It's not a subatomic particle or a specific real element."

Still, "dungeon atoms" has a nice ring to it. We could call them Dun-Ams for short. Wait, why does that remind me of Gundam?

"If these magicules are what manifest the dungeons' powers, perhaps we should use the English word 'factor,'" Miyoshi suggested. "It comes from the Latin word for 'doer.' How about D-Factor?"[\(11\)](#)

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"Oh, but this summer, *Psychological Review* published a paper on something called the D-Factor."

Miyoshi had run a quick search on her phone. According to the results, a joint research team from the universities of Copenhagen, Ulm, and Koblenz-Landau had published a paper on common factors amongst those with dark personality traits. These were called the D-Factors.

"Overlapping abbreviations are common enough," I said. "You know how terribly ambiguous of an abbreviation ATM is, right?"

It could mean anything from standard atmosphere to anti-tank missiles.

“I guess you’re right,” Miyoshi agreed.

“According to AU10-0003, dungeons are tools for spreading these magicules,” Naruse chimed in. “Or D-Factors, I suppose.”

“Tools for spreading magicules?” I repeated.

In other words, the dungeons were continuing to spew out this “D-Factor” substance even now? And they’d been doing so for three years?

“Erm, is that okay?” Miyoshi asked with an anxious expression.

For three years, the dungeons had been discharging a mysterious substance unknown to humankind. Even the slightest consideration of this matter brought to mind pollution.

Naruse mulled this over for a moment. “If this D-Factor actually does exist, its effects on the human body haven’t been recognized as anything problematic from a public health standpoint.”

This data came from physical examinations performed on explorers as a whole. Compared to normal people, explorers showed no significant difference in rates of disease contraction, or any other categories inspected during general medical exams. Overall, dungeon exploration even seemed to improve health.

Still, something about Naruse’s phrasing bothered me.

“In other words, there might be a problem outside public health?” I asked.

“Of course you’d say that,” Miyoshi interjected, interrupting my astute observation with her unfair opinions. “You’re so cynical, Kei.”

Wait, when someone says, “from a public health standpoint,” what else am I supposed to think?!

While listening to my exchange with Miyoshi, Naruse wore a smile. “In terms of other problems... Yoshimura, what do you think of the dungeons having gamelike elements such as leveling up and statuses?”

Statuses. These were thought to be the quantification of human abilities, much like those in a video game. Since dungeon research had first begun, the

existence of experience points and statuses had been a matter of debate. Yet even now the details were unknown. Of course, the inscription detailing the party system had proven the existence of both these things.

“Basically, you want to know if I believe levels and statuses are linked to the strengthening phenomenon among explorers, right?” I asked. “If so, I do. Is that the problem you’re talking about?”

“Rather than a problem, perhaps we should call it an unexplained phenomenon,” Naruse replied.

The effects of statuses. Based on our investigations, Miyoshi and I believed them to be something that worked like an exoskeleton. No matter how hard we studied the physiological numbers, barely any results appeared in that data. From a medical perspective, this could only be described as a phenomenon being produced by an unexplained power.

“That being said, there’s no evidence of explorers being psychologically affected,” Naruse continued. “They’re not particularly aggressive or anything. Explorers have simply grown stronger or gained more stamina. That’s all we know of this subject, and yet—”

“The degree of their growth is off the charts,” I finished.

Naruse nodded firmly. “Right now, the top-ranked explorers could easily break the world records in track and field.”

That much was certainly possible. From my personal experience with 200 AGI, I could probably run a full one hundred meters in under two seconds, much less nine. In the end, could you call a person capable of this feat human? Even that seemed dubious.

“Here’s another thing,” I said. “Suppose D-Factors are responsible for the mysterious phenomena happening inside and outside of dungeons. If that’s the case, would skill orbs, potions, and so forth be useless without them?”

In that case, no number of chemical analyses would be able to explain the phenomenon behind potions. After all, the potions might not contain the primary substance that caused the phenomenon. And even if they did, that substance might not even be a chemical component.

Naruse's eyes widened. "Then the idea that using skill orbs and potions inside a dungeon will heighten their effects—"

"Might not be a groundless rumor, after all," I finished Naruse's thought again.

When Asha had used Super Recovery, the results had been incredible. Perhaps the high density of D-Factors within the dungeon had played a role in this.

Over the past three years, the dungeons had spread across the world. But if a person far removed from any dungeon—without even a D-Card—used a potion, perhaps the results would pale in comparison to Asha's recovery.

"Apparently, monsters are made of D-Factors," Miyoshi said, "and defeating them causes the substance to spread."

"So when a monster vanishes into black light, those are D-Factors?" I asked.

Miyoshi grinned. "Maybe we should try catching them in a bottle next time."

"Wait, does that mean they're visible entities?"

"Possibly. If D-Factors *are* some kind of substance, couldn't we use an electron microscope to confirm their existence?"

Some modern microscopes—especially electron and scanning probe microscopes—could observe atoms. If D-Factors were an actual substance, we could probably confirm if they existed.

"But how will we create a sample?" I asked.

No matter the microscope, observing the target would be impossible without creating a proper sample. For example, you couldn't see oxygen molecules flying around in the air.

"Why don't we try catching the black light in a very fine mesh?" Miyoshi suggested. "If anything remains in the gaps, we'll basically have hit the jackpot."

In other words, we would stick a carbon vapor deposition grid mesh—which electron microscopes used—into the black light and try observing it.

"If the need arises, we can try that, but I wouldn't expect much," I said. "The

D-Factors of defeated monsters might be visible, but they're entirely made up of light."

If we sucked the black light into a thin tube and closed both ends with resin, that would probably be a more surefire way of trapping the D-Factors. But if this substance were truly light, it would probably pass through the tube as well.

Come to think of it, light also enters the body whenever you use skill orbs too.

"Perhaps statuses are affected by the number of D-Factors you've absorbed into your body." At this, I clapped my hands. "Either way, here's what we know: a mysterious substance called D-Factor exists, and it's casually used on the other side of the dungeons. Thus, if D-Factors don't exist in the world they've connected to, the people on the other side—if we can call them people—will be in a bind. Because of this, they created the dungeons and established an environment in which to spread D-Factors."

"But if that's possible, they could probably just shower the Earth in D-Factors all at once," Miyoshi countered. "Why would they choose such a roundabout method?"

I shook my head. "Without asking them, we won't know for sure. But even if we look like uncivilized monkeys from their perspective, we're still intelligent life-forms who have built a material culture, more or less. That must be why."

"So in your opinion, they have some set of rules for coming into contact with intelligent life?"

"Usually, societies with technology advanced enough to be considered magic have these rules. It's a staple in sci-fi."

"Hmm," Miyoshi mused. "Imagine humans ventured out into space and found a habitable planet. If the indigenous life-forms seemed relatively intelligent but were on the level of monkeys... I don't think we'd care about those rules."

In response to Miyoshi's overly cynical remark, I chuckled dryly. "No, if they'd built a material culture, we'd definitely care."

Logic aside, the notion of ethics being the same amongst highly intelligent life-forms was a conventional idea, but was it actually true? At this point in time, it didn't go beyond wishful thinking.

“Let’s think about this,” I said. “If you raised the concentration of D-Factors all at once, maybe it would have a serious effect on the indigenous people. How does that sound?”

“But if density matters, wouldn’t that have an effect on explorers?” Miyoshi asked.

“That would be the result, yeah. But it wouldn’t be strange to think of this as a patch test being performed on Earth.”

During a patch test, the subject would have allergenic substances applied to their skin to see if a reaction occurred. Perhaps a small group of people—in this case, explorers—were being placed in an environment with highly concentrated D-Factors to test for any side-effects. If thought of this way, it made a sort of sense. I had no clue why the environment had to be a dungeon though.

“The beings on the other side are probably trying to coexist with us natives,” I continued. “From the looks of it, they’re even providing a variety of benefits to make humanity dependent on the dungeons. If they had no qualms about annihilating us, they wouldn’t go through all this trouble. At least, I don’t think they would.”

Perhaps their goal wasn’t Earth itself but us as a species.

“Kei,” Miyoshi addressed me. “Regardless of whether they plan on annihilating us, do you think humanity would stand a chance against beings capable of creating the dungeons?”

“Not at all.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

In short, everything hinged upon their decision.

“Either way, we have no choice but to keep doing as the almighty dungeons have instructed,” I declared. “Steadily capture them and await first contact.”

“Why do you think they won’t approach us from the other side?” Miyoshi asked.

“Maybe they’re just shy.”

Despite my joking tone, Naruse still looked pale. “Just listening to you two

makes me worried about how humanity will react to the inscriptions,” she groaned. “To some degree, I can understand why many countries didn’t release Russia’s information to the general public.”

Upon hearing that dungeons were tools for terraforming Earth, most people would expect “allergic reactions.” All across the world, movements to bury the dungeons might even arise. However, this would all be dependent on how we broached the topic.

So far, I hadn’t seen any negative effects on Earth. From my perspective as a former ordinary civilian, the dungeons seemed to be working overwhelmingly in our favor. Those who had lost family members to exploration probably held different opinions, but death was an unavoidable risk for all adventurers. So long as a person explored of their own free will, blaming their deaths on the dungeons would be wrong.

Naruse held a tablet in two hands, staring at the screen intently. “Should we actually release this information to the public?” she murmured with a hint of anxiety.

“Whenever you need to make an important decision, it’s always better to have information, no matter how unpleasant it might be,” I responded. “So long as that information is accurate, at least.”

I wanted to believe that modern people were civilized enough to not cause a panic over this. But again, this was simply wishful thinking on my part.

“By the way,” I said to Naruse, “Sorry to change the subject, but we have something else to discuss with you.”

“What’s that?” she asked, simultaneously furrowing her brow and stiffening.

Oh, right. Recently, we’ve come to Naruse with some pretty outrageous queries, such as “Hey, do you mind becoming an otherworldly language translator?” and “How should we go about getting licenses for hellhounds?”

“No need to go on the defensive,” I replied. “Actually, I’m wondering where we could get permission to use land on Yoyogi’s second level.”

“Use land?” Naruse repeated. “What on earth for?”

“I’d like to cultivate a small garden.”

“Come again?”

When dungeons had first appeared in the world, various countries had responded differently when it came to their ownership.

In Japan, dungeons had initially been thought to belong to the original landowner, per Article 242 of the Civil Code. In short, they’d been deemed real estate accession. Later, the world had learned that dungeon interiors didn’t exist as part of the actual land. Thus only the entrances had been deemed real estate accession. As a result, the possession rights of dungeon interiors had been up in the air.

If dungeon interiors had been deemed to exist within Japan, the national treasury would have claimed ownership of them, per Article 239-2 of the Civil Code.[\(12\)](#) However, no one had been able to determine *where* exactly the dungeon interiors existed in Japan, seeing as they didn’t occupy the surface or the underground, nor even the airspace.

“If the land is unowned, perhaps we should follow international law,” some people suggested. “We can claim ownership of dungeon interiors through prior occupation.” However, one could hardly argue that each floor of a dungeon occupied the same territory. Furthermore, acquiring the power to occupy every single level would require an enormous, unfathomable fortune. Put simply, it was an impossible task.

Consequently, no one had been able to claim ownership of dungeon interiors. And of course, this meant no taxes could be levied on economic activities occurring within the dungeons. In the end, many countries had been at a complete loss for how to legally handle dungeons. And so they’d created an organization to manage the dungeons and keep up appearances. This had been the birth of the WDA, or World Dungeon Association.

As of right now, the WDA collectively held authority over dungeon interiors. Though dungeons didn’t truly exist in any country, a given nation’s DA would manage the dungeons with entrances inside their borders. When necessary,

these DAs would also loan dungeon management and use rights back to their national government.

In Japan, almost all the land around dungeon entrances was owned by the state. Most landowners had sold these areas—or allowed them to be expropriated—due to the possibility of monsters spilling out from the dungeons. If this were to happen, no-fault liability would be applied to the person owning the land around the entrance. In short, the landowners would face compensation liability for any damages caused by monsters breaking free of dungeons, regardless of intent or negligence. Hardly anyone had accepted this risk.

All this aside, Japanese law generally applied within Yoyogi Dungeon at the present moment. Therefore, Article 239 of the Civil Code had become the legal basis for being able to claim drop items as one's own.

Incidentally, would permanently residing somewhere in a dungeon for twenty years make that area yours?[\(13\)](#) Since no one had ever posed this question, the answer remained unclear.

Only three years had passed since the dungeons had first appeared. Legislation regarding them would likely continue to evolve.

“And...what do you hope to accomplish by cultivating a field inside a dungeon?” Naruse asked.

“Don't give me that look,” I pleaded. “Agriculture is the very foundation of a slow life, y'know? Since we're talking about a field here, I obviously want to grow crops.”

“Uh, okay?”

“But Kei,” Miyoshi interjected, “based on what farmers actually say, working in agriculture isn't at all conducive to a slow life.”

“Now that you mention it, yeah. When I think of farming, I envision working from sunrise to sunset.”

“You're dealing with living creatures, after all. Taking days off at your own

convenience probably isn't an option."

"Damn," I swore. "Who the hell said that agriculture is the very foundation of a slow life?"

"You did, Kei, just now."

"Wait, what?"

"Also, aren't you horrible with living things?" Miyoshi piled on. "As in, you managed to kill a cactus?"

"Oh, that's right! Well then, I leave everything in your capable hands, dearest Miyoshi!"

"You're dumping this on me?!"

I nodded. "Forcing responsibility onto someone else—that's the true hallmark of a slow life, don't you think?"

"Definitely not! You're talking about throwing your life away! That would be a throw life!"

Did she really just rhyme throw with slow? Who's cracking the dad jokes now, eh?

"What's your impression of a 'slow life,' anyway?" Miyoshi wondered.

I considered that for a moment. "My impression, huh? Lying around and doing nothing, I guess?"

"Does that sound fun to you?" Miyoshi pressed, her expression serious.

How should I respond to that?

Back when I'd been extremely busy and couldn't take time off, I'd dreamed of becoming a professional loafer. Yet now that a life of leisure had come within my reach, lying around and doing nothing would probably make me feel restless.

"Well, I'd probably get bored of it in three days," I finally answered. "But wait, what *is* a slow life, exactly?"

"Generally, it's described as a lifestyle that doesn't emphasize efficiency or speed," Miyoshi replied.

“What sort of life doesn’t emphasize efficiency? One where you deliberately slack off?”

“Maybe it means intentionally doing pointless things.”

I frowned. “Who would intentionally do something pointless? An idiot?”

“If nothing else, we’ve concluded that you’re not cut out for the slow life, Kei.”

Hold on a second here. There’s plenty of work in this world that seems pointless but actually isn’t. But normally you wouldn’t do something that was pointless in both appearance and actuality, right?

“Well then, you want to borrow land inside a dungeon to help facilitate a slow life?” Naruse asked.

Oh crap! Her aura is practically screaming, “Do that in your own damn garden!”

“I-It’s for an experiment,” I stammered.

“An experiment?” Naruse repeated. “To cultivate a field inside a dungeon?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s the idea. Has anyone else ever tried this before?”

“I do recall seeing records of this being attempted in desert regions, but...”

Whoa, we actually have a forerunner?

“So what were the results?” I asked.

“As with all facilities created inside the dungeons, it disappeared,” Naruse replied. “Well before anyone could actually harvest the crops.”

“Were slimes the cause of the disappearance?”

“Most likely, but...if I recall correctly, the cause was stated to be unknown.”

By now, this should have been obvious, but slimes were dungeon cleaners. If you piled up rocks inside a dungeon, nothing would happen. However, if you brought in materials from the outside and tried to build something, slimes would appear from out of nowhere, crawling over and melting your creation. Of course, no one knew how slimes could differentiate between objects native and foreign to the dungeons. Oddly, slimes wouldn’t appear if someone kept watch,

but from a cost perspective, posting guards around a vast field around the clock wouldn't be practical.

Also, Yoyogi's second level had no ceiling. A sky unfolded overhead, with stars even appearing at night. If you launched a rocket, that aircraft reaching space seemed entirely possible. That being said, the first SDF team to explore Yoyogi had flown a drone into the upper air. After reaching a certain height, the drone had been unable to fly any higher.

The drone hadn't run into anything. Likewise, it hadn't lacked power due to the thin atmosphere. Simply put, a mysterious phenomenon had occurred. The drone had never changed in elevation, no matter how much it continued to ascend.

Incidentally, open area floors didn't have dead-end walls like you could find on Yoyogi's first level. Nevertheless, these open area floors didn't span interminable lengths. Instead, if you traveled to the edge, you would exit at a different edge—probably the one on the opposite side. In other words, these areas were closed spaces. Because Yoyogi's second level fit this category, it had been mistaken for an incredibly vast floor during the initial mapping.

Perhaps the upper air was similar, but whatever the case, we only knew one thing for certain: a ceiling hadn't been found. Thus, I couldn't imagine slimes falling from above. To thwart the creatures, we could dig a shallow moat and fill it with alien drool. And to thwart goblins, we could set up a sturdy chain-link fence. With these two countermeasures in place, perhaps things would work out. Still, if monsters could pinpoint their respawns inside the field, we would have no choice but to throw in the towel, chalking it up to bad luck.

"In any case, if anyone can hand out permission, it would be the JDA's Dungeon Management Section," Naruse said. "But since there's no precedent, I can't give you an immediate answer. I'll look into it."

"Thanks," I replied.

While registering the translations, Miyoshi spoke from the other side of the monitor. "Doesn't this seem like a job for our full-time supervisor?"

"Now that you mention it, yes!" Naruse called back.

Uh, what? Sure, the translation itself does sound like a job for the management section, but come to think of it, should we have placed everything in the hands of our full-time supervisor...?

“Still,” I spoke again, returning to the subject at hand, “we’ve already asked this of you, but can permission to use a dungeon for projects outside exploration actually be granted to parties or individuals?”

Miyoshi responded to my worried inquiry as if it were no big deal. “It should be fine, right? Considering the amount of time parties diving to the lower levels will spend traveling, they’ll have no choice but to create bases in the dungeons. Visiting the JDA and submitting a form to receive permission each and every time just isn’t feasible.”

That may have been the case. If explorers found a suitable location during a dive, they would immediately set up base there. Now suppose that base existed permanently or for a sufficiently lengthy period of time. In a sense, these actions would be equivalent to the party monopolizing land within the dungeon. Forbidding this would be impossible.

“Those cases are exceptions,” Naruse said with a serious expression. “In all likelihood, you’ll need permission to use land on the beginner levels, where the necessity of bases isn’t clearly recognized.”

Miyoshi nodded. “If it becomes public knowledge that you can set up a base without permission, someone will probably end up building a villa on the second level.”

Yeah, I can just imagine someone slapping together a house out of two-by-fours.

“We also have to consider safe zones,” Miyoshi added.

Certainly, it would be difficult for the JDA to develop safe areas by themselves. Since these zones were still inside dungeons, explorer cooperation would be essential. Considering the scale and meaningfulness of the project, corporations would no doubt offer to support development. This would be similar to the International Space Station, which supposedly operated at a huge loss. However, safe zones on the thirty-second level and beyond had a chance of generating huge profits simply through the collection of metals from the

surrounding areas. Not to mention the gold on the fiftieth floor.

“Let me sum things up,” I said. “The JDA will allow explorers to build small bases on the pro levels without permission, excluding safe zones. On the other hand, we’ll need permission to build large bases or occupy land on the amateur levels?”

“Things will probably end up that way,” Naruse replied. “Also, are you planning to make money from this endeavor?”

Hmm. That’s a hard question to answer.

“Miyoshi,” I said, “if this experiment succeeds, do you plan on making money from it?”

My business partner donned a thoughtful expression. “Will I apply for intellectual property rights if it’s profitable, for instance?”

Perhaps because this statement seemed at odds with cultivating a small field, Naruse cocked her head. “Intellectual property rights?”

“I would like to publish our results free of charge for any hunger relief nonprofits,” Miyoshi explained. “But if any major grain corporations imitate us, I’ll take whatever I can from them.” At this, Miyoshi donned a wicked expression. “Down to the very last yen.”

What on earth are you talking about?! Naruse seemed to be wondering, but of course she didn’t chime in.

“For now, let’s say that we *are* planning to make money off this endeavor,” I decided. “Since it seems to be turning into a delicate situation.”

“Huh?” Naruse asked. “O-Okay.”

“Kei, this might be a good opportunity for us to start a company,” Miyoshi suggested.

Before, Miyoshi and I had discussed an organization that aimed to return our auction profits back to society. But could we have a for-profit company do that?

“Wouldn’t a nonprofit organization that focused on dungeon capturing be more appropriate?” I asked.

Miyoshi shook her head. "It can take three or more months to establish an NPO."

"Seriously?"

"I'm positive. After we first discussed this, I asked a judicial scrivener about it."

These days, establishing a public company could take less than ten days, but going through the formalities of setting up an NPO could be that time-consuming?

"Also," Miyoshi continued, "You need ten or more employees, three or more people on the board of directors, and at least one accountant."

"That's crazy," I gasped. "But doesn't a public company need three people on the board of directors too?"

"Based on the newest company laws, you only need one director. In that case, a general meeting of all shareholders will make the decisions rather than a board of directors."

"I see. Well then, a public company should be fine."

"For our situation, I would recommend an LLC."

"As in a limited liability company?" I asked.

"Yep. Since LLCs are extremely insular, gaining credit from financial institutions can be difficult, which definitely gets in the way, but—"

Miyoshi briefly explained the differences between public companies and LLCs, none of which seemed to pose any particular problems. In fact, the greater degree of freedom inherent to LLCs was everything I could've hoped for.

"Well then, should I be the representative employee?" Miyoshi asked.

"Of course," I answered. "So anyway, Naruse."

"Yes?" she responded.

"In regard to the land, could you apply for permission using our party license or Miyoshi's commercial license? The latter is S-Ranked, after all. If a legal personality is required, we'll provide one later."

“Understood. Are you okay with the area being small?”

“Hmm,” I mused. “For now, we can make do with around ten square meters. Somewhere far afield where people don’t often venture would be perfect.”

“Great. I’ll make inquiries about it.”

“Tell your superiors that this experiment could turn the world upside down,” Miyoshi added cryptically, doing a fist pump to emphasize her point. “And wear your best poker face while you’re at it.”

Based on Miyoshi’s statements about intellectual property rights and major grain corporations, Naruse was probably wary of us doing something outrageous again.

“Good luck out there, but remember to pace yourself,” I urged, trying to sound inoffensive.

Still, simply borrowing land within a dungeon was causing this much trouble. In all likelihood, it would have been faster to secretly cultivate a small field in the back of the second level without permission.

As I sank into the sofa with these thoughts crossing my mind, my phone vibrated.

“Huh?” I asked. “Mitsurugi’s calling me?”

I had last seen her on the previous Sunday.

Well, I did claim to be relatively free this month, I thought while answering the phone, curious.

“Hello.”

“Oh, are you there, Coach?” a woman asked.

“Coach?” I repeated.

This voice definitely didn’t sound like Mitsurugi.

“Is this Saito?” I asked. “Why are you calling me ‘Coach’? And from Mitsurugi’s phone, no less? This is all pretty unusual.”

“Well, I kiiiiind of need to apologize to you for something.”

“Say what?”

“To tell the truth, I landed a leading role not too long ago, but—”

Apparently, Saito would be playing the heroine in a film coming out next year. Unlike TV dramas, movies tended to reflect the vision of casting producers and directors. If either liked your audition, you had a good chance of landing a role, regardless of your popularity. Thus, Saito had auditioned for this particular movie. Even so, she hadn’t been able to discuss the film on Saturday, as it had been a secret until the production announcement.

“That’s incredible,” I said. “So are you calling to ask about the gift we talked about before?”

“I’m not pressuring you into getting me a gift!” Saito cried. “But, uh, I *do* kind of want one.”

“Then what’s this about?” I asked, unable to understand the point of this conversation.

“Well, at the announcement event, I did an interview. At that time, questions came up about the recent improvements in my acting ability.”

From what I could gather, Mitsurugi and Saito’s dungeon diving had become well-known in certain circles. The interviewer had been asking Saito about the connection between this and her acting. In any case, they’d probably meant for this to be a small segment on the heroine’s unusual hobbies.

But of course she hadn’t been able to say, “I’ve been vanquishing hordes of slimes!” So instead she’d let slip, “I’ve been undergoing my coach’s training regimen.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“And wow, everyone sure latched onto that piece of info,” Saito replied.

That’s the last thing I want! What the hell are you doing to me, Saito?!

“S-So what happened next?” I sputtered.

“It’s causing a huge stir in the entertainment industry,” Saito answered. “Everyone’s wondering who my mystery ‘coach’ is.”

“Why?!”

“Well, I’m not proud of this, but until two months ago, I was a relatively unknown actress with average abilities.”

Yeah, not exactly something to brag about.

“But in a mere two months, an aspiring actress only known for her cuteness did the impossible,” Saito continued. “She beat out the other actress expected to land the leading role. The auditions were pretty much rigged, but since the director didn’t know anything about that, he still picked little old me. Of course that’s going to make me stand out.”

“Wait, the audition was even rigged?!” I exclaimed.

“The girl who’d expected to land the role came up to me and asked how I flattered the director into changing his mind. Obviously, I was baffled by this, but later someone involved in production explained the situation to me.”

Supposedly, production had decided to choose the leading actress through audition, but a television studio was also heavily involved in this film. As a result, the process had wound up half-rigged through connections to a talent agency with which the studio had frequent dealings. Even so, no one had informed the director of this, as he was famous for being a stubborn auteur. And since this director had taken a great liking to Saito, manipulating his evaluations had been impossible. Thus she’d been chosen for the leading role.

I frowned. “I’m not sure what to say, but...that sounds like a whole lot of trouble.”

“No kidding!” Saito huffed. “And since that girl’s agency laid all the groundwork, everyone vaguely knew the details. I’m terrified of how they might get back at me in the near future! But anyway, now there’s a mysterious coach behind my meteoric rise, y’know? So obviously, plenty of other girls want to undertake your training regimen.”

“No, *not* obviously!” I shouted back.

“Ugh, Haru already gave me the scolding of the century. She’s still glaring at me right now. That’s why I called you—to apologize.”

Yeah, I know she didn't do this maliciously. Even so...

"Was the interview live?" I asked.

"Nope, recorded," Saito answered.

"Well then, let's hope that portion gets cut."

"I wouldn't count on it. Everyone was most excited for that part of the interview. As for when it will air—"

Saito proceeded to tell me the date, time, and channel on which the interview would air. She then apologized once more and hung up. With the call over, I let out a groan.

"What's with the big sigh, Kei?" Miyoshi inquired.

"Clearly I'm venting my frustrations."

I repeated everything that Saito had told me on the phone.

"Oh, I see," Miyoshi mused. "Then there is a demand for that sort of thing."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Remember our discussion about the boot camp?"

"You were serious about that?!"

Naruse listened to our conversation with a gaze that seemed to say, "What are you two up to this time?" Though I wasn't sure if she'd seen my reaction to the words "boot camp," she dashed into the neighboring room like an evacuee, refusing to get roped into something else crazy. From what I could tell, she continued organizing the translations from behind closed doors.

December 14, 2018 (Friday)

Tokiwa Lab, Minato City

Early the next morning, we drove a rented mini truck to Naruse's Secret Laboratory. We arrived at the start of opening hours, of which Midori had informed us.

"Kei," Miyoshi interjected reprovably, "this place is actually called Tokiwa

Medical Equipment Laboratory.”

Apparently, it was also called Tokiwa Lab for short.

“You’ve been here several times now,” Miyoshi continued while opening the door to the lobby. “How did you not know that?”

“Because there’s no sign,” I replied. “So I always thought of this place as Naruse’s Secret Laboratory.”

“Why would we put up a sign when we don’t have a shop?” a familiar voice asked. “It’s a waste of money. Plus, there’s a small nameplate on the gate.” Midori had come out to meet us with her hands on her hips. “Before we decided on Tokiwa Lab, everyone tried to name the damn place after me whenever I ignored the issue. Naruse Medical Equipment, Midori Lab, and so on. What a bunch of busybodies.”

“Why did you decide on Tokiwa Lab?” Miyoshi asked.

“Because the factory that used to be here was called Tokiwa Precision Machinery,” Midori answered.

That’s your reason? I thought, but apparently, Tokiwa Precision Machinery had been the factory belonging to her family. Midori’s maternal grandfather had operated the factory, but since there had been no one to inherit the business, he’d ultimately given the building to his granddaughter.

“So that’s why your name is Midori,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Miyoshi asked with a curious expression.

“Obviously, ‘midori’ means ‘green,’ and ‘tokiwa’ is a lesser-known word for ‘evergreen tree.’”

The older sister’s name—Miharu—had probably come from the father’s side of the family. Thus, the second daughter’s name had come from the mother’s side. Since their family name was Tokiwa, she’d been named Midori. Seemed plausible enough. And in all likelihood, Midori had been the favorite of her maternal grandfather.

“Interesting,” Miyoshi said.

“And then she just stuck ‘Medical Equipment Laboratory’ to the end of

Tokiwa,” I concluded.

Midori neither confirmed nor denied my speculations, cutting to the chase instead. “That aside, this is the precision measurement device, which needs to be installed somewhere. And this is the simplified version.”

“You’ve already finished the simplified version?” Miyoshi asked.

“After the acquisition of physiological values was mostly eliminated, it became much simpler, structurally speaking.”

Upon hearing this, Nakajima—who’d been wandering around with a stack of papers—came to a full stop. “Please don’t call it simple, Boss. Do you know how much I struggled to consolidate everything into a compact form? Also, both of those are ultrahigh performance prototypes.”

“It’s only simple because you’re so capable, Nakajima,” Midori smiled. “Something of this caliber is a piece of cake for you, right?”

Nakajima rolled his eyes, looking up at the sky. Or rather, the ceiling.

“A prototype?” I asked for clarification.

“For now, I’ve attached any and all sensors that might be relevant to the measurements you specified,” Nakajima explained. “Feel free to think of this as the highest performing device possible.”

“Wow.”

Miyoshi patted the devices. “I’ll take measurements with these and narrow down what information we actually need.”

From here on out, Miyoshi would downgrade the performance based upon the results of her tests. In the end, she would leave only the necessary sensors, reducing the device to a commercial product.

“To use the precision measurement device, you simply stand on this disc for a few seconds,” Nakajima said.

“What?” Miyoshi exclaimed. “You can measure brain waves without making contact with a person’s head?”

Looking absolutely thrilled by this question, Nakajima leaned forwards and

began explaining. “You sure can. Of course, these measurements won’t have the same sensitivity as SQUIDs, but even now, ultrahigh sensitivity magneto-impedance biosensors—incomparable to those of the past—have been developed. And in addition to solving the problem of demagnetization shock, TMR sensors also—”

“Whoa, slow down!” Miyoshi cried. “This is way outside my expertise. I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“Yep, STEM guys never consider who they’re talking to at all,” Midori concurred unfairly, crossing her arms and nodding fervently.



“Kind of sounds like you’re speaking from prejudice,” Miyoshi snarked.

“She’s exactly right, Boss,” Nakajima agreed. “Regardless, the output of those magnetometers has been adjusted to reflect the electrical characteristics of brain activity.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

Nakajima smiled bashfully. “But precisely because of that, the simplified version might produce significant errors based on the measurement conditions.”

“I’ll try to make adjustments for that in the software,” Miyoshi said. “But aside from measuring conditions producing some miscalculations, there aren’t any inconsistencies between the devices, right? And the fluctuations in accuracy are small?”

“These devices have range finders built into them, so if we correct for that, the fluctuations themselves should be less than plus or minus 0.05 percent.” At this, Nakajima took out a memory card. “By the way, I used the data gathered from measuring myself to make the adjustments. This memory card contains the raw data with text that describes the conditions at that time. If anything comes up, please check it for yourself.”

“Thank you so much!” Miyoshi cried. “It’s looking like things will work out, one way or another. I didn’t know you had a D-Card though.”

Nakajima scratched his head. “Well, the times being what they are and all that.”

“What else did I need to ask...? Oh, right. How much does one of these devices cost?”

“Aside from the special sensors, these are a mishmash of common tech. If the precision devices are twenty million yen, the simplified versions are probably around three million yen.”

Midori slapped me on the arm. “We would’ve been screwed without your and Miyoshi’s financial support.”

“Truly,” Nakajima concurred. “I’d love to use our budget this freely for every

project.”

“Oh, stop complaining. Lack of money breeds resourcefulness.”

“Everything has its limits, Boss.”

I used to be in the exact same position, I thought with a bemused smile. At the same time, another question for Nakajima crossed my mind.

“Budgets aside, how much will these devices cost once we mass-produce them?” I asked.

Nakajima considered this for a moment. “Let’s see. As you play around with the prototypes, selecting the appropriate data and increasing the accuracy should cut down on redundancies. That could lower the price to one third or one fourth of the original cost. In some circumstances, it might even come out to as little as one tenth of the original cost. But right now, I can’t say anything for certain.”

For the simplified version, one third of the original cost would be a million yen. Was that cheap or expensive? In any case, this was on the high end of hobby products, such as audio equipment, PCs, and bikes. Perhaps these devices would also settle into the hobby sphere.

“You’re going to contract a manufacturer for the mass production, right?” Midori asked. “Our lab outsources its manufacturing, after all. Speaking of which, Azusa. Could you hurry up and tell me what the hell you plan on doing with these devices?”

“Turn them into a worldwide bestseller, of course,” Miyoshi answered.

“Come again?”

“This device *does* have a unique sensor equipped with a range finder that’s used for measuring electromagnetic waves,” Nakajima said. “But except for that particular sensor, this device is—as I previously stated—mostly a mishmash of common tech. Even if you did manage to sell mass-produced versions, they would be copied immediately. There aren’t many parts that could be patented, after all.”

Miyoshi nodded. “I’m well aware of this device being a simple measuring

instrument. That will do for now. Did you come up with the unique sensor yourself, Nakajima?”

“Yes, I did,” he confirmed, still slightly bashful.

After Miyoshi had showered Nakajima with praise, he launched into a detailed explanation about various factors of the hardware—such as the communication and display sections—as well as its protocols.

“What do you think, Nakajima?” Miyoshi asked after the conversation. “Could you integrate what we talked about?”

“That should be similar to attaching a cellphone to the device,” he replied. “It shouldn’t be too much of a problem.”

“Well then, could you make two precision models for tests and sales promotions? After that, I’d like four of the simplified models.”

“Sure thing. The exterior and assembly parts can be 3D printed. After that, I’ll only need to order the standard parts. So long as there are no monetary issues, I should have them ready within a few days.”

“You sure work fast, Nakajima,” Miyoshi remarked.

The man laughed sheepishly at that.

“If you make the devices sequentially, I’d like to have the first one ahead of time,” Miyoshi continued. “So when it’s ready, please contact me!”

“Of course! You can count on me.”

Having said this, Nakajima immediately began making a list of parts to be ordered.

“Azusa, where did you learn to bend men to your will like that?” Midori marveled. “From taking care of losers?”

She’d said that last part while looking at me. Rude.

Lately, it did feel as though my dependence on Miyoshi had been increasing somewhat. Sometimes, I even mistook her for a cat-shaped robot from the future. But if I told her this, she would probably respond in a furious huff, “I look nothing like that furry blue ball!”

“What are you talking about?” Miyoshi responded. “Everyone’s starved of proper evaluation. Parts of the company we worked for until a little while ago could be somewhat exploitative. They were a good example of what *not* to do.”

“Is that right?” Midori asked.

“So about the mass production we were talking about a little while ago...”

Miyoshi proceeded to suggest the idea of establishing a joint venture company and a small factory. Upon hearing all this, Midori couldn’t hide her reluctance.

“We definitely don’t have that sort of financial flexibility,” she admitted.

“I’m counting on your brains and connections for that,” Miyoshi replied. “We’ll also need to hire more employees.”

“Do you actually expect to transform this lump of common tech into such a large-scale business?”

“I need you to keep quiet about this for now, but to be completely honest, this device quantifies human abilities.”

After stiffening for one moment, Midori placed her hand on Miyoshi’s forehead. “You don’t seem to have a fever.”

“A healthy thirty-six degrees, right?” Miyoshi laughed. She then took Midori’s hand, pulling her into a small space used for meetings. “Kei, do you mind buying us drinks? This conversation is going to take a little while.”

“Got it,” I replied. “But where’s the vending ma—”

“There’s one in the lobby,” Midori interrupted. “Our staff picked the drinks themselves, so I can’t make any promises about the flavors.”

“Thanks,” I said, waving slightly and heading towards the vending machine.

Immediately, Miyoshi began explaining our latest findings on how dungeons affected statuses and how they might be measured.

Come to think of it, I’ve never seen Miyoshi drink canned coffee, but she would probably prefer unsweetened or lightly sweetened. Now, where’s the vending

machine...? Oh, there it is.

All the drinks within this slightly old vending machine were free, popping out at the press of a button. How reminiscent of an international IT corporation. I expected no less from a development company trying their hardest to be hip and trendy. The options all being canned soft drinks was a little underwhelming though.

That being said, the lineup was somewhat unusual.

“What the hell is ‘drinkable cream puff’?” I wondered aloud.

A small piece of paper had been placed on the can being used as the model. “The expiration date for these is 4/21/2018, but they’re still drinkable,” it read. *Um, you sure about that?*

Damn, and what’s with the rest of this lineup? Dr. Pepper, Sangaria Mikkuchu-Juchu, durian cider, pickled radish cola, and sea urchin ramune?

“The staff picked these flavors themselves?” I said aloud. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Well, Dr. Pepper seems like the most normal one. Or maybe Mikkuchu-Juchu?

After grabbing three of the Mikkuchu-Juchu, I returned to the conference room.

When I returned to the conference room, the briefing had apparently ended. Handing the soft drinks to Miyoshi and Midori, I asked the latter about the vending machine.

“Oh, you must have found the joke vending machine,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Everything was free, right?”

“Yeah. But wait, isn’t that supposed to be an employee benefit?”

“How could a poor start-up like ours afford employee benefits? There’s a normal vending machine in the lobby a little farther down the hall.”

“I didn’t make it that far.”

According to Midori, her family's old factory had used that vending machine, and she hadn't wanted to let it go to waste. The fun and games had started when she'd brought back joke drinks from trips, adding them all to the vending machine. Ever since then, any employee who went on a trip would play along, bringing back cases of joke drinks. Plenty of local soft drinks had joke flavors, which were often used as punishments for losing a game.

"Wait, other people work here besides you and Nakajima?" I asked.

"Of course they do," Midori replied. "That being said, there are only six of us. Nakajima was able to handle your request by himself, but one other person couldn't shoulder the rest of our work. You should be grateful that I'm coming to keep an eye on this project." While speaking, she fiddled with the Mikkuchujuchu in her hands. "But anyway, according to Azusa here, you're going to start a company that provides support in capturing dungeons?"

I nodded. "That's the plan."

"Wouldn't a nonprofit be better suited towards those activities?"

"Sure, but since nonprofits take three months to set up, we thought a normal company might be better."

"You can't take dog years lightly, much less mouse years," Midori sighed, seeming exasperated.

Mouse years and dog years were IT terms that had been popular a little while ago. While dogs grew seven times as fast as people, mice grew eighteen times as fast. In other words, technology could develop at the same rate. Essentially, these were power words meant to intimidate people into thinking, "If you don't innovate, you'll get left behind."

"Dungeon capturing should advance considerably with the device created by your company," I declared. "I don't know if it'll go eighteen times as fast, though."

In any case, this marked the rise of a new standard where there had previously been no guiding principle. This new standard—numerical values—would no doubt have a huge impact.

"So as the prototype manufacturer, we can either end our work here, or we

can manage the hardware as a partner company?” Midori asked. “That’s a lot to think about.”

Miyoshi turned her gaze on Midori. “Nakajima was very modest about the device being ‘a mishmash of existing tech,’ but the core component is his sensor, right?”

Hearing praise for her company’s tech coaxed a smile from Midori. “That’s true,” she answered simply.

“Since these measurement devices are similar to medical equipment, you could create another department within your company to handle them,” I suggested. “Or you could transfer the work to our new corporation as a partner company. I wouldn’t mind a different solution either. You can consult Miyoshi on that matter.”

“Honestly, we’re struggling financially here, as is the case with most small start-ups,” Midori admitted. “If you can provide capital, our company backing down here isn’t really an option.”

“In that case...”

“Yeah, I look forward to doing business with you.”

While I gripped Midori’s proffered hand, Miyoshi spoke from the side. “If that’s settled, you need to be careful of buyouts.”

“Buyouts?” Midori repeated.

“Yep. If word of you partnering with us leaks, someone will probably try to buy you out immediately.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

Ignoring the question, Miyoshi asked one of her own. “How are Tokiwa Lab’s stocks distributed?”

“Um, I own sixty percent. The university owns five percent, and the other employees each have a small stake themselves.”

“What about investors?”

“Up until now, we’ve faced one rejection after another,” Midori answered in a

self-deprecating tone. “My grandpa has invested a small amount though.”

“If this story goes public, those people who rejected you might come back with more enthusiastic offers,” Miyoshi warned. “Watch out for that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A huge influx of organizations will probably come knocking at your door, but for now, give them all the cold shoulder. We can provide all the necessary financing. Isn’t that right, Kei?”

Miyoshi turned around, seeking my permission for the loan. Without saying a word, I gave the “OK” sign with my hand.

“I have no idea what’s going on, but...all right then,” Midori assented.

Having already signed an NDA, we decided to discuss the details with a specialist at a later date. Thus, we loaded the prototypes into the mini truck and said farewell to Naruse’s Secret Laboratory.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Upon returning to the office, Miyoshi enthusiastically set up the device and began making adjustments.

“Well then, I’m off to return the truck,” I said.

“The rental place is on Koen Street, right? In that case, you can be back in two minutes!”

After taking a few deep breaths to prepare for my sprint, I immediately stopped, donning a look of incredulity. “Are you an idiot? If I run that fast, people will call the cops, and I’ll wind up as an urban legend.”

I didn’t want to end up as the front-page article of *Tokyo Sports* with the headline “A wild Kemur appears!”

“Fine,” Miyoshi sulked. “But come back as soon as possible!”

“Will do.”

After returning the rental vehicle, I headed back to the office, and as soon as I walked through the door, Miyoshi grabbed hold of me. She then placed me into

the cage of the precise measurement device as if I were a prisoner. When she started acting like this, nothing I said would have any effect on her. If I wanted a quick release, I would have to follow her directions without complaint.

While I stood inside the device, Miyoshi forced me to adjust each of my statuses to their previously measured values before scanning me again. Afterwards, I continued adjusting my stats per her instructions, playing lab rat for what seemed like an eternity.

Partway through the measurements, Naruse visited the office. “What are you doing?” she asked with obvious interest.

Miyoshi donned a sly expression, laughing sinisterly. “Do you *really* want to know?”

Her smile twitching, Naruse fled to the translation room.

“Kei, I’ll scan Naruse later, but I’d also like to measure those two entertainers,” Miyoshi added. “The larger the sample size, the better.”

Why those three? I wondered at first, but apart from them, we had no other suitable candidates to form a party with and check their statuses. As Miyoshi had instructed, I called Mitsurugi and left a message on her voice mail.

Minato City

Inside the editing room of a TV production company called Media 24, Takatsugu Himuro woke to the sound of an incoming call on his cell phone. After sitting up on the couch and glancing at his wristwatch, Himuro looked at the name on his phone’s display. Clicking his tongue, he then answered the call.

“What does a big shot producer want from me at this early hour?” he asked.

Despite this statement, it was already past noon. While scratching his head, Himuro grabbed a pack of Camels from his desktop, pulling out one cigarette and lighting it. Ever since Japanese Tobacco had bought out Camel, the pungent flavor of Turkish tobacco had disappeared. Thus, Himuro had stopped buying his smokes from those bastards, but after a while, he’d come back to them, simply because their German-made natural filter boxes had been a slight improvement. Nowadays, he worried about smoking, but bad habits were hard

to break. And lately people had started treating smokers as malodorous, which only made things worse.

The person on the other end of the line was Makoto Ishizuka. Himuro and Ishizuka had been friends during college, but the latter was a prodigy who'd landed a job at Central Television. Now, he worked as a producer in the production department. Conversely, Himuro had gotten a job at Media 24, and thanks to Ishizuka's connections, he'd somehow worked his way up to becoming a director. But even in Himuro's own estimation, this was about as high as he could climb.

"Whoops, sorry," Ishizuka responded without the slightest hint of guilt. "Were you asleep?"

Are you serious? Himuro thought. *You knew damn well I was asleep.*

But since he was already awake, he simply replied, "Don't worry about it. So, what can I do for you?"

"Why so cold? Anyway, remember the production interview from yesterday? Y'know, the one with the new actress that my department is involved in."

"Oh, the one with...Saito, right? No matter how much I rush, I can't finish editing that in one day."

And if you are going to rush me that much, you better pay me a hell of a lot more.

"That's fine," Ishizuka replied. "But during the interview, she mentioned having a coach, didn't she?"

"Hmm. Hold on a second."

Rummaging through his things, Himuro took out the interview files. *Oh right, she did say something about that,* he thought absentmindedly, inhaling and exhaling a lungful of smoke to clear his head.

"Yeah, I remember that now," Himuro stated. "What about it?"

"I'd like you to investigate this 'coach,'" Ishizuka replied.

"Huh? Hire a detective agency for that. You know this is a production company, right?"

“Now, now, don’t fly off the handle. We want to use this as footage for a program.”

According to Ishizuka, a talent agency interested in this “coach” had already looked into the matter briefly.



Yeah, I understand the feeling, Himuro thought, not the least bit surprised.

Except for the director, almost everyone had been aware of this audition having been rigged. However, through sheer acting ability, an actress of very little notoriety had charmed the director enough to overturn the results. Curious to know who this prodigy was, Himuro had looked her up, but until two months ago, she'd been a completely unremarkable up-and-coming actress.

If someone had actually trained Saito, this person would be an absolute godsend in the realm of acting coaches—even if you only bought half the story. Since talent agencies mostly represented actors, they would no doubt be interested in this coach.

But why did a production studio want to use this as footage?

“Is the coach a man?” Himuro asked.

“Probably.”

Normally, Himuro would have suspected someone of trying to create buzz through a scandal. But why would Ishizuka's own studio engineer a scandal around the leading actress of a film they were involved in? Moreover, Saito was practically a newcomer. Creating buzz about two famous actors would make sense, but to painstakingly involve your heroine in a scandal before the movie was even announced? No production studio would do that.

“Which program is this going to be used in?” Himuro asked.

“We can...discuss that more in due time.”

Every program had a specific tone. Based on that tone, you tried to collect as much usable footage as possible, but if the tone was vague, the focus tended to blur. Someone like Ishizuka had to be aware of this fact. In other words, there was probably something shady about this job.

“Give me a break,” Himuro sighed. “So what's my objective?”

No matter how much he racked his brain, Himuro couldn't come to any conclusion. Thus, he pressed Ishizuka for a clear answer.

“Did you hear about the auction last month?” Ishizuka asked. “The one that attracted attention from the entire world?”

The sudden and dramatic change in conversation left Himuro dumbfounded. “An auction?” he repeated without much thought. “In Japan?”

“Himuro, my boy, your antenna’s looking a little low.”

“Oh, shut up. But wait, are you talking about that possibly fraudulent auction? The one everybody was up in arms about?”

“That’s the one. I’ll be damned—you did know about it.”

Yes, Himuro *had* heard a few of the details. Normally, the mere existence of a skill orb auction would have been huge news, seeing as the items vanished in twenty-four hours. Yet after the three-day bidding period had come to light, most people had dismissed the auction as some sort of inane fraud.

Nevertheless, the auction had actually taken place. By all accounts, someone had placed the winning bid, and the trade had been finalized. As proof of this, a second auction had taken place immediately afterwards without criticism from anyone.

While this should have been breaking news, traditional media hadn’t highlighted the story. Without knowing the organizer or the winning bidder, the media had been at something of a loss as to how to report on the event. Additionally, exposing a person or organization capable of purchasing such an expensive item would have been an enormous risk. Suppose the media had reported on this story in an inflammatory manner, and the buyer had turned out to be a major sponsor. In that case, a simple apology wouldn’t have sufficed.

“So what does this auction have to do with anything?” Himuro asked.

“Well, we know the address registered to the JDA license that organized the auction. And little miss Saito has had contact with the same address.”

“Seriously?”

How the hell did you manage to dig that up?

“In other words,” Himuro inferred, “you think the owner of this license and Saito’s mysterious ‘coach’ are the same person?”

“That’s what I’d like you to find out.”

“Again, you want me to play detective? If your main goal is the auctioneer, isn’t this a job for the journalism department?”

“Unfortunately, the JDA has their guard up on that front,” Ishizuka replied. “So instead we’ll approach this story from the perspective of a promising new actress’s ‘coach.’ Afterwards, we’ll beef up the sensationalism during production. That’ll probably draw the most eyes.”

If the JDA had their guard up, there must have been something worth protecting. And if exposing this proved beneficial to the public in some way, wouldn’t that be a job for the journalists? All the more reason to entrust this to their department. Why beef up the sensationalism during production?

“You sure this is all okay?” Himuro asked.

For starters, where had the personal information connected to someone’s JDA license originated? Himuro could sense the danger from a mile away.

Ishizuka offered a prompt reply. “Unlike the journalists, we can just say, ‘Oh, we made a mistake? Sorry about that.’”

Like I always say—production studios don’t give the public nearly enough credit.

“But why is the auction organizer not being talked about?” Himuro asked. “Are they involved in something shady?”

“So far I haven’t heard anything about that,” Ishizuka answered. “Regardless, I’d like you to do a little digging on that front and collect some evidence.”

By “collect some evidence,” Ishizuka had actually meant this: “If the information doesn’t align with our intentions, skew it in the best possible light.”

“If this is a request from my superior, I’ll do it,” Himuro said. “That’s my job, after all. But if things go south, you’ll take full responsibility, right?”

If no one covers my ass, and it pops off like a lizard’s tail, I’ll be screwed.

“As much as possible,” Ishizuka agreed. “But nowadays, everyone’s up in arms about regulatory compliance, y’know?”

“In other words, we should try to wave away any blunder on my part as an employee acting recklessly in the field?”

Ishizuka laughed. “Well, if that’s how you want to approach things, good luck.”

Before saying anything that Himuro could use as evidence later, Ishizuka hung up the phone. Sighing once, Himuro stubbed out his cigarette and stood up to take a shower.

After hanging up on Himuro, Ishizuka turned towards the man sitting on the couch. Despite being finely tailored, the man’s suit was also gaudy.

“I’ve made the request,” Ishizuka reported. “But are you sure we should be doing this, Boss?”

“You’re hesitating now? Up until a few moments ago, you were completely on board with this.”

“Since this is my project, I’ll put myself on the line for it, but I’d hate to take the fall for something that’s not my fault.”

The head of production—who Ishizuka had called “Boss”—chuckled. “If you don’t, you’ll never rise to the top.”

After the two had made small talk for a while, Ishizuka excused himself and left the room. During the conversation, the head of production’s smile hadn’t faltered, but now he muttered to himself quietly, as if this whole ordeal had drained him of patience.

“Sorry, Ishizuka, but if I don’t return the favor, I’ll be in a world of trouble. Especially in matters that concern God.”

December 16, 2018 (Sunday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Thanks for having us,” Mitsurugi said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Saito agreed.

Two days after I’d left a voice mail asking for help, both women came to the office in the late afternoon. Since Saito had been able to wrap up filming in the

morning, they'd used this opportunity to visit together.

"Coach!" Saito cried. "My predictions came true! They aired my interview about you!"

"Ugh, I'm *not* your coach," I grumbled. "But since the interview only aired yesterday, no harm has come of it...yet. For now, everything's still fine and dandy."

Of course, we were talking about the interview in which Saito had let slip information about me. Despite this part having no connection to the film, it had been considered an interesting news item. Thus, that section of the interview had still been broadcast in its entirety.

"Everyone I meet wants me to introduce them to you," Saito commented. "You're turning into something of a celebrity, Yoshimura."

"Anything but that," I groaned.

"Ryoko," Mitsurugi sighed, "you could stand to be a little less careless."

"I've had more than enough of your lectures," Saito complained. "Yoshimura, before I called you, Haru gave me a tongue-lashing you wouldn't believe."

"You reap what you sow," I sneered.

"Seriously?! You're cold as ice!"

Himuro sat in a parked car on the side of the road, peering into a small camcorder used in his line of work. "Whoa, whoa, they actually went inside?" he muttered to himself, stopping the recording.

After verifying Ryoko Saito's schedule yesterday, Himuro had been keeping an eye on her. And on the second day, she'd come here. Was Himuro simply lucky, or did she visit this place often?

"She's pretty careless for an up-and-coming actress," Himuro continued muttering to himself. "Is her agency not managing this sort of thing?"

Moments ago, the women had entered the house whose address was—according to Ishizuka—tied to the JDA license that auctioned skill orbs. Beyond

any shadow of a doubt, the women were involved with someone in that house.

The person in the house might be an acquaintance of the other girl... Mitsurugi, if I'm not mistaken. Regardless, we can spin this story however we want.

"Either way, I've collected the 'evidence.'"

That being said, no one had come to the front door. When Himuro reexamined the footage, it was simply a scene of two women entering a building. Without footage of the man, any attempt to uncover a lover's tryst would be unconvincing. Since this appeared to be a private residence, investigating who owned the house could provide corroborating evidence. But these days, footage was the lifeblood of the media. And all that aside, Himuro hadn't sensed that Ishizuka's true intent was to expose a rendezvous.

"Still, I don't even know the name of the program or the intent for the footage. What exactly am I supposed to be filming?"

Normally Himuro would have dragged along another cameraman on this investigation. However, if he couldn't explain the intent behind the footage, he wouldn't be able to use a partner very well. As such, he'd decided to operate the camera himself for the first time in a while. When Himuro recalled the preliminary investigations of his assistant director days, he couldn't suppress his excitement. Back then, he'd been renowned for charging into any location. People had even called him "Ryuji the Fireball." His given name—Takatsugu—could also be read as "Ryuji," which gave the impression of a dragon.

Regardless of the program or the intent behind the video's use, Himuro needed to collect as much usable footage as possible, lest everything be for naught. *And any shot might have unexpected value*, he considered while capturing various places around the house on camera.

"Huh?"

While Himuro busied himself with these tasks, the office window blinds were lowered one after another.

"What's this? Are they planning on having a good time in there?"

Unusual behavior often signaled that unusual events would occur.

“I’m no Peeping Tom, but spying’s just part of the job.”

While cracking jokes to himself, Himuro gripped his camera, stepping out of the driver’s seat and onto the road. He’d been in production for a long time. In other words, he had a great deal of experience peering into other people’s secrets. During his career, Himuro had learned one thing for himself: the more someone wished to hide a secret, the more profitable it was. And exposing those secrets was what made this job so fun.

After casually slipping inside the gate, Himuro headed towards a gap in the closed blinds. Strictly speaking, this was trespassing, but if anyone accused him of this, he could claim to have been a visitor. He was only human, after all—prone to mistaking addresses every once in a while.

“But still, does Ishizuka really just want me to investigate this ‘coach’?”

How much worth did a “coach” that no one knew about really have? Himuro couldn’t be sure, but either way, he would work for his paycheck. With these lighthearted thoughts in mind, he approached the house.

“Well then, what are we helping with today?” Mitsurugi asked.

She looked at Miyoshi—who was closing all the blinds in the office—curiously.

After Miyoshi had finished closing all the blinds, the room was slightly dim. She then used her phone’s flashlight to illuminate her face from below, donning her creepiest expression. “Mwa ha ha,” she cackled. “You’ll be participating in the most secret of experiments.”

“Coach, where did this mad scientist come from?” Saito asked.

“Probably Tomiya Elementary,” I responded with a wry smile, naming a nearby school.

Still laughing sinisterly, Miyoshi shot across the room, yanking the cover off the precise status-measuring device.

“Ta-da!” she cried.

“Umm... What is that?” Saito asked.

“I’m so glad you asked! It’s a device that measures human attributes!”

“Come again?” Saito approached the device, examining its podium and three cylindrical supports. “By ‘attributes,’ do you mean this machine can measure your height and weight simultaneously?” While posing this question, her eyes also seemed to be asking, “What kind of idiot would actually make something like that?”

I couldn’t blame Saito for thinking this. In actual society, various values were used to measure a person’s “attributes.” Other than height, weight, and age, test results also served this purpose. However, if you excluded external attributes, no machine existed that could measure such attributes from the outside.

“Nope,” Miyoshi replied. “This machine actually measures your innate abilities. Did you bring your D-Cards?”

“Oh, of course,” Saito gasped. “This has to do with the dungeons.”

Seeming oddly satisfied with this answer, she and Mitsurugi took out their D-Cards.

“We brought them, just like you asked,” Saito continued. “What are you going to do with them?”

“We’ll use them to form a party,” I answered.

Saito frowned. “A what now?”

Since information about parties hadn’t been made public, of course Saito and Mitsurugi didn’t know about them. Thus, I explained how to form parties through the dungeon system by using one’s D-Card.

“You’re kidding me,” Saito insisted, seeming utterly shocked. “You can actually do all that?”

I gave an affirmative nod.

“Knowing the general location of your party members would be fine on its own, but *telepathy*?” Saito asked. “Is that some kind of weaponized relationship destroyer?!”

“Uh, ‘weaponized relationship destroyer’?” I repeated.

“In the entertainment industry, you have to feign subservience while plotting rebellion. Beneath the smiles and friendly interactions, our hearts are all pitch black. If our thoughts are transmitted to one another, everything will turn into a complete and utter mess!”

“How about...just not forming parties with those kinds of people?” I suggested.

“Yeah, that’s one option, but what if someone forces entertainers to form parties on a variety show?”

“Since telepathy’s invisible, it won’t make for interesting television. I think you’ll be fine.”

If someone attempted to highlight dungeon parties through a TV program, it would—in all likelihood—only be used to confirm the validity of telepathy. After all, the footage wouldn’t be very interesting, seeing as the effects of telepathy were invisible. At most, two people could form a party, and one person could guess a piece of information only visible to their partner. Of course, something like that could easily be staged.

Saito folded her arms, seeming uncharacteristically deep in thought. “Hmm...”

Businesses outside the entertainment industry were also built on interpersonal relationships. Everyone wore a mask suiting the time, place, and occasion. A person’s public stance and private thoughts being completely different wasn’t the least bit strange. However, if Saito was this worried, the relationships in her world must have been extremely precarious and fragile. And whatever thoughts leaked out from telepathy would be the unvarnished truth. Those would be difficult to take back.

“Not everything you think leaks out,” I explained. “From what I can tell, your party members will only hear what you *want* to convey.”

“Oh, that’s it?” Saito asked, visibly relaxing. “And here I was worried that every little thought would come flooding out.”

“Based on that relieved expression of yours, you must think some pretty awful thoughts, huh?”

In response to my somewhat mean-spirited quip, Saito casually turned the

tables on me. “Of course. I mean, consider this: as soon as we form a party, you’ll find out about my teensy little crush on you. Embarrassing, right?”

“Ryoko?!” Mitsurugi cried.

Saito stuck out her tongue. “See what kind of trouble it would cause?”

Yeesh, this girl’s too much for me, I thought with an awkward smile.

“But if you’re not careful, you *will* convey some thoughts unintentionally,” I warned.

“Well, accidents happen even in real life,” Saito declared. “Slips of the tongue and all that.”

“True enough,” I agreed. “Well then, can you take out your D-Card?”

Saito slapped Mitsurugi on the back, her eyes sparkling as if to say, “Now’s your chance.” What she actually said aloud was “All righty then, I give Haru the honor of bonding with you first, Coach.”

“Uh, bonding...?” I repeated.

Her cheeks slightly flushed, Mitsurugi held out her D-Card. I glanced at her rank, which was 681. Since she’d been 980 previously, she’d shot up three hundred places. Evidently, she’d continued exterminating slimes.

Noticing my lack of surprise, Saito spoke up. “What’s this, Yoshimura? You knew Haru’s rank?”

“We discussed it once before,” Mitsurugi answered in my stead.

Saito puffed out her cheeks like a sullen child. “And here I thought I was special.”

I’d practiced telepathy with Miyoshi enough to get the hang of not conveying unnecessary thoughts. While being sufficiently careful, I pressed my D-Card against Mitsurugi’s.

Admit, I thought in English, and at that moment, Mitsurugi let out a small gasp. She’d probably experienced that feeling of connectedness.

“What happened?” Saito asked with a curious expression.

Mitsurugi glanced at me. “Well, just now, something...”

“You’re up next, Saito,” I said.

“Okey dokey,” she replied strangely, holding out her D-Card. She didn’t even hide the display. On the contrary, she puffed out her chest and bragged, “I’m pretty impressive too, eh?”

Her rank was 1,421.

“Japan’s top-ranked civilian explorers are in the higher end of the quadruple digits,” I said.

Saito puffed out her chest even more. “Then that makes me one of them.” Upon being admitted, she seemed to feel something. “Mm?!” she exclaimed bizarrely. “Mmmm?!”

“Did you feel it too?” Mitsurugi asked.

“Yeah, I did,” Saito replied. “So that’s what made you gasp?”

Apparently, this is the feeling of being connected, I conveyed to the girls telepathically.

Reflexively, Saito turned in my direction. “Huh? What was that just now?”

Telepathy, I answered once again without speaking.

“Amazing!” Saito cheered. “It actually exists!”

“Uh, didn’t I just explain everything to you...?” I asked aloud.

“Well, seeing is believing, isn’t it? Not that I can see anything.”

After Saito’s astonishment had died down, she and Haru began conversing telepathically.

Hey, Haru, can you hear me?

I can, I can! This is incredible!

They repeated this exchange for a while.

Kayama—a member of the US team surveilling D-Powers—peered at his monitor. “Whoa, whoa, looks like another hero’s taken center stage.”

Since the agents presumably belonging to Great Britain had disappeared,

numerous invasions had been attempted, but so far, no organization had succeeded.

Recently, it had become an open secret in the intelligence community that many countries were monitoring D-Powers. The situation had transformed into a competition of sorts, everyone vying to see who could first attach a “bell” to the target. After all, none of the failed intruders had lost their lives. Instead, they’d all been returned to their home countries somehow or another.

“Where are they from this time?” Nord asked.

Nord was Kayama’s current partner in crime, who had been transferred from the NSA.

“Who knows?” Kayama asked. “Unlike all the other attempts, he’s moving like a complete amateur. He might be from something like Pinkerton or Hargrave.”

Pinkerton and Hargrave were both major American detective agencies.

“C’mon, those guys are pros too, after a fashion,” Nord argued in defense of the private detective agencies. Many of their staff members were former police officers, after all.

Nord then took the note scribbled down by Kayama, which contained the license plate number of the car today’s hero had arrived in. He searched the number in a database, and after a while, the results came back. The vehicle belonged to Media 24—a television production studio in Minato City.

“Looks like he’s with the media,” Nord stated.

“Nice work,” Kayama replied.

When the man disappeared behind the house, Nord and Kayama suspected—without much emotion—that they wouldn’t see him for a second time today. The building in front of them was a house of horrors. Something always ate whoever approached it.

After glancing at the two women absorbed in telepathy, Miyoshi approached me and spoke in a whisper. “Kei, we’ve caught something,” she revealed, her expression grave.

In all likelihood, someone had fallen into the Arthurs' net, but it was still light outside. Based on all previous experiences, the sun was too high for the usual secret agents to attempt one of their infiltrations.

"This feels different from usual," Miyoshi continued.

I nodded. "Let's hope it wasn't a salesperson or religious solicitor."

"We do have a 'no solicitors' sign on the gate. If someone did trespass, I don't think we can be held at fault."

"Either way, let's look into it later."

"Roger that."

After leaving my side, Miyoshi turned towards the two women and began speaking to them as if nothing had happened. "Well then, do you two mind taking turns standing here?" she asked, pointing towards the disc platform of the precise measurement device.

Saito nodded. "Then I'll go first. I just have to stand here, right?" Turning in my direction, she then spoke in a teasing voice. "Oh, but do I need to take off my clothes?" she asked, miming undressing.

I considered saying, "Yeah, go ahead and strip," but Saito was the type to take a joke too far. If she actually undressed, I'd have hell to pay. So instead, I silently shook my head.

"You can keep your clothes on," Miyoshi said. "Okay then, let's give this thing a spin."

Smiling, Saito stood in position and faced forwards.

"Starting now," Miyoshi announced, beginning the series of measurements.

Sitting down at my desk, I took out note-taking paper and called up Making.

Name: Haruka Mitsurugi

SP: 65.36

HP: 29.00

MP: 55.20

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 12 [+]

INT: [-] 28 [+]

AGI: [-] 22 [+]

DEX: [-] 41 [+]

LUC: [-] 16 [+]

Name: Ryoko Saito

SP: 33.23

HP: 28.50

MP: 48.50

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 12 [+]

INT: [-] 25 [+]

AGI: [-] 17 [+]

DEX: [-] 34 [+]

LUC: [-] 12 [+]

“Wow,” I murmured.

As of our last dive to acquire Mining, I’d defeated forty-eight hundred monsters. During my entire career as an explorer, I’d earned 74.333 SP. However, this number included Enkai. If I hadn’t defeated the sun god, I probably would have earned—at most—a mere 29.333 points. On the other hand, if half of Mitsurugi’s SP had transformed into stats, she’d earned 130 points. Calculating backwards from this number, she’d exterminated nearly 6,500 slimes. If you simply compared the number of monsters we’d defeated, her kill count was far higher than mine. She definitely deserved to be in the top echelon of explorers.

That being said, Mitsurugi had mostly defeated slimes—the weakest of all monsters—while the lion’s share of my points had come from tenth-level monsters. When it came to leveling up, the “in-and-out slime attack” method reigned supreme.

At some point, Saito had gotten too busy to continue accompanying Mitsurugi on her dives. Yet based on how much her stats had risen, she’d probably earned close to seventy points.

“What are you doing?” Saito asked me all of a sudden.

Raising my head, I found her standing by my desk. She must have switched places with Mitsurugi while I wasn’t paying attention. Certainly, me staring at an invisible tablet must have looked somewhat bizarre, even if I’d placed mock notes on top of the desk.

“Uh, nothing really,” I hedged. “I have a question for you though.”

“What’s up?”

“How would you feel about your acting abilities suddenly skyrocketing?”

“Huh?”

“Let me rephrase that,” I continued. “If you could continue to improve your acting, increase your speed or stamina, or gain more strength, which one would you choose?”

In response to this sudden, incomprehensible question, Saito looked momentarily bewildered. Even so, she soon changed her mindset, seeming to interpret my question as some sort of joke.

“That’s a tough one,” she admitted. “Are you saying these improvements would happen without any effort on my part? Like some sort of windfall?”

“Something like that,” I affirmed.

Since these were actually the results of her efforts in Yoyogi Dungeon, that wasn’t a “windfall” per se, but I had no other way of explaining things.

Saito examined my face with probing eyes. “Yoshimura, you’re not making a bet with God that you can corrupt my soul, right?”

“I won’t demand your soul as remuneration—promise,” I answered with a dry chuckle.

In Goethe’s *Faust*, Mephistopheles had made the same bet with God over the titular character’s soul.

“In that case, do you live under a theater somewhere?” Saito pressed. “Are you planning on coming to the aid of one pathetic chorus girl such as I?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t own a monkey music box.”

In *The Phantom of the Opera*, the titular phantom possessed a music box with a papier-mâché monkey sitting on top of a barrel organ.

Come to think of it, Simon mentioned something about the top-ranked explorer being called The Phantom. The Phantom of the Dungeon, eh? That speaks to my edgy side.

Having apparently finished the measurements, Miyoshi and Mitsurugi joined the conversation.

“Have you thought about wearing a white mask?” Miyoshi asked.

“With no other context, that makes it sound like one of those Zo-onna Noh masks,” I replied.

“Tut, tut,” Mitsurugi interjected. “Don’t we have more important things to be talking about than masks?”



In response to Mitsurugi making a rare pun, everyone turned around simultaneously.

“Uh, was that a reference to the mask of King Tut?” I asked.

“Dad jokes shorten the life spans of models,” Saito added with a serious expression. “I’d quit while you’re ahead.”

Mitsurugi flushed. “Wait, really?!”

“All that aside, what were you two discussing, Kei?” Miyoshi asked.

“If you could freely improve one aspect of yourself, what would it be?” I said. “All hypothetically, of course.”

Miyoshi shot me a glance that seemed to say, “Could you lie any more shamelessly?” Yet all she said out loud was “Oh, neat.”

Having apparently reached a stopping point in her translations, Naruse also joined the conversation. “Is this assuming we could improve any aspect of ourselves?” she asked.

Saito probably hadn’t expected anyone to be in the other room, and as such, she looked at me with a “Who’s that?” expression.

“Oh, this is your first time meeting each other, right?” I asked. “This is Miharu Naruse—a JDA employee and our full-time supervisor. Naruse, this is our actress friend Ryoko Saito. And you already know Mitsurugi, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes, we met at the sushi restaurant,” Naruse replied.

“Oh, that party I couldn’t go to!” Saito cried.

“I’m Miharu Naruse. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, nice to meet you. I’m Ryoko Saito.”

“While I was working in the other room, I overheard your conversation,” Naruse admitted. “It sounded so interesting that I decided to join in. I hope I’m not intruding.”

Saito shook her head. “No, no, not at all.”

Naruse likes this sort of conversation too? Surprising.

“What would you want to improve?” I asked her.

“Strength, of course. More power!”

“Seriously?”

This took me by complete surprise. Why did Naruse sound like the protagonist of *Wangan Midnight*, whose secondhand race car writhed madly as it powered onwards?

“Huh?” Saito asked. “Why do you need strength? Can’t you let men do the heavy lifting for you?”

Yeah, that fits her character.

“To be honest,” Naruse clarified, “I’d like to be able to beat any explorers who won’t listen to me into a bloody pulp.”

Saito nodded. “Oh, I see.”

Indeed, there were men who wouldn’t listen to a manager’s instructions if she was a young woman. Even if she did her very best to explain the rules, they would simply laugh like buffoons and ignore her. I suppose you *would* want to knock some sense into those sorts of guys.

Yeah, that sounds like a serious issue, but Naruse’s word choice paints quite the picture...

Miyoshi nodded in response to Naruse’s surprisingly violent remark. “Working in the dungeon management section must be pretty stressful, huh?” she asked in a heartfelt tone.

“The main duty of bottom-rung employees is to manage general explorers,” Naruse explained. “Back when I worked that job, I wanted to cry all the time. Our section has a pretty low retention rate, you know.”

Even in Yoyogi, you hardly saw any young women working in the management section. At most, they worked as receptionists, but apparently, receptionists belonged to the commercial affairs section—also referred to as “the guild.”

“And that’s why I’m so grateful for everything D-Powers has done for me,” Naruse said with a smile.

Since being appointed as our full-time supervisor, things had started looking up for Naruse, as she no longer had to do that kind of work. When we’d first met during my suspected suicide attempt, she’d likely been performing that exact duty.

Mitsurugi placed a finger to her cheek, seeming deep in thought. “I suppose I’d like a little more stamina.”

Apparently, models needed stamina—in other words, vitality.

“Runway models aside, those of us who pose for magazines and the like have to work in the early morning most of the time,” Mitsurugi continued. “Also, clothes are chosen ahead of the season. During the winter, we model midsummer clothes. And when it’s still scorching hot at the end of summer, we model midwinter clothes.”

Yeah, you would need stamina for that.

“Doesn’t running in and out of the dungeon so much build up your stamina by itself?” Saito asked. “As for me, I’d definitely improve my acting! I’d also like eternal youth and a name that doesn’t end with ‘ko.’ I’m not a child, y’know!”

Sorry, but eternal youth and names have nothing to do with this kind of improvement.

“Stop being so extra, Ryoko,” Mitsurugi sighed.

This lively conversation continued for a while. Afterwards, we disbanded the party and performed the same measurements once more.

Just before eleven o’clock in the evening, two taxis we’d called arrived before the front gate.

Mitsurugi bowed to us gracefully. “Well then, goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I replied. “Thanks for everything today.”

Saito slapped me on the back several times. “Anything for my dear coach!”

Apparently she was feeling somewhat remorseful about the interview the other day.

“We’ll pay you both back with dinner on the twenty-third,” Miyoshi said.

“Looking forward to it,” Saito replied. “See ya later.”

“Goodbye,” Mitsurugi added.

Naruse had mostly finished the English translations of the inscriptions. With AI serving as backup nowadays, you could do this sort of work pretty efficiently. However, because Google Translate would sometimes flip affirmative and negative verbs, you had to remain vigilant. Afterwards, Naruse’s primary revisions would be to unify terminology and so forth.

“Good work today,” I said. “Will you be joining us on the twenty-third?”

“Unfortunately, I have a prior engagement on that day,” Naruse answered. “I don’t really understand why, but I have to go back to my parents’ house for a family meeting.”

That family meeting would probably be about the partnership between our company and Midori’s.

“That’s too bad,” I said. “See you tomorrow then.”

“Yes, see you tomorrow.”

Miyoshi and I stood at the gate until Naruse’s taxi had turned the corner up ahead and disappeared.

“That’s a wrap,” I declared. “Were you able to get the data?”

“Yep, that part went perfectly,” Miyoshi replied. “But we do have one last order of business...” Descending from the entrance into the garden, she then picked up something that looked like a handheld camera. “This right here.”

Oh, the mystery person caught by the Arthurs.

“A camera, huh?” I asked. “Do you think they’re with the news?”

“Who knows?” Miyoshi responded. “For now, let’s check what kind of footage they recorded.”

“Sounds good.”

We headed back into the office, laid the camera on the table, and placed a pot on the stove to start brewing coffee.

“Speaking of which,” Miyoshi said, “you fiddled with their stats, didn’t you?”

“Was I that obvious? Well, it’s something of a Christmas present for my two apprentices.”

After hearing their wishes, I’d modified their stats accordingly.

“How much did you tamper with them?” Miyoshi asked.

“It turned out something like this.”

Name: Haruka Mitsurugi

SP: 0.36

HP: 48.50

MP: 71.90

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 25 [+]

INT: [-] 34 [+]

AGI: [-] 35 [+]

DEX: [-] 70 [+]

LUC: [-] 20 [+]

Name: Ryoko Saito

SP: 0.23

HP: 34.90

MP: 60.50

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 16 [+]

INT: [-] 30 [+]

AGI: [-] 25 [+]

DEX: [-] 50 [+]

LUC: [-] 12 [+]

Upon seeing the data I'd written out, Miyoshi cradled her head, seeming beyond exasperated.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You went *way* beyond overboard, Kei. The other day, we speculated just how much the top explorers have increased their stats over the past three years, remember?"

Based on our independent research and the SP we'd acquired, we'd estimated that the top explorers had acquired anywhere from 180 to 200 SP. Thus, their average statuses would be thirty to forty points. Even if their SP distribution had been slightly weighted towards a particular status, we'd concluded that the greatest value would probably have been around fifty to sixty points.

"Mitsurugi is now the world champion of DEX by a huge margin!" Miyoshi cried. "Excluding you, of course."

"Y-Yeah, it's pretty high, but for people whose points are weighted towards one status, it's not too—"

"Kei."

"Yes?"

"The other day, we found out that only half of one's total SP is naturally distributed, right?"

"Err..."

I couldn't argue Miyoshi's point. Our estimates for the top-ranked explorers' stats had been calculated backwards from the amount of SP they'd presumably acquired. But in this case, the actual top-ranked stats were...

"Half of what we estimated?!" I cried.

“Most likely.”

In that case, the largest value would be around thirty. No, wait a second. If the top-ranked explorers have acquired two hundred SP, but in reality, only one hundred of those points are reflected in their stats—

“Does that mean Mitsurugi’s total stats are higher than anyone’s on Team Simon?!” I shouted.

Miyoshi nodded. “Looks like you finally understand the situation.”

“Then your INT, as well as Saito and Mitsurugi’s DEX—”

“They’re all world champion levels. Excluding you, of course.”

Miyoshi had an INT of 50. And while Saito had a DEX of 50, Mitsurugi’s was 70.

“Three points makes quite the difference, you know,” Miyoshi said. “If one of your statuses nearly doubled all of a sudden, you would definitely have trouble controlling your body. I wonder if those two are okay.”

“But c’mon,” I said. “Calling attention to that would be pretty weird, right?”

I couldn’t think of anything more suspicious than saying, “You might be extremely dexterous now, so watch out for that!”

While considering this, I frowned. “Maybe we could say, ‘The pseudo measurements we performed today were the key unlocking your latent poten —’”

“Are you trying to establish a new religion?”

Sighing in exasperation, Miyoshi bonked me over the head with a crumpled-up piece of paper. She then removed the boiling pot from the stove and began brewing pour-over coffee.

“If we start the dungeon boot camp, you’ll definitely need to keep the increases to around ten points,” Miyoshi warned.

“Got it. And anyway, regular explorers probably don’t have that many status points left over.”

Regretting my decisions would get me nowhere. So instead, I copied the video

data from the camera's memory card and began checking its contents.

"Who's this guy supposed to be?" I asked. "Saito's stalker?"

The memory card contained footage taken by someone tailing Saito.

"Wow," Miyoshi said. "Are any of the videos not suitable for people under eighteen?"

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that..."

"But if there is that sort of footage, we would just report it to the police."

That might have been true, but leaving that footage undeleted would weigh on my conscience.

I shook my head. "Since I haven't replayed everything, I don't know for sure, but I doubt it."

"But where did this guy learn Saito's schedule?" Miyoshi asked. "If he didn't know her plans, he wouldn't have been able to film all this, right?"

"Then maybe he's someone she's worked with. Would an acquaintance do something like this, though?"

"An acquaintance turning out to be a stalker seems like the most likely development."

I nodded. "Well, according to Dr. Hannibal Lecter, people *do* begin coveting what they see every day."

"For now, should we inspect the man in question?"

"Sure, but are we okay on time? It's been a while since the Arthurs captured him, right?"

Miyoshi shrugged. "I'll finish up in a jiffy, and if he regains consciousness, we can just paralyze him again."

"It's starting to feel like we're turning into an evil organization."

While I smiled uneasily, Miyoshi called forth Cavall, who shot the captured man onto the office floor.

The man was of medium height and build, and gave off a stylish air. Though

his hair was currently disheveled, he wore it in a slicked back undercut. He also wore a high-necked sweater, a long coat, and untucked slacks that fit his body perfectly.

“He looks to be around forty, but he’s got a youthful sense of fashion,” I said. “Think he’s in the entertainment industry?”

“If he’s a work acquaintance of Saito’s, that would make sense,” Miyoshi replied, taking out something with a deft hand.

“Are those...medical gloves?”

Miyoshi laughed sinisterly. “No true investigator can go without these.”

From the looks of things, Miyoshi planned to examine the man’s person without leaving any fingerprints. But did she really need to go through all that trouble?

“Hey, Cavall,” I said. “You’re always confiscating things from the people you catch, right? How do you do that?”

Cavall tilted his head towards Miyoshi as if to ask, “Do I have your permission?”

When Miyoshi nodded, the man sank into the darkness. His belongings were then rapidly shot out of the shadows.

“Amazing,” I said. “Everything apart from his body was removed from the shadow pit?”

Aside from all his loose items, even his clothes and socks lay scattered on the floor.

Upon finding a certain something in his clothes, Miyoshi scrunched up her face. “Yuck, we didn’t need everything down to his underwear.”

After checking the man’s clothes and wallet, we discovered that his name was Takatsugu Himuro. If his business card was genuine, he was a director at a television production company called Media 24, whose main client was Central TV.

“Central TV is one of the sponsors of the movie that Saito’s starring in,” Miyoshi reminded me.

“So he *is* an acquaintance turned stalker?”

I reached for a voice recorder among his belongings, but Miyoshi stopped me.

“Use these, Kei.”

Miyoshi handed me a pair of surgical gloves. Resigned, I put them on and picked up the recorder. Despite my boundless curiosity about what had been recorded, I probably didn’t have time to listen to it. As such, I deleted everything from the recorder and returned it. Because the device used a memory card, I’d been able to completely wipe its files by using a PC. Meanwhile, Miyoshi picked up the man’s smartphone and did something to it.

Oh god, is she installing spyware?

“Don’t commit any crimes that will leave evidence,” I warned.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Her smile sent chills down my spine. Pretending not to have seen it, I faced Cavall. “Hey buddy, can you return everything to the way it was?”

Nodding fervently, Cavall dropped all the scattered items into his shadow pit.

“Man, the shadow pit is insanely convenient,” I said. “Unlike Storage, we can even place living creatures inside it.”

“But there’s a strict weight limit for anything other than the Arthurs,” Miyoshi replied. “Apparently, leaving someone in there will impede the puppers’ actions.”

As she spoke, Miyoshi took out the batteries from the man’s phone and voice recorder. She then threw them into the shadow pit separately. *What was the purpose behind that?* I wondered somewhat curiously, but knowing Miyoshi, she had some sort of plan in mind.

“Impede their actions, eh?” I asked.

After nodding fervently again, Cavall spat our intruder out of the shadow pit once more. The man had returned to his prior state before being completely stripped of his clothes. *Wow, that sure would be convenient for changing in the mornings,* I thought while watching the scene unfold. Then an idea occurred to me.

“If I asked them to, could the Arthurs instantaneously change me into a disguise?” I asked.

“What do you plan on doing with a disguise?” Miyoshi asked. “Become the Phantom?”

“Yep.”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

Up until now, I’d managed to conceal myself in Miyoshi’s shadow, somehow or another. Even so, people like Simon and Mitsurugi had already half-guessed my secret. If I started helping out with dungeon capturing in the future, allowing things to continue like this could become slightly problematic. That being said, I would hate to abandon the easygoing life of a G-Ranked explorer. And so, much like Clark Kent⁽¹⁴⁾ and Shizuya Kondo⁽¹⁵⁾, I would opt to perform my heroics while in disguise.

“Not a bad idea, right?” I asked.

“Well, you can be surprisingly childish when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“P-Pipe down, you! It’s traditional for heroes to conceal their identities!”

“Not so much these days.”

Yeah, can’t argue with her there.

“Either way, continuing to work as we’ve done up until this point is going to be a challenge,” I stated.

Miyoshi nodded. “Up till now, we’ve only been wandering around low-traffic areas like the first, tenth, and eighteenth levels, so we haven’t dealt with any problems.”

“But from here on out, safe zones and the like are going to complicate things. We have more than a few difficulties lying in wait.”

“I’ll think about this a bit, but having a costume doesn’t sound like a bad idea. One of my friends is a fujoshi. She might be able to help us out.”

I did a double take. “Wait, did I just hear you correctly? Fujoshi as in a girl who’s really into BL manga? How is she going to help us out?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff, Kei! From what I’ve heard, cosplay can be a whole lot of fun!”

“C-Cosplay...?”

With my twenty-ninth birthday just around the corner, the idea of cosplaying sent waves of anxiety crashing down on me. Still, nothing from Miyoshi Productions had failed me thus far. If I had to criticize her in some way, certain aspects of her personality seemed undeniably crazy. On a rather frequent basis too.

“Well, uh, please be gentle with me,” I requested. “But anyway, what should we do with this guy? We never found out his objective, but he’s going to wake up soon, right? Should we just dump him at the gate?”

Miyoshi grinned. “Why don’t we ask the man himself what his objective is?”

“Uh, come again?”

“Now, now, don’t lose your cool, Kei. I’ll take care of this.”

“Err, okay...”

I had a terrible, *terrible* feeling about this, but for now, I would let Miyoshi take the reins. Smiling cheerfully, she returned to her seat. In all likelihood, she planned to continue analyzing the measurement data until the man regained consciousness.

Shadow Pit

“Ugh...”

Himuro’s consciousness emerged from nothingness. Though he should have been able to see himself, he remained in pitch-black darkness.

“What is this place?” Himuro muttered to himself.

Without thinking, he tried to sit up. However, his head bumped against something, which prevented him from rising any further. While lying on his side, he stretched out a hand, finding what appeared to be a wall around twenty centimeters away from his face.

“Oh, hell no...”

Himuro tried to spread out both his arms, but at a short distance on either side, walls blocked his hands. Panicked, he then raised a hand above his head, but as expected, his fingertips touched the wall yet again. Only his feet were left, but if he found a wall there as well, that would mean— “I’ve been stuffed in a coffin six feet under?!”

As soon as this idea crossed his mind, Himuro felt dizzy, his breathing growing rapid and shallow.

“No, get a hold of yourself...”

Aware that he was on the verge of a panic attack, Himuro tried to maintain his presence of mind by closing his eyes, straining to remember what had occurred before he’d lost consciousness. After Ryoko Saito had entered the office, Himuro had trespassed onto the grounds. Yes, this had been audacious, but for someone who worked in television, this sort of behavior was all too common. After all, those who couldn’t produce footage were treated like scum. If Himuro had been caught, lowering his head and claiming to have made a mistake should have prevented any problems from arising. Until now, that tactic had always worked.

At that moment, Himuro noticed a weight in the inner pocket of his coat. Apparently, he hadn’t lost his phone. Himuro snatched the device from his pocket, the mere possibility of escaping this darkness filling him with relief. Yet even when he pressed the switch, the phone didn’t power on.

“Damn it!” he swore.

Once again, the feeling of suffocation overcame him. If he were truly trapped inside a coffin underground, he would have a limited supply of oxygen within these confines. When that thought occurred to Himuro, his fear exploded.

“Let me out of here!” Himuro bellowed, slamming his fists into the wall in front of him. “Let me the hell out of hereeeee!”

Sweat poured from his entire body, drenching the narrow space, and an overwhelming sense that he was suffocating overcame him. No matter how many times he drew breath, the oxygen didn’t reach his lungs. As tears flowed

from his eyes, Himuro pounded his arms, legs, and even head against every surface of the enclosed space. All the while, he screamed himself hoarse.

“Takatsugu Himuro,” a voice called to him.

“Let me— Huh?!”

“Takatsugu Himuro.”

“Wh-Who are you? No, I don’t care! Just let me out of here!”

The voice, which came from the direction of his feet, belonged to another person. And within this airtight space awash in death, that voice was his single ray of hope.

“Who hired you?” the voice asked.

“I’m begging you—let me the hell out of here! I can’t breathe!” Despite his cries, no one responded. “Hello? Hey! You’re just pulling my leg, right?! Say something!”

“Those without answers are worthless to me.”

“A-Answers?”

Himuro strained to remember the question. If he recalled correctly, it had been “Who hired you?”

“A producer!” Himuro shouted in response. “I’m just a guy who works in television!”

Half-panicked, a series of thoughts raced through his mind. *Who hired me? What the hell kind of question is that? This is reality, not a film or TV drama, right?!*

“And what were you sniffing around our home for?” the voice asked.

“Huh? I-I was just...”

Himuro explained what he could to the mysterious voice. He’d been acting on a series of orders that a producer from Central TV named Ishizuka had given him.

All the while, he screamed internally.

What did Ishizuka tell me the other day? Unlike the journalists, we can just say, "Oh, I made a mistake? Sorry about that." Like hell that'll work! If I use the production studio's usual tactics, I'll end up dead and buried! And what did I say to myself back then? Production studios think way too little of the world at large!

But it was already too late for regrets. Himuro could only come clean about everything and beg for his life.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Following a series of questions, we paralyzed Himuro again. However, because ambulances were busy even at the best of times, having one carry him would have made me feel bad. And so, after determining that there were no problems with the man, we contacted Secret Agent Tanaka, asking him to take the captive into custody as usual. Despite it being close to midnight, Tanaka arrived at the office almost immediately.

"Is he going to be taken to some hospital?" Miyoshi asked.

Tanaka donned a curious expression—possibly because we'd never made this inquiry before. "Why do you want to know?"

"He doesn't look as though he's received any sort of training," Miyoshi responded. "If he's a normal person, I thought I might visit him later."

Tanaka glanced at Himuro, who'd been placed on a stretcher. "He might not look like much because he's a first-rate undercover spy. But for tonight, we'll be placing him in Tokyo Metropolitan Police Hospital."

"Got it. Thanks for everything."

Tanaka gave us a small nod. Afterwards, he and his subordinates left the office.

"Do you think we went too far?" I asked.

What if Himuro had truly panicked? He could have hit his head hard enough to crack his skull, or he could have suffered a seizure. If either one of those things had occurred, we would've been in a spot of trouble.

“I purposefully timed my provocations to ensure that wouldn’t happen,” Miyoshi disclosed. “If I’d really wanted to torture the guy, I would’ve left him in a space where he could barely move for a long time.”

A pitch-black space where you could barely move? Even thinking about it made me feel claustrophobic.

“Just picturing that is giving me the willies,” I said. “So in the end, did you put him to sleep with shadow bind again?”

“Yep. Also, I returned his phone, voice recorder, and batteries to their rightful places. When he wakes up in the police hospital, he’ll think this was just a dream.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You sure about that?”

Because I’m highly doubtful.

“So what exactly are you plotting?” I inquired.

“Plotting?” Miyoshi repeated. “You wound me!”

“Spare me the ham acting. Since you specifically asked where Himuro would be hospitalized, you must have some sort of plan, right?”

“If he got wrapped up in this because the Arthurs mistook him for another spy, that would be bad, right? So just in case, I thought I might visit him tomorrow.”

“And what’s your real intention?” I pressed.

“Since we don’t know anyone in the media, I’d like to...become friends with him. Look, he even left his camera here.” Miyoshi lifted the camera dropped by Himuro. “Since we found this in a different location from him, I didn’t give it to Tanaka.”

But after threatening the guy so much, she wants to become friends with him? Seriously?

“By the way,” Miyoshi said. “The personal information tied to JDA commercial licenses is supposed to be confidential, right?”

“Yeah, I think so. If not, anyone who wanted something would come knocking

at our door. All trades are supposed to go through the JDA.”

Miyoshi huffed indignantly. “We’ll have to file a complaint with Naruse. Anyway, the JDA has their guard up when it comes to our auctions, but when a new actress mentions her ‘coach,’ production decides to use this perspective to treat the auctions as a sensationalist story? Are people who work at TV studios all a bunch of idiots? I thought they were supposed to be highly educated.”

“Perhaps they attempt to exploit gaps in the rules *because* they’re highly educated.”

If production went too far, they could force their performers to apologize during the program in question. Up until now, this had been enough to sweep most scandals under the rug. Sure, you could complain to the Broadcasting Ethics & Program Improvement Organization, but even the Minister of Internal Affairs had stated, “The BPO is far from independent, and their decisions are often self-serving.” In all likelihood, people had already grown numb to these issues.

“But do you really think investigating the auctions was his objective?” I asked.

Miyoshi looked puzzled. “What do you mean? It would’ve been difficult for him to lie under those circumstances.”

“No, I don’t think he was lying either, but...what was he trying to investigate about the auctions, exactly? Even without a thorough investigation, he should’ve been able to uncover the auctioneer’s identity almost immediately. After all, there’s an ID on record that suddenly jumped up to S-Rank. Who else could it be?”

“That’s true,” Miyoshi agreed. “The public wants to know where we’re acquiring our orbs, our connection to the world’s top-ranked explorer, and whether we’ve discovered a method for preserving orbs.”

“The army of spies in the apartment building out back are after that information as well. Why would some random guy working in TV production come snooping around?”

“Maybe someone enticed him into doing so.”

“Like this producer named Ishizuka from Central TV?” I asked.

“That seems to be the case, but I’ll look into it a bit more.”

“Hold on. How are you going to ‘look into it’?”

“They’ve blatantly intruded on our privacy under the pretense of covering a story,” Miyoshi pointed out. “It’s important for these people to know that *they’re* being looked into as well.”

“Are you going to use a private investigation agency?”

“Sooner or later, we were going to need ways to deal with the media, and someone from their side of things appeared of his very own accord. I want to make the most of this!”

I sighed. “Well, don’t get too carried away.”

“More importantly, do you mind taking a look at this, Kei?”

Miyoshi handed me a tablet, which displayed an oddly shaped 3D graph. During the confusion, its calculations must have finished.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“The measurement device uses time axis direction information to improve its accuracy.”

“Like synthetic aperture radars or multi-frame super resolution?”

Synthetic aperture radars were mounted on satellites and the like. By using the motion of their antennas, SARs were able to imitate much larger radars, which increased image resolution. Multi-frame super resolution used the preceding and proceeding frames of a video to produce a higher resolution image than the original input.

Miyoshi nodded. “Something like that. By using this time axis direction information, the device has a function that outputs data retrieved during a unit of time. While looking at this output, I found something that appeared to be a cycle in the fluctuation of values.”

“A cycle?” I repeated.

“Yes. Also, this figure isn’t the value retrieved through super-resolution that Nakajima hypothesized. Rather, I converted the information acquired through

these cyclical units of time into three dimensions by convolving the changes in time axis direction. Afterwards, I output this figure using a visualization tool.”

I looked at the figure once more. It was a strange three-dimensional shape. Reminiscent of a solid Klein bottle, it seemed unlikely to exist in reality.

“It just looks like a weird shape to me,” I admitted. “I’m completely lost on the details.”

“Even I’m not sure exactly what this represents, seeing as I had to play around with the coefficients and various convolution methods to get the results I wanted.” At this, Miyoshi shrugged. “It’s a model that suits my convenience. Still, there is one thing I can say for certain.”

Miyoshi brought up a similar figure on the tablet’s screen, merging it with the original figure. The two models overlapped almost perfectly, as if she had arranged this beforehand.

“What do we have here?” I asked.

“The first one is my model. The second one is your model when you adjusted your stats to match mine.”

“Amazing. They’re almost exactly the same.”

Miyoshi brought up another figure. “And these are the measured values output by Nakajima.”

When I looked at those numbers, they were certainly close to our models, but there were quite a few points of difference.

“Didn’t he say there would be a fluctuation of plus or minus 0.05 percent?” I asked.

“That has to do with the performance of the device.”

That being said, if you compared Nakajima’s measurement values to those output by my mimicry of Miyoshi’s stats, they probably wouldn’t overlap perfectly.

“Is this difference the result of whether you used the cycle?” I asked.

“I think that’s a big part of it.”

“That’s amazing, Miyoshi. In that case, can you analyze the characteristics of this bizarre graph and turn them back into numbers? Specifically as stats?”

“I think that might be a possibility, but that’s not the problem.”

“Huh?”

If we could use the information gained through the device to output stats, wouldn’t that solve our problems?

“Take a look at this,” Miyoshi said.

The tablet now displayed a model labeled as “Saito.” Right above this, there was another model labeled as “Saito-C.” The C must have stood for “comparison.”

Miyoshi laid one model on top of the other, and just like before, they overlapped neatly. However, one section of the comparison model contained an odd protuberance.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It could be junk that occurred during the modeling process, but...”

To help Miyoshi create these comparison models, I’d mimicked the stats of all the women. Apparently, my comparison models of Saito, Mitsurugi, and Naruse all contained this same difference.

“In other words, this is something I have that all the women don’t?”

Unbidden, I thought of a certain organ on my lower body that occasionally stood at attention. After all, we were looking at an odd protrusion.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “If you’re thinking about differences in sex, you’re probably wrong.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because when we first compared my model to yours, they matched. I *am* a woman, remember?”

Indeed, my comparison model had matched Miyoshi’s almost perfectly with no conspicuous protrusion.

I frowned. “So this is a trait that only you and I possess?”

“Based on what little data we have, that’s exactly right.”

In other words—

“This must be due to one or more skills, right?” I asked.

“Yes, and the most likely skill would be a spatial storage one.”

“Your reasoning?”

“Because Naruse has Otherworldly Language Comprehension.”

I see. If a passive skill was the source of this protuberance, it would appear on Naruse’s model as well.

“If we had Mitsurugi or Saito use a skill orb and measured the differences, that would clear things up, but...” Miyoshi trailed off.

Saito would probably be thrilled, but she could be somewhat careless. Unlike the coach incident, it would be more than a little problematic if she accidentally spilled the beans.

“What about Mitsurugi?” I asked.

“She *would* be the safer of the two options.”

But could we really give Mitsurugi Storage? If her possession of the skill came to light, the future could take a very undesirable turn.

“Better yet, why not give the orb to Earth’s savior—Simon Gershwin?” I asked.

“If the origin of the orb came to light, the SDF would do more than hold a grudge against us.”

On the other hand, if we suddenly gave the orb to the SDF—with whom we had no connections—they would start watching much more closely. I could do without their scrutiny. In the end, the SDF could end up being a viable option, but currently, we weren’t prepared for that.

“Hmm,” I mused.

“One of our three friends will serve best for the comparison experiment,” Miyoshi said. “If we could measure Team Simon in detail before he used the orb, that would be a different matter, but I bet their stats are treated like highly

classified informa— Oh, I just thought of something! If I created something like a jammer, it would probably sell like hotcakes!”

“Look here...”

Yes, if you created a bacterial weapon, you wouldn’t be able to use it without a paired vaccine. And so, if you created a device that exposed something, pairing it with a prevention method would certainly prove convenient.

“If these models contained something that could identify individuals, that would be convenient in a lot of ways.” As Miyoshi spoke, her tireless hands fiddled with the 3D figures. “If I created a variety of models from data other than your stats and extracted portions that didn’t change, perhaps we could call that ‘information that personally identifies you.’ Afterwards, I would need to compare this information to other people, do this and that, and...”

Whenever Miyoshi’s interest shifted targets, whatever she’d been doing up until that point became trivial. Quick-thinking people often shared this inclination. Until Miyoshi’s interest returned to the previous matter, our investigations into Storage possessors would be placed on hold.

Until then, I would think about who we should give Storage to. After all, Mining lay in wait. Once explorers could start obtaining metal resources from the lower levels, the value of Storage would skyrocket.

Similarly, we would have to decide the recipients of Mining. Right now, I had five copies of the orb. Of course, we could put them all up for auction and leave the decision-making to whichever countries purchased them.

Miyoshi had become completely absorbed in her PC monitor. To escape from my trouble-filled reality, I shut off my thinking and dove into bed. Tomorrow, I would hunt for Storage, whose cooldown time had ended. Regardless of who we let use the skill, I needed to obtain any orb with a long cool time as often as possible.

December 17, 2018 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“So that’s why you never went to sleep?” Naruse asked.

“Yesh,” Miyoshi answered with a sigh.

When I woke up the next morning and went downstairs, I found Naruse scolding Miyoshi.

“Good morning,” I greeted them. “Are you two in the middle of something?”

“Kei, Kei!” Miyoshi cried. “My PC’s too slow! Buy me a supercomputer!”

“Say what?”

Apparently, Miyoshi had tried running some sort of process on all the data she’d gathered on me. However, the processing had never finished, and she’d stayed up all night fiddling with a variety of things. The next morning, Naruse had arrived at the office, and upon finding Miyoshi in this state, our full-time supervisor had scolded her for pulling an all-nighter.

Well, when you have nothing left to concentrate on, Super Recover immediately stops keeping you awake. That aside, I know Miyoshi is feeling high from staying up all night, but what the hell is this about supercomputers all of a sudden?

“Right now, one petaFLOPS costs a billion yen, right?” Miyoshi asked.

Indeed, the successor to the K computer, which would be built next year, had a manufacturing budget of 130 million yen per peta. But more importantly—
“Are you dense?” I asked. “Where the heck would we put a supercomputer?”

Nowadays, large computers could operate with the electrical power of any ordinary household, but supercomputers were an entirely different matter. In the worst-case scenario, we would need an entire powerplant.

Miyoshi pretended to cry.

“You’re hopeless,” I sighed. “But anyway, K is open for public use. Back at our old workplace, I looked into it to see if I could use K to perform structural analyses of materials. If I recall correctly, it costs thirty million yen to borrow the computer for an entire day. Will that work for you?”

“Yeah, that sounds great!”

Miyoshi leaped to her feet and opened the High Performance Computer Infrastructure website. Mostly using Riken computers, HPCI was a public-use

computing environment that Japanese universities and research agencies could use for storage and data processing systems. In short, their organization had made the use of government-subsidized supercomputers available to everyone.

“Wow,” I said. “For a certain price, HPCI will keep the results of your project private, and they’re always accepting clients. Money really can buy you anything.”

Generally, research departments could use HPCI free of charge. Once or twice per year, there was an application period, and a review would determine whether your department could use the facilities. This was in stark contrast to industrial usage. If a company paid the usage fee themselves, they could have preferential use of the facilities. What’s more, HPCI always accepted industrial applications.

“The K computer can use up to six million node hours,” Miyoshi said. “I should be able to make good progress on the construction of your model.”[\(16\)](#)

If one hundred gigaFLOPS would suffice, we could apply to the Foundation for Computational Sciences and likely have an account registered in three days. Otherwise known as FOCUS, this organization was geared towards newcomers. Originally, it had been created to help industries acclimate to using supercomputers in a non-intimidating fashion.

Even so, modern PCs had incredibly fast CPUs. Speaking of dream rigs, high-end, multi-core CPUs had the efficiency of one teraFLOPS, which was a great deal more than one hundred gigaFLOPS.

“Kei!” Miyoshi cried. “The Earth Simulator is still up and running! Wow, vector processing is so cool—I’m gonna apply here too! Hitting the Enter key...now!”

Apparently, the applications differed between the K computer and other HPCs.

But man, Miyoshi is acting high as hell. Is she okay?

“Miyoshi,” I said. “Go get some sleep. Please.”

“I’m going to use every supercomputer in Japan! Don’t even try to stop me! Yahoo!”

Miyoshi shot to her feet, placed both hands on top of her head, spun around like a drill, and ran up to the second floor.

Completely dumbfounded, Naruse watched Miyoshi leave. “Is she going to be okay?”

“Yeah, she’ll be fine,” I replied. “The high of an all-nighter makes her act like that sometimes.”

Back at our old workplace, she’d acted similarly whenever she’d received permission to use an expensive reagent.

Still, what on earth is Miyoshi doing that requires such a large number of calculations?

“By the way,” Naruse said.

“Yes?”

“What did she mean by the ‘construction of your model’?”

“Well, um... Those details are confidential, and it’s a little too complicated for anyone other than Miyoshi to explain. Let’s put this conversation on hold until she wakes up!”

I inwardly cursed Miyoshi while coming up with excuses.

Four hours later, Miyoshi woke up and began organizing the logs for the HPCs she’d applied to use. “Sorry for causing such a ruckus,” she apologized.

“Still, your desktop is pretty powerful, right?” I asked. “If creating a model takes that much time, won’t it require an incredible amount of computational power to calculate the data collected from the status-measuring device and send it back?”

That would make the device virtually useless.

Miyoshi shook her head. “No, that shouldn’t be a problem. Once the coefficients and individual formulas are determined, the calculation itself is instantaneous.”

In other words, the broad strokes of the formulas had been decided upon

through yesterday's models. In that case, what the heck had she been calculating?

"So what were you doing last night?" I asked.

Perhaps concerned about Naruse's presence in the translation room, Miyoshi lowered her voice. "I'm trying to identify individuals and distinguish their skills."

"What?"

Miyoshi took the cover off the prototype. "Nakajima called this a test model with the highest possible efficiency, remember? So as you might expect, he overengineered the device."

Since Nakajima hadn't known what timing would be optimal for the super-resolution-use time slice, he'd constructed the device to retrieve all information at 240 fps. But in actuality, the device used—at most—eight frames of data per every 0.5 seconds to determine each status.

"Yeah, that's astronomically overengineered," I agreed.

Eight frames of data for every 0.5 seconds would equal sixteen fps. A performance of fifteen times that was ridiculous.

"Exactly," Miyoshi agreed. "I now understand why Midori doesn't want to allot him too much of the budget."

Sure, creating something that greatly surpassed the requirement specifications was all well and good, but we also had cost performance to consider. And most of the time, budgets were limited.

"So how does this relate to identifying people and distinguishing skills?" I asked.

"For now, I'm using the information extracted from the device's full specs to create models using an array of methods. Once that's done, I'm searching for sections that don't change."

"Oh right, that was the last thing you mentioned yesterday."

"Exactly."

Sections that didn't change even when stats fluctuated. If those existed and

differed based on the individual, identifying individuals could become possible.

“So, *does* it seem possible to you?” I asked.

“About that...”

After creating any and all useful-seeming models, Miyoshi had written code to search for these sections and left it running. However, the code had never returned any results, which had led to the dire situation this morning.

“Did a bug cause an infinite loop or something?” I asked.

Miyoshi frowned. “Since the progress log is still outputting information, I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Well, you’re not exactly working from any sort of theory.”

“But extremely thorough investigations are the basis of computational mathematics.”

Thoroughly investigating an infinite number of subjects wouldn’t prove anything, but in matters of industrial use, that was enough to determine results within a proper range.

I considered Miyoshi’s words before responding. “But at the very least, the volume of calculations should seem feasible before you put that investigation into motion, right?”

“Well, I think I successfully forced everything into the order of at least $O(N^3)$, but since my account with HPCI won’t be registered right away, I’ll leave my PC running by itself for a while.”

According to Miyoshi, if she found a good model, it would output what we needed. Hopefully, she wouldn’t end up like the main character of that viral video in which a woman explained combinatorial explosion to two children. After running calculations on a supercomputer for two hundred fifty thousand years, she turned into a robot while waiting for the results.

“Are you two done talking?” Naruse asked. Perhaps she’d waited for our conversation to end before coming out of the translation room.

“Oh, yeah,” I replied.

Naruse folded her arms and narrowed her eyes, radiating cold intimidation. “If you hurried up and explained things to me, perhaps I could help out as your full-time supervisor.”

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “She’s giving me girl boss energy.”

I nodded. “All bow before the queen.”

“What are you two blathering on about?” Naruse asked.

“Nothing at all,” Miyoshi and I answered simultaneously.

“Your research might be confidential, but you *did* force me to help with some kind of measurement,” Naruse pointed out. “It’s about time you told me what’s going on.”

“Erm, Miyoshi?”

Utterly perplexed, I passed control of the conversation to Miyoshi. In response, she nodded with an expression that meant, “I suppose it *is* about time.”

“As it happens,” Miyoshi began, “I suspect you’ll be discussing a similar matter during your family meeting on the twenty-third.”

“What?” Naruse asked with a curious expression. “*My* family meeting? What do you mean?”

In broad strokes, Miyoshi explained our business collaboration with Midori and the goal of the device. Naruse listened to the whole explanation in silence, but as soon as Miyoshi had finished, she spoke up excitedly.

“You can actually quantify stats?!”

“Uh, yes,” Miyoshi replied.

That’s a JDA employee for you. She latched onto the quantification first, completely skipping over the fact that her sister’s lab had made the device.

“Can I see mine too?” Naruse asked.

Miyoshi nodded. “If you’re okay with the data we measured yesterday.”

Taking out her tablet, Miyoshi brought up Naruse’s data. Based on Naruse’s measurement values, Miyoshi created one of those 3D models. From there, she

calculated Naruse's stats. Of course, her HP and MP were reference values derived from her stats.

If someone had used a xHP or xMP skill orb, a simple calculation wouldn't match their actual HP/MP. So in reality, these were fairly half-baked numbers. Still, if you considered the number of skill users and the level of influence those skills currently had on their stats, this wouldn't pose any major problems for the practical use of the device.

Name: Miharu Naruse

HP: 23

MP: 27

STR: 10

VIT: 9

INT: 15

AGI: 9

DEX: 13

LUC: 11

For a while, Naruse looked at the values excitedly, but all of a sudden, she looked up with an uneasy expression. "If these values truly represent stats, this device will provide explorers with immeasurable benefits."

She's probably right about that.

If—for example—the WDA announced recommended stats for various dungeons and levels, explorer injury and death rates could plummet instantly. Likewise, explorers might even devise methods for deliberately increasing one's stats.

To quantify something was to abstract it. This simplified matters, bringing objectivity to phenomena. Once free of vague subjectivity, people could uncover the path towards shared recognition. After being released from a world

of magic, people would enter into the refined world of science. Even if—to use the same magical terminology—this path led to new and different curses. Regardless, when humanity became capable of evaluating the results of trial and error, they would move towards even more effective means of dungeon capturing. I was certain of that.

“But this device will have unintended impacts as well,” Naruse said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean... This *is* a means of ranking people, isn’t it?”

Yeah, anyone would have similar apprehensions. Miyoshi and I had first imagined people LARPing *DBZ*.

“That might be the case at first, but eventually, this device won’t be too much different from a bathroom scale,” I answered with a smile. “Making it into a children’s toy would be too expensive, after all.”

Bathroom scales were also devices that quantified a human property. However, except for particular researchers, no one ranked humans based on this value.

“You can’t equate this with weight,” Naruse protested.

I shook my head. “Actually, it *is* pretty similar to body fat percentage.”

“Huh? What in the world do you mean by that?”

Body fat percentage could be measured by seeing how easily a weak electrical current flowed through a person’s body. Yet because there were individual differences in body sizes, measuring adipose tissue solely through electrical resistance values could produce calculation errors. In the end, databases had been created by measuring the values of a large number of people, which were then used to determine people’s body fat percentages. In truth, our method for determining a person’s stats would be similar.

“And anyway, people are already ranked through all kinds of numbers,” I argued. “The World’s Billionaires and standardized test scores are other examples of this, right?”

“Those aren’t necessarily visible though,” Naruse protested again.

“But they are—through people’s standards of living and the schools they get into.”

In reality, humans were ranked in all sorts of ways. Yes, people who did this excessively were a problem, but at this point, even if the number of ranking standards increased by one, it wouldn’t be a big deal.

Naruse breathed a small sigh of resignation. “So, are you going to publish the theory or algorithm that allows this device to output stats?”

Miyoshi silently shook her head.

“But in that case, no one will be able to verify its authenti—”

“Naruse,” Miyoshi interrupted. My research partner had hardened her resolve in Yoyogi Dungeon, and the time had finally come for her to put that into action. “This technology is nothing more than the result of inductively researching stats.”

Miyoshi’s implication stunned Naruse. “I-Inductively?”

“Naruse, I’m—” Pausing, Miyoshi averted her gaze from Naruse, dramatically playing up an air of nervousness. When the tension had reached its peak, Miyoshi darted her gaze back to Naruse, blurting out her confession with a fierce look in her eyes. “I’m an Appraisal user.”

At that moment, I could almost imagine a piano dramatically responding to the dominant played by the orchestra. It was Concerto in A Minor, op. 54—the only piano concerto ever composed by Robert Schumann.

“Huh?” Naruse asked.

Having readied her D-Card in advance, Miyoshi showed it to Naruse, who was reacting to what she’d just heard with stunned disbelief. Miyoshi had hidden all her other skills with a cover, which was definitely suspicious, but at this point, what else could anyone expect from us?

After confirming the skill name, Naruse looked at Miyoshi’s face and then at the D-Card once more. Three years had passed since the appearance of dungeons, and for the first time ever, the existence of an Appraisal skill had been verified.

A few days later, the results of Miyoshi's nigh interminable search were displayed in a single log on her desktop monitor. But of course, no one noticed this right away.

"Conformity: KY2538-21104 (1284,7743,6430-1312,6661,6434)."

Tokyo Metropolitan Police Hospital, Nakano

That afternoon, I headed towards Yoyogi Dungeon to obtain another copy of Storage, whose cool time had ended. After Naruse had finished writing her report, she hurried back to Ichigaya with it.

Thus Miyoshi visited the police hospital in Nakano alone.

"Are you listening, Cavall?" Miyoshi asked the hellhound, who was hiding in her shadow. "I want you to take me to his room."

She then sank into the shadows in an out-of-sight location.

After waking early in the morning, Himuro had received an examination and explanation from a doctor. Since the physician hadn't found any particular abnormalities, he'd scheduled Himuro's discharge for sometime today.

Once the doctor had left, an unremarkable man had interrogated Himuro. Though Himuro hadn't understood the meaning behind this interrogation, the interviewer's extensive knowledge of him had come as quite the surprise. For instance, the interviewer had known the name of a woman Himuro had only dated for a month in college.

In any case, it didn't seem as though Himuro needed to fear any sort of punishment. According to the two men posted outside his door, he would be released from police custody upon leaving the hospital.

"Still, why was I investigated so damn thoroughly?" Himuro wondered aloud.

He felt ill at ease, like a pig who smelled a truffle but couldn't find the correct place to dig. While contemplating this, he prepared to leave the hospital.

"Hello there."

Though Himuro hadn't heard the door opening, a voice suddenly called out to him. His heart skipping a beat, he whipped around in the direction of the greeting. A petite, energetic-seeming woman stood there. If she was an acquaintance of his, Himuro couldn't place her right now.

"Where the hell did she come from...?" Himuro muttered to himself.

Where else but the entrance? he thought a moment later, regaining his composure.

"I'm about to be discharged," Himuro said to the woman. "Have you mixed up the rooms?"

"Nope, I haven't mixed up anything, Mr. Himuro."

Smiling, the woman referred to him by name. Himuro felt as though he'd heard her voice before, but he couldn't remember where.

"I beg your pardon, but who are you?" he asked.

How did this woman—whoever the hell she is—know where to find me? Himuro wondered. After all, work at production companies started late. Despite it being Monday, Himuro hadn't contacted anyone, as it wouldn't have been a problem even if he left for work now.

"Funny—that's what I wanted to ask *you*." While speaking, the woman placed Himuro's lost camera on top of the table. "This is yours, isn't it? You dropped it in our yard."

Himuro picked up the camera, which had a Media 24 sticker on it. The cracks in the lens had presumably resulted from dropping the device. By all appearances, repairing the camera and buying a new one would cost the same amount of money. Sure, Himuro could claim to not own the camera, but he wanted to retrieve the internal memory card.

"Yes," he admitted reluctantly. "It is mine."

Of course, he couldn't just say, "Oh, I was secretly recording you." At the same time, memories of last night caused him to hesitate for a moment.

This morning, when Himuro had described his experiences, the doctor had listened to him kindly with a smile on his face. "You must have been delirious,"

the doctor had concluded. After all, no one had found a facility capable of confining Himuro as he'd described. And contrary to his claims, his smartphone was operating normally.

Furthermore, Himuro had been using Google Maps's timeline feature. This had been the final nail in the coffin, as—according to those records—he hadn't moved from the vicinity of that house even once.

Even now, Himuro didn't believe those memories of darkness to have been a dream. But despite having felt death closing in on him, all external evidence pointed towards the experience having been a simple nightmare. Regardless, the ability to forget unpleasant experiences was a beneficial trait in Himuro's line of work. And he'd been blessed with that disposition in spades.

"I'm terribly sorry about that," Himuro said. "It seems as though I mistook your house for someone else's."

He couldn't remember clearly what he might have blurted out in the darkness last night. Thus, he attempted to escape this whole ordeal the usual way: by smiling and feigning ignorance.

However, the moment Himuro tried to play dumb, he found himself standing in the darkness once more.

"Wh-What the hell?!" he shouted.

During the conversation, he'd been standing on the floor of a well-lit hospital room. Now, pitch-black darkness threatened to crush him, almost as if he were having a flashback to yesterday. Yet just as Himuro teetered on the brink of panic, he returned to the exact same hospital room—the exact same location—as moments before, having fallen to his knees.

He coughed violently, the corners of his eyes warping like a fish-eye lens. His field of vision narrowed, and the woman before him seemed like some sort of otherworldly creature.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

When her voice reached his ears once more, Himuro recalled where he'd heard it before. At the same time, he also remembered that suffocating immobility, which caused sweat to pour from his entire body.

“Wh-What the hell are you?!” he cried out.

“What’s that?” the woman asked with a smile. “Are you all right? Tell me again—you mixed up our house with someone else’s?”

If Himuro answered affirmatively, he would most likely be plunged into that darkness once more. He didn’t know where that darkness existed, and he refused to ever go back. Even if it were a mere illusion.



“I suppose I can’t fault you for that,” the woman said. “But since we’re acquaintances now, let’s stay on good terms. Perhaps you can even assist me in the future.”

“You want us to stay on good terms...?” Himuro repeated.

Unable to understand most of what the woman had said, he merely nodded.

“Wow, thank you so much!” she exclaimed. “Oh right, I also brought this as a get well present.”

The woman pulled a small potted plant from out of nowhere. Upon seeing this, Himuro momentarily regained his common sense. *Who the hell brings a potted plant to a hospital as a get well present?* he wondered. *Is this a kind of harassment?* According to the instructions he’d been shown this morning, bringing in flower arrangements was against the rules, even if they didn’t have roots or soil.

A diminutive shrub with many small leaves grew from the pot. *I used these during filming once, right?* Himuro thought while looking at the plant absentmindedly. *What was it called again?* In a flash, the name returned to him. If memory served correctly, he’d wanted to use purple flowers for a summer program. When he’d chosen this shrub, he’d also researched the details, as doing so was a habit of his.

“D-Duranta?” Himuro stammered.

“Well then, I’ll be in touch,” the woman said.

Her voice brought Himuro back to himself, but when he looked up, she was no longer there.

“She’ll be in touch?” he muttered to himself.

Himuro raced over to the door of his hospital room, yanked it open, stuck his head out into the corridor, and surveyed the area. In response to this disturbance, the two men from the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office rose from their chairs.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?” one of them asked.

“Did a woman leave from here just now?!” Himuro cried.

“A woman?”

After exchanging glances, the two guards looked at Himuro suspiciously, their gazes seeming to probe him for hard drug use. Seeing their reactions, Himuro reconsidered pressing the matter, as any complaints on his part could result in an even longer investigation.

“Uh, sorry—it’s nothing,” he said, returning to his room. “Stay on good terms...and assist her in the future, huh?”

What the hell is she going to make me do? he wondered while shutting the door behind him, unease creeping over his skin.

The potted plant sat in front of Himuro, and he could almost imagine it surveilling him. Without much thought, he peeled off his bed sheets, used them to cover the pot, and let out a tremendous sigh.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“So after thoroughly traumatizing the guy, you went back to finish the job?” I asked.

“Finish the job?” Miyoshi repeated. “You make me sound like a hit woman. I only visited to give him get well flowers.”

“Uh, flowers?”

“Well, unfortunately, I couldn’t bring him flowers because most of them stop blooming in October, but I *did* give him a potted duranta.”

I furrowed my brow. “You actually brought a hospital patient a potted plant?”

While the word “nezuku” meant “to take root,” the word “netsuku” meant “to be ill in bed.” Because of this, giving potted plants to hospital patients was seen as bad luck, and people generally avoided doing so. Miyoshi’s harassment knew no bounds.

“Passing out for one day is hardly the same as being hospitalized,” Miyoshi said. “But anyway, as soon as Himuro remembered the name of the shrub, he went pale. Production directors are said to be quite knowledgeable, after all.”

“What, are durantas poisonous or something?” I asked.

“No way. This was a police hospital, remember?”

“Then what’s the deal?”

“In the language of flowers, duranta means...” Here Miyoshi paused, donning a sweet smile. ““I’m watching over you.””

That’s terrifying, Miyoshi! What horror movie did you pull that one from?!

“I also thought of sunflowers, which carry the meaning of ‘I’m only looking at you,’” Miyoshi continued. “But since they’re an annual flower, I couldn’t find any of them—potted or otherwise—at this time of year.”

“You sound like one of those girls who’s sweet on the surface until she murders you in cold blood.”

“But for two people in love, both sunflowers and durantas have pretty romantic meanings.”

Though Miyoshi laughed without a trace of malice, I could understand why the blood had drained from Himuro’s face. After being threatened, he’d received the terrifying message of “I’m always watching you.” What man wouldn’t be horrified?

“I also mentioned needing the assistance of someone in the media, and he gladly agreed to help,” Miyoshi said. “Good thing he’s such an understanding person.”

“*Gladly?*” I repeated dubiously. “You sure about that?”

In response to my quip, Miyoshi stared off into the distance, whistling both poorly and stupidly.

“Well, don’t do anything that’ll land you in a jail cell,” I advised.

“Of course I won’t!” Miyoshi huffed indignantly, as if I’d said something incredibly rude. But apparently she still planned on looking into Himuro’s associates.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

While looking up at the JDA headquarters in Ichigaya, Miharuru walked with a tired gait. She couldn't decide how to report on the overly sensational information she'd received from D-Powers not too long ago.

"Since I can't talk about Heaven's Leaks or Mining yet, I'll start with Appraisal and the farm," Miharuru muttered to herself. "And maybe I'll end with the status-measuring device."

Despite having all the information, I have no control over what pieces are given to the world? Yeah, I'm definitely not cut out for that. I'm not some master communicator either.

"Why the sudden visit, Naruse?" Saiga asked.

Miharuru had visited Saiga's office at a different time than her regularly scheduled reports. Sensing something out of the ordinary, Saiga closed his office door—which he usually kept open—to better ensure their privacy.

"I'd like to deliver an urgent report on D-Powers," Miharuru said, handing the files to her boss.

Currently, all issues related to D-Powers were under the purview of the Dungeon Management Section's chief executive. After all, there were too many matters that couldn't be made public.

"Good work," Saiga said, withdrawing his own documents and handing them to Miharuru. "I'll give you these as well. Look over them while I read your report."

At a glance, these documents seemed to be the tentative rules for using land within a dungeon.

"I need to get a consensus from the sales staff on the contents of those damn documents," Saiga continued. "But when I asked why deciding on such matters was necessary, no one would give me a straight answer. It's putting me in a real bind."

Naruse nodded. "Right now, there's no chance of any corporation borrowing land inside a dungeon."

Once D-Powers published the inscriptions about safe zones, things would be different. But currently, if you spoke about borrowing land within a dungeon,

only the explorer-created bases—which had been established on a whim—came to mind. Though the base near the eighth level’s exit was one example of this, no one had yet foreseen anything greater in scale. And of course, the JDA couldn’t possibly charge rent for such a base.

In the end, the sales staff hadn’t taken land use seriously, leaving the matter to the Dungeon Management Section. In the near future, they would cry bloody tears of regret over this mistake, but right now, no one could even imagine that.

“Still, those two don’t seriously plan on enjoying the slow life inside Yoyogi Dungeon, right?” Saiga asked. “What do you think their actual objective is?”

Miharu smiled vaguely at that. She’d suspected Yoshimura of having lied for the most part.

“Since they don’t seem to need a very large area, it’s probably for some kind of experiment,” she speculated. “Though I can’t say anything for certain about their intentions.”

“Makes sense,” Saiga answered with a nod. “But if they’re attempting to do something with land inside a dungeon...”

The section chief folded his arms, donned a grim expression, and appeared to think for a little while.

“Boss?” Miharu asked.

“Do you think they’ve found a way to deal with slimes?”

“Huh?”

True—if you wanted to build a facility within a dungeon, slime countermeasures would be absolutely necessary. Naruse didn’t know what those countermeasures might have been, but if D-Powers had concocted some sort of revolutionary method, she wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised. Those two threw common sense out the window, after all.

“Should I try asking them?” Miharu asked.

“I suppose so,” Saiga agreed. “But don’t go poking the hornet’s nest.”

“Understood.”

“In any case, if D-Powers ends up doing something outrageous when we’ve had no time to prepare, that would put us in a tough spot. Keep a close eye on how this situation progresses.”

Seeing her boss’s apprehensive expression, Miharuru could imagine how anxious he must have been feeling. “I’ll do just that,” she replied, trying to hide her sardonic smile. “This might be a tentative version, but do you mind if I form a contract with D-Powers based on these land-use rules?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. It’ll probably serve as a sort of experimental contract.”

“Thank you.”

For a while, both Miharuru and Saiga looked over their documents. Over time, Saiga’s complexion grew worse and worse. Finally, he let out a deep sigh and addressed Miharuru once more.

“Give it to me straight, Naruse. This report isn’t some kind of exercise in creative writing, is it?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Everything Miharuru had written in her report seemed utterly preposterous.

“I see,” Saiga said. “Well then, Azusa Miyoshi truly is an Appraisal user?”

“There’s no mistaking it. I checked her D-Card.”

The report included Naruse’s inquiries about Appraisal’s functions. According to Miyoshi, it provided detailed explanations of skill orbs and drop items.

“With Appraisal, we should be able to handle unregistered skills and items much more safely than before,” Saiga noted.

“I believe so.”

“And based on your report, the drop monsters for Appraisal are the eyeballs at the Wandering Manor?”

“Yes, sir,” Miharuru replied. “The Wandering Manor is the mansion featured in that video uploaded to the Dungeon Information Bureau. A large number of those eyeballs were dangling from the eaves.”

“Retrieving another copy of Appraisal won’t be easy then.”

“Miyoshi hopes that by using this information, she’ll be able to obtain a large number of the inscriptions within the Wandering Manor. The ones that look like pages.”

Saiga furrowed his brow. “I see. Well, we can set that aside for now, but you also said that by using this skill, D-Powers had developed a device that can display stats?”

“Indeed—they even measured me. However, the device can’t measure people who aren’t dungeon explorers. There’s some sort of unavoidable restriction.”

“Regardless, I can’t believe we’ve already come this far.”

The definitive proof of stats—which had only been rumored to exist by researchers—came as quite the surprise, but on top of that, D-Powers had already created a device that quantified and displayed those stats. At this point, they had lapped all other researchers in this field several times over. Perhaps they had a cat-shaped robot from the future on their payroll.

“The JDA will want to get involved in this as well,” Saiga mused.

“But D-Powers has more than enough funding and tech,” Miharuru pointed out. “They even have a functional prototype. I don’t think the JDA has anything to offer at this point.”

She’s right about that, Saiga thought with a chuckle. The JDA has no room to get involved here. Rather, we have no choice but to bow our heads and ask for guidance on all these matters.

Saiga voiced another thought out loud. “If Executive Director Mizuho finds out about this, he’ll probably try to pull another dumb stunt behind the scenes.”

“I’ve heard his reputation plummeted due to the Otherworldly Language Comprehension incident.”

Apparently, a lot had occurred with the higher-ups after that meeting of bureau directors.

Saiga grimaced. “He’ll probably see this as a chance to redeem himself.”

In this day and age, no one would listen to such self-aggrandizing words as “for the sake of Japan.” The same held true for the United States, the European Union, and even China. If the speaker actually wanted the best for their country, that would be another matter, but if their words were empty, no one would give them the time of day. Most people would simply distance themselves from such a person.

In any case, Azusa Miyoshi’s value had skyrocketed due to the matter at hand. She wasn’t just Japan’s most prominent dungeon diver. No, she had become the most important explorer in the entire world. She was the center of so much innovation that it was almost dangerous. In fact, there were plausible whisperings that a certain country had tried to assassinate her.

“Has D-Powers sold their souls to a devil lurking in the dungeons or something?” Saiga wondered aloud.

Just a few days ago, this issue of leasing land within the dungeons was circling around a number of the departments, he thought. We just managed to finalize the issue, but how many new rules will be necessary from here on out because of D-Powers? I can’t even imagine.

“I would almost prefer that you had gone crazy and started committing your delusions to these reports,” Saiga said. “That would make things a lot easier.”

“You’re terrible, Boss.”

Despite her laughter, Miharu actually had similar thoughts. Due to this information being so important and abnormal, she’d worried about choosing the proper place and person to report to. Fortunately, Miharu had been blessed with a wonderful and capable boss who would probably forgive her even if she turned him into a human sacrifice. As a result, her worries had remained trivial.

Saiga leaned back against his chair, stretched his back, and looked out the window. “Looks like there’s another storm brewing.”

Outside, a clear, beautiful sky unfolded across Tokyo. Yet in the distance, clouds—small and black—had begun taking shape.

December 18, 2018 (Tuesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

That morning, Naruse came through the front door carrying documents of some kind under her arm. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Miyoshi responded. “You’re here early.”

“Yes, it’s about the land leasing matter. The decisions are still tentative, but since everything has been organized for the time being, I came to deliver my report.”

Looks like our previous conversation bore fruit.

Miyoshi prepared tea for the meeting. However, before we could even begin discussing the details, she let forth a shout of protest, unable to suppress her indignation. “Thirty thousand yen for three and a half square meters?!”

“That’s correct,” Naruse replied.

“This price is on the same level as offices in Roppongi or Shinjuku’s third district!” Miyoshi cried.

“Is that expensive?” I asked.

Despite looking exasperated, Miyoshi nonetheless started explaining things to me. “Kei, how many square meters was your last apartment?”

“Huh? The dining room was six plus two, and the inner room was almost eleven. Including the bath and other water facilities, it was around thirty-three square meters, I guess?”

“Exactly. The average studio apartment is roughly thirty-two square meters. If you paid thirty thousand yen for every three square meters, your monthly rent would be three hundred thousand yen.”

“Whoa, that’s hella expensive!”

“This price is no better than some real estate in Ginza,” Miyoshi fumed. “What was the basis for this calculation, exactly?”

Miyoshi began lashing out at Naruse, but the latter was only relaying what the JDA had decided. Grilling Naruse over the matter would only cause more trouble for her.

“Cool your jets, Miyoshi,” I intervened. “Nothing will come of flaring up at Naruse right now.”

“You’re right about that,” Miyoshi conceded. “But consider this, Kei. If we assume that each floor of Yoyogi Dungeon is a circle with a five-kilometer radius, its area would be approximately $5000 \times 5000 \times 3.14$ square meters.”

“That’s true.”

“So if the JDA rented out an entire floor at this rate, their monthly rental income would exceed seven hundred billion yen. That’s highway robbery—no two ways about it.”

“Did you just calculate that in your head?!”

Naruse spoke up again, sounding apologetic. “Once safe zones come to light, this rate will probably drop, but for now, this is the tentative price for commercial enterprises seeking to borrow land.”

Yet not even this could hamper Miyoshi’s grouching.

“All right,” I interrupted. “We’ll rent three and a half square meters.”

“That’s all?” Naruse asked.

“Yep, that should do for now.”

In the end, we only wanted to confirm two points. Would plants grown within dungeons respawn? And if those plants *did* respawn, at what point would they be seen as belonging to the dungeon? Neither investigation would require a huge tract of land.

“Yeah, let’s go with three and half square meters then,” Miyoshi agreed. “Can we decide on the location for ourselves?”

Naruse nodded. “Yes. So long as it’s not on the main route from the second to third level, that shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll bring you a permit certificate later, which the JDA would like you to post somewhere on the land you’re using.”

“Got it.”

This is awesome, I thought, my excitement getting the best of me. Now we can run our agricultural experiments.

“So you *have* developed countermeasures against slimes?” Naruse asked with a huge grin plastered across her face.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t slimes normally eat the certificate, no matter where you posted it?”

“Oh, well, um, I guess so?”

“And since you’re taking the certificate and posting it without complaint, you must have some way of preventing that, *right*?” Naruse pressed.

“Err, well...” I hedged. “That’s...part of this experiment.”

“Then once you have the results, please share them with me.”

I hesitated. “Yeah, okay.”

Miyoshi was clearly suppressing a laugh while watching me flub this conversation.

So long as people didn’t know that slimes dropped storage-type orbs, very few explorers would go around hunting them. Even so, Miyoshi and I had already discussed publishing our findings on benzethonium chloride. In the future, this would be necessary to protect dungeon facilities, after all. By that logic, relaying this information to Naruse wouldn’t be a problem, but at the same time, I felt somewhat defeated.

“Well then, shall we go choose a spot later?” Miyoshi asked.

“Sounds good,” I answered.

In the end, I’d wound up with egg on my face, but the experiment itself seemed utterly fascinating. Ahem, excuse me. I meant to say “extremely worthwhile and perhaps capable of saving the world.”

That afternoon, we headed towards Yoyogi Dungeon in search of a good location.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Second Level

“Kei, do you think this area will work?” Miyoshi asked.

“Hmm.”

It was a small hill with a single tree growing on top.

“Suppose we placed a wire mesh over that tree to cover the area like a tent,” Miyoshi suggested. “Do you think that would keep goblins out?”

We could drive a foundational pole into the ground, but even then, the wire would be unstable if we couldn’t dig too deep into the earth. However, if we could use an already growing tree as the main support, that could solve the problem. And since the tree was freestanding and not too large, slimes probably wouldn’t attack from above either.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

We looked around the area, but there didn’t seem to be many goblins. Regardless, we formulated a plan to cover this entire area—tree included—with a three meter dome of wire mesh. Goblins climbing up the mesh was a very real possibility, but the idea of using a solid wall worried me, as it would block out sunlight. And so we planned on setting up some kind of rat guard. Or rather, goblin guard.

“Digging a moat around the plot might be a good idea,” I mused, “but I’m not sure about filling it with alien drool.”

I didn’t know if goblins ate food or drank water. Nevertheless, I wanted to eliminate the possibility of monsters gathering around the moat to slurp up the alien drool solution.

“Maybe we could surround the area with a circular tube,” Miyoshi suggested. “By using motion sensors and something resembling showerheads, we could build a contraption that sprays any monsters approaching it.”

“But we’ll need to install this contraption a short distance from the field. After all, the solution could have an ill effect on the plants we’re growing.”

That afternoon, we spent a long time on the second level, formulating a random assortment of plans all the while.

As we descended the hill, Miyoshi looked up at the area that would become our field. “But Kei, why do you think this is going to work?”

“Huh? Aren’t you the one who brought up the original idea?”

“That’s true, but rationally speaking, the dungeons viewing foreign objects as part of their interiors and respawning them sounds too good to be true. If that were possible, the dungeons would be all-powerful 3D printers.”

Indeed, if this applied to everything, the word “scarcity” would disappear from dictionaries all across the world.

I nodded. “Under most circumstances, I don’t think this would be possible.”

“And yet you seem pretty confident about this experiment.”

“Most things probably wouldn’t respawn, but I think food—and only food—might be an exception.”

“Why?” Miyoshi asked.

“Because dungeons are tools for spreading D-Factors, right?”

“It certainly seems that way.”

I shrugged. “In that case, don’t you think they’ll lend a hand when it comes to spreading D-Factors?”

“What do you mean?”

We’d be producing dungeon-grown foods that were—in all likelihood—loaded with D-Factors. Furthermore, we’d be spreading these foods around the world and having people ingest them directly. Since that aligned with the dungeons’ purpose, the dungeons would no doubt assist us in this endeavor. At least, I believed so.

Listening to my theories, Miyoshi looked troubled. “Whenever we have these discussions, I almost start thinking of the dungeons as living beings with wills of their own.”

I furrowed my brow. “Wait, you *don’t* think they have wills of their own?”

“Um, what?”

“No, scratch that. I’m referring to the will of whoever created the dungeons, not the dungeons themselves.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if the dungeons *did* have wills of their own,

but if I made this assertion without any basis, I'd sound pretty cringe.

"If some sort of being actually created the dungeons, they would be no different than a god to us," Miyoshi replied. "At this point, I won't be shocked no matter what happens."

When compared to the days before the advent of dungeons, our world already seemed to have lost its mind. If you attempted to gauge things by our prior common sense, the deluge of new realities would make anyone question their own sanity.

"Do I want to meet this 'being' right away or go my whole life without doing so?" I wondered aloud. "Honestly, I don't know how I feel."

December 20, 2018 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Oh!"

Looking out the office window, I saw many canopied trucks of the same size driving in a row, which elicited a shout from me.

"What's wrong?" Miyoshi asked.

"Nothing's wrong, but just now, I saw around eight canopied, two-ton trucks driving in a row. It almost looked like a mini-convoy."

Originally, the word convoy had meant "fleet," but due to the title of a certain film directed by Sam Peckinpah, it now described a group of trucks—even in Japan.

Truckers' convoys had been a by-product of the National Maximum Speed Limit. In 1973, the United States had established this law—which had prohibited speed limits exceeding fifty-five miles per hour—to reduce fuel expenditures in response to the oil crisis. Since truck drivers worked on a tight schedule, most of them had been forced to ignore this speed limit. Consequently, law enforcement had cracked down on them using speed traps. As an act of self-protection, many truckers had begun driving in groups. That way, even if the entire group got caught at a speed trap, only one truck would

have been pulled over. This had been the origin of truckers' convoys.

Miyoshi moved to my side and peered out the window. "Oh, right. Since there are a lot of narrow alleys in this area, people moving in and out of the inner neighborhood can't use just one big truck. The mini-convoy you saw is probably headed towards the house located farther back diagonally."

"Huh?" I asked. "That huge mansion?"

From what I'd heard, that mansion had been here for a long time. Someone was moving out of that house as well?

"I don't know why they're moving," Miyoshi continued, "but it could be that the owner went bankrupt."

That sounded ominous, but something of the sort might have occurred.

"Speaking of which, I've seen a lot of canopied trucks around here lately," I observed, "even though most of these homes aren't rentals."

Until recently, what appeared to be moving trucks had been coming and going from the apartment building behind our house. Almost like rental property at the end of the fiscal year.

"Hmm..." Miyoshi mused.

"What's up?"

"Like you said, there are a lot of people moving out, but we haven't seen many people moving *in*, have we?"

Though moving in took a lot of time, I hadn't seen anyone unloading those sorts of trucks. And since the real estate in this neighborhood was too large for single people, that didn't make sense.

"Must be a coincidence," I declared optimistically.

The trucks moving people out and those moving people in probably came at different times during the day. The latter must have come later when Miyoshi and I were likely out of the house.

"Perhaps," Miyoshi answered.

Lately, moving companies had been optimizing their workflow to curtail labor

costs. Thus, the times allotted for moving in had become shorter.

“I’ve heard that moving families is difficult nowadays,” Miyoshi added.

I cocked my head. “In what way?”

“Different moving companies get compared to one another due to free estimate services.”

“Yeah, you’d be an idiot to not take advantage of those. But since I’m such a chicken, I’d feel compelled to hire a company if I used their free estimate service.”

Miyoshi shook her head. “You’re not very thrifty when it comes to those sorts of things.”

“And you’ve benefited quite a lot from that. How many expensive meals have I bought you now?”

“Ahem. When we moved here, I did get free estimates, but—”

Apparently, Miyoshi had scheduled the appointments for every thirty minutes. As a result, Yamato Transportation, Sakai Moving Service, and The 0123 had all gone up to bat right after each other. Based on her account, you could have cut the tension with a knife.

“The atmosphere was suffocating,” Miyoshi sighed, “and the salespeople performing the estimates all gave me the stink eye.”

“You sure that wasn’t your imagination?”

“Doubt it. I bet a lot of clients do the same thing. Those salespeople are probably fed up with it.”

From what I’d heard, the industry had started viewing moving families as too much trouble for too little profit. Because singles and students didn’t own as many things, moving them was much easier. On the other hand, families had multitudinous possessions and filed a plethora of complaints.

“Also, some companies try to steal a march on their competitors,” Miyoshi explained.

“What do you mean?”

“In the middle of estimates, some companies will offer incredibly low prices as part of a sales pitch. ‘If other businesses haven’t given their estimates yet, we’ll only charge you this much,’ they’ll say, ‘so please hire us.’”

“Impressive,” I remarked. “So did you go with one of those companies?”

“Nope. I went with a place that would dispose of all my old furniture.”

Most major moving companies would take unwanted articles off your hands. However, this came with a variety of conditions, and under some circumstances, they wouldn’t provide this service. Since Miyoshi had hired an interior designer for our home, the place had essentially come furnished. As such, she’d disposed of all her old furniture except for the most valuable pieces.

Come to think of it, I’m still renting that run-down apartment. I need to do something about that place already.

“I’m finished!”

Upon hearing Naruse’s cry of triumph from the translation room, Miyoshi and I exchanged glances.

When we peeked into the room, Naruse—who had been sprawled out on the sofa bed—quickly sat up again, handing Miyoshi a USB flash drive. “These are the finalized versions of the Japanese and English inscription translations.”

Only twenty days had passed since Naruse had used Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Her translation speed of the 266 inscriptions had probably outstripped Monica’s by a wide margin. In all likelihood, Monica had a far greater degree of specialized linguistic knowledge, but this could also become a hindrance, forcing her to produce stricter, more painstaking translations.

To avoid errors, specialists chose their words carefully when explaining things. However, this tended to make comprehension more difficult for the average person. In that respect, Naruse had the advantage of being able to produce rough and easily understandable translations, which were supported by her wealth of knowledge concerning fantasy and dungeons.

“Good work,” Miyoshi congratulated her. “Only five days until we publish them.”

“It feels like a long time coming,” Naruse answered with a sigh.

For an honest person like Naruse, feigning ignorance while holding vital information must have been grueling. I couldn’t even imagine her pangs of conscience. Yet upon completing the translations, she must have felt similar to anyone completing an important job. That sense of satisfaction and release was universal, after all.

Even so...

I spoke up. “Oh, right. Sometime after we publish the translation, Miyoshi and I plan on holding an auction for Mining. Your help will be much appreciated then.”

Naruse’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

...demons are always looking for the perfect opportunity to pierce their victims’ hearts.

December 23, 2018 (Sunday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Mitsurugi and Saito will be here at 3:00 p.m.,” Miyoshi remarked from the dining room table after checking her text messages.

“That’s an unusual snack,” I said, noting the sweet potato chips pinched between her fingers.

“With French fry-shaped kenpi being all the rage now, you hardly ever see sliced sweet potato chips anymore. Still, these are pretty good. Once you start eating them, you can’t stop.”

Kenpi were a form of candied sweet potato. I didn’t really care about Miyoshi’s explanation, but since I wasn’t doing anything important, I listened with half an ear. Somehow, the conversation jumped all the way to a certain kind of sweet potato cracker from Saitama.

“I’m not sure how to describe the flavor,” Miyoshi rambled on. “It’s simple, but also—”

“That’s enough, Miyoshi. At this point, I’m the world’s foremost expert on

your love for sweet potato snacks. So anyway, has there been any action from the JDA?"

Naruse could have reported on Miyoshi's Appraisal skill as early as yesterday.

"Nope," Miyoshi replied. "I thought they would summon me ASAP, but maybe everyone's home for the weekend. I suppose the JDA keeps government office hours too."

"Don't even think about going alone. I'll accompany you."

"Thanks a million. You can be pretty cool sometimes, Kei."

"I do my best."

Miyoshi slurped down a cup of tea. I didn't see her drinking Japanese tea very often, and... *Wait, what?!*

"Surely that's not the tea I've been saving for a special occasion, right?" I pleaded.

"Your taste in beverages isn't half bad, but tea has a short shelf life."

Though Japanese tea looked dry, it contained around three percent water. Once opened, it would only taste its best for about two weeks. That much was common knowledge. Even unopened, it was advisable to drink it within three months.

"This is the best first tea of the season," Miyoshi declared. "You need to drink it before summer at least."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I grumbled.

"Well, putting away the tea for a special occasion and then missing the opportunity to drink it does sound like a very Kei thing to do."

"I'm a timid little man, after all. If you don't mind, brew me a cup too."

"You got it." While boiling the water, Miyoshi donned a smug expression. "You're the same way with women, y'know?"

Mind your own business.

"Oh, and speaking of what we discussed on Friday..." Miyoshi continued.

“Yeah?”

“I found personal identification info in your model.”

“Seriously?!”

In other words, that program—which seemingly hadn’t returned any results due to an overabundance of calculations—had actually been doing its job?

Miyoshi nodded. “We might be able to identify individuals.”

“That’s amazing.”

“But on the other hand...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, for our original goal of blocking measurements, there’s no real need to identify individuals.”

That was true. Falsely setting a certain person’s stats to a predetermined value would require personal identification. Otherwise, the device would only need to know that a certain person didn’t want to be measured.

“People who don’t want to be measured could carry around another device that emits some kind of signal,” Miyoshi said. “Then, we could have the measurement device pick up that signal and send the results back to the server. That would solve this problem.”

“Yeah, it would,” I agreed.

“And with that build, we could add all sorts of expanded functionalities, not just jammers!”

Miyoshi was right about that, but if we wanted to implement this jammer, we would have to consider a whole host of things other than security. For starters, when another manufacturer built a status-measuring device, our jammer would be rendered completely meaningless and impotent. Considering the potential industry for this tech, you would have to carry different jamming devices for each manufacturer. Users would find this solution absurd.

“This sounds like the history of electronic payment systems,” I remarked.

“What do you mean?”

“If generic measuring devices start appearing on the market, different jammers will be necessary for each manufacturer. I was just thinking about how absurd that would be.”

Miyoshi frowned. “Rather than electronic payment systems, I can imagine things developing similarly to the MP3 player industry.”

“How’s that?”

“MP3 players that didn’t care about copyright protection were incredibly popular. As you can imagine, those that actually took copyright seriously were driven out by the former.”

“So manufacturers who don’t give a crap about jammers will dominate the market?” I asked.

“And since you don’t have to manufacture anything extra, it’ll be cheaper too.”

“Gah, what a bunch of money grubbers.”

Miyoshi used cooled hot water to brew the tea, placing the kettle on a hot plate. The polyphenols in tea dissolved at around sixty degrees Celsius. In contrast, the amino acids dissolved at around fifty degrees Celsius. Thus, keeping the water at a little less than sixty degrees Celsius would allow you to brew the best-tasting tea. Masters could probably do this through intuition, but we mere mortals had to rely on the power of science to reproduce their expertise. Unfortunately, this method lacked elegance.

“Either way, it’ll be a long time before other manufacturers put out a product,” Miyoshi stated. “More importantly...”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t say this to Naruse, but we actually have a more serious problem.”

“Serious?” I repeated. “That’s not a word I hear from you very often.”

“Regardless, that device can clearly distinguish between who has a D-Card and who doesn’t.”

“How so?”

“If you don’t have a D-Card, certain values are always zero,” Miyoshi explained.

“And why is that a problem?”

“Well, it sort of divides humanity into two halves, doesn’t it?”

The struggle between old and new humans was a common trope in science fiction dramas. Usually, the new humans were superpowered, few in number, and victims of persecution.

“At the time of their birth, everyone is an ‘old’ human, and anyone can become a ‘new’ human by obtaining a D-Card,” I pointed out. “I don’t see any way that sort of conflict could occur.”

“Kei. Humans are capable of fighting to the death over whether someone else eats meat. If our increase in strength via stats becomes common knowledge, people will argue about those improvements being right or wrong. I can’t even imagine what might happen.”

When the last grain of sand had fallen through the hourglass, Miyoshi poured the tea from the kettle into preheated teacups. The beautiful greenish liquid shone at the bottom of the white cups.

“Furthermore, new humans can’t return to being old humans,” Miyoshi continued. “And according to religious fundamentalists, if the enemy refuses to convert—”

“They should be wiped out,” I finished. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“History is littered with stories like that.”

She’s definitely overthinking this, I thought, but even so, humans loved the idea of “naturalness.” Japanese people were especially prone to this line of thinking. Obviously, stats would have an impact on sports. Dungeon diving could be equated with doping, people with and without D-Cards could be separated into different divisions, or perhaps something entirely different would occur. Since stats hadn’t been quantified yet, dungeon diving was treated similarly to high-altitude training, but I couldn’t predict what would happen in the future.

“If you’re that worried about this, just don’t display any values that amount to zero,” I said.

Miyoshi shook her head. “That won’t be possible.”

“Why?”

“Because when using the device and those models, I can’t even acquire stats from people who don’t have D-Cards.”

“Well, that’s...a problem.” Finding myself at a loss for words, I gave a less than adequate response. “But at least we won’t have to worry about people shouting, ‘Over nine thousand? Your power level isn’t even nine, you scum!’”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Miyoshi said with a laugh.

Tokyo Midtown

“Coach!” Saito cried. “There’s a whole mess of hanging Santas!”

Numerous Santa ornaments hung from a metal framework resembling a Christmas tree. Upon seeing this, Saito began huffing and puffing air through her nose excitedly.

“Hanging?” I repeated. “That makes it sound like the Santas are being executed en masse.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely the vibe I’m getting.”

“If it were a group of teru teru bozu hanging from the tree, that would be a little spooky though,” Miyoshi chimed in.

“But the Santas are pretty cute,” Mitsurugi followed up casually.

The four of us were walking down the illumination viewing route of Tokyo Midtown. Explaining how this outing had occurred would be a long story, but in a nutshell, Mitsurugi and Saito had come to the office a little past 3:00 p.m. Since we had dinner reservations at 6:30 p.m., that left us with around three hours of free time. Until a little while ago, it had been raining lightly, but when the drizzle had reached a lull, Miyoshi had suggested going to Tokyo Midtown.

“Going to Midtown during the Christmas season?” I’d asked. “That’s suicide.”

“It’s close to where we’re eating, it’s festive, and since the weather isn’t great, there won’t be very many people,” Miyoshi had countered. “Plus, I heard about an event happening there.”

“From whom?”

The other day, Miyoshi had bought a gift for Asha from a jewelry store. At the same time, she’d received a flyer from the employee, who’d mentioned an event they were collaborating on.

“People in the jewelry business sure are hardworking,” I commented.

Miyoshi nodded. “Connections are extremely important in their industry, after all.”

Upon further investigation, the collaboration had turned out to be a Christmas event. With the rain having eased up, Miyoshi had thought this would be a good way to kill time. “Well, giving the event a quick look can’t hurt,” the four of us had thought, but alas, we’d been fools.

“This place is jam-packed with people,” I gasped. “And all these illuminations are going to make me sick. Get it, *ill*uminations?”

“How strange,” Miyoshi replied, rudely ignoring my pun. “From what I heard, this place tends to get crowded after 6:00 p.m., but it should be fine just after sundown.”

“That’s only true before the twentieth, right?” Saito asked.

Miyoshi looked surprised. “Wait, really?”

“Our current situation is proof enough,” I replied.

At this, Miyoshi shrugged. “Well, enjoying the crowds is one part of Christmas in Tokyo.”

Yeah, but this feels more like the crucifixion of Christ than his birth.

As we followed the flow of the people, the lights suddenly went out. Moments later, a blue glow spread across the plaza, causing everyone around us to gasp in delight.

“Blue lights spreading across the ground,” I muttered to myself. “Reminds me

a bit of *The Polano Plaza*.”[\(17\)](#)

Since Mitsurugi was standing beside me, she must have heard these words. While squinting at the light show, she began humming a song from the musical version of *The Polano Plaza*. “In the story, the small lights of white clover flowers illuminate an entire field, and their fragrance fills the air,” she said. “Is that right?”

“Yep, sure is,” I confirmed.

The light show in the plaza grew increasingly flamboyant with the illuminations flying around like shooting stars.

“But Kei, isn’t *The Polano Plaza* about a summer festival?” Miyoshi asked.

I shook my head. “If we can sing joyfully amidst the light of white clovers and underneath the faint glow of the galaxy, why get caught up in the details?”

“I’m not sure if we can sing joyfully outside in the middle of winter,” Miyoshi quipped. “But speaking of *The Polano Plaza*, does anyone know what ‘cat’s whisker’ is supposed to refer to?”

Many puzzling terms appeared in the play adaptation, and one of those was the English phrase “cat’s whisker.”

“It’s a song by the Benson Orchestra of Chicago,” Saito replied. “A theater teacher of mine told me so.”

“Wow,” I said. “You actually study theater?”

“D-Did my coach just diss me?” Saito sputtered. “What new actress would neglect studying theater?”

Yeah, that makes sense, I considered but quickly changed the subject. “Anyway, Kenji Miyazawa used a lot of inscrutable language in his writing. I still don’t know what the Kanya Hyau Problem is.”

“Is it not in the *Kenji Miyazawa Dictionary*?” Miyoshi asked.

“Probably,” I replied. “But that book is over one thousand pages on medium-sized paper. I wouldn’t mind an ebook version.”

A bright band flashed across my line of sight. When the climax of the

extravagant light show had concluded, all of the illumination faded. Once again, a blue glow gradually spread across the plaza. The show would probably reach its end soon.

When I glanced to my side, I found Mitsurugi looking at me. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Yoshimura,” she responded in a whisper. “You did something the other day, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

Without even straining my memory, I knew she was talking about me allocating her SP. Mitsurugi continued staring at me, but when the event ended, she turned back towards the plaza, still speaking in a whisper. “I’ll consider it a Christmas present. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, um, yeah.”

While I could neither confirm nor deny anything, we continued down the road, the flow of people pushing us along.

“Miyoshi, Miyoshi,” Saito said. “Where are we going for dinner?”

“Today’s destination is Mita,” Miyoshi replied.

I looked up at The Ritz-Carlton. “Mita, huh? Knowing you, I would’ve guessed Azure 45.”

Azure 45 was The Ritz-Carlton’s premier restaurant.

“True—it would’ve been the perfect location,” Miyoshi agreed. “During this time of day, the final afterglow melts into the darkness, and the city landscape emerges from its own light. Imagine having Chef Miyazaki’s finely dressed steak placed right in front of you amidst this ambience. The flavor and mood would’ve been perfect!”

Here Miyoshi slumped her shoulders and donned a sad expression. Was it just my imagination, or had she been overacting lately?

“But Kei, Azure 45 is filled with couples around Christmas,” she continued. “No one else is allowed through the doors! Mostly through psychic repulsion.”

If we'd ended up surrounded by lovey-dovey couples due to the seating arrangement, I definitely would've vomited sugar. Not to mention how out of place we would've looked.

While striking a melodramatic pose, Miyoshi looked up at the hotel and continued speaking as if she were on a stage. "At least for today, the four of us are like Adam and Eve after being expelled from paradise. We lift our heads towards the angels wielding flaming swords before the front gate. 'None of you may enter here,' they say, forcing us to join hands and hobble down from the forty-fifth floor."

"Oh, c'mon," I scoffed with a sigh. "At least let us use the elevator."

Mitsurugi and Saito giggled while watching this exchange.

"So," I continued, "in the end, those cherubim are actually wielding 'fully occupied' signs, not flaming swords, right?"

"Exactly!" Miyoshi cried. "You can't get a reservation, and no one cancels either! How does everyone have so much money to spend? The bubble popped over twenty years ago!"

Saito squeezed between Miyoshi and me, taking both our arms. "Well then, are we going to eat at Golden Hill?"

Golden Hill was a long-established French restaurant in Mita, and the chef was a leading figure in Japan's French cuisine sphere.

However, Miyoshi wagged her pointer finger in response. "Listen up. No matter where you go around Christmas, all French restaurants have a special, atmospheric menu. Not only are the ingredients and dishes mostly the same, but they also cost 1.5 times more than usual!"

To French chefs, those might have been fighting words, but Miyoshi merely spoke the truth.

"Thus, we're having Japanese food!" Miyoshi continued. "We'll be going to Harukawa today. The restaurant owner—a man named Motoyama—has an incredible smile. At this time of year, the monkfish melts in your mouth, and the crab takikomi rice is superb as well." Miyoshi paused here to lick her lips. "The monkfish we had at Naito with Asha was pretty good, but it was still a little

early in the season.”

Saito turned around to face Mitsurugi, who was walking one step behind us, and began to tease her. “Oh, wow. Haru loves crab, y’know. Once, she took me out to eat Matsuba crab, and her feet were practically drilling holes into the ground the entire time. She didn’t speak a word either.”

“Th-That was a youthful indiscretion,” Mitsurugi stammered.

“Speaking of which, I never asked you about what kind of role you’re playing,” I said to Saito.

“In the movie?” she asked. “Well, um, it takes place at a certain hotel in Hong Kong. The story is about three con artists—one of them being me, the heroine. I can’t get too specific about the plot though.”

They probably wanted to keep the movie’s script a secret until its release.

“You’re playing a con artist?” I asked. “Yeah, that fits you perfectly.”

Saito huffed. “What do you mean? I’m such a sweet and honest girl.”

That’s exactly what I’m talking about!

I handed a small box to Saito, who was still linking arms with Miyoshi and me. “Well then, here you go. Congratulations.”

“Um, what?” Saito asked. “Is this my gift for landing a leading role?”

I nodded. “Yep. And it means I’ve made good on my promise.”

“Oh, what could it be? May I open it now?”

“That’s fine with me, but you want to open it while walking?”

“Eh, I don’t think anyone will mind.” After carefully peeling off the wrapping paper, Saito opened the lid of the case with a snap. “Oh, wow...”

The case contained a pair of earrings set with purple stones. Of course, I couldn’t have given her a ring, and the stones on a choker or pendant would’ve been too big. As such, I’d gone with the safe option and given her a gift similar to Mitsurugi’s.

“From what I’ve heard, this stone appears to change colors based on its type and the angle at which light shines on it,” I explained. “That aspect reminded

me of you, I guess.”

“Huh?” Saito asked. “Is this alexandrite?”

“Yeah, well, it sort of sounds like the Library of Alexandria, doesn’t it?”

Why did that cause her to freeze up? I wondered.

With a sigh, Miyoshi explained things to me. “Kei... Do you know the meaning of alexandrite in the language of stones?”

Language of stones? The hell is that? I hardly know the language of flowers, and you expect me to be an expert on stone trivia?!

“Err, no?” I answered.

“Alexandrite can mean ‘hidden feelings,’” Miyoshi revealed.

“Hidden *what* now?”

Who the hell came up with such a nonsensical meaning?

“Uh, okay, I more than understand the situation now,” Saito said. “The design of these earrings is elegant enough. I’ll take ’em with gratitude, Coach!”

“Y-Yeah,” I answered. “Keep up the good work.”

While holding the earring case, Saito slid over to Mitsurugi’s side and whispered something into her ear. “Isn’t that a relief, Haru?”

“Huh? A relief? I don’t know what you mean...”

Later, the four of us boarded a taxi. From Gaien-Higashi Street, we took a right at the Igura-Katamachi intersection. After entering Azabu Street, we turned left at Sannohashi Bridge. Immediately, the stone lanterns of Harukawa came into view.

The monkfish was creamy enough to melt in our mouths, and the Himi yellowtail had just the right amount of fat. Both were delicious, but what Mitsurugi seemed to enjoy most were the Echizen crab cream croquettes.

December 24, 2018 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

On Christmas Eve, couples dominated the streets of Tokyo, their acts of love filling the city. Sadly, Miyoshi and I had no plans in particular. In fact, we were busy with the final check of Heaven's Leaks, which we planned on publishing at midnight.

When I descended the stairs into the office, I found Miyoshi—arms folded and expression serious—standing before two of the Arthurs, both of which were only poking their heads out from the shadows. She didn't seem to be feeding the hellhounds by tossing food into their mouths.

"Good morning," I said. "What the heck are you doing?"

"Oh, good morning, Kei. To tell you the truth—"

Before fighting Enkai, we'd discussed having the hellhounds swap places while having something attached to their bodies. Currently, Miyoshi was in the middle of researching this.

"Well, just take a look," she instructed.

Having said this, Miyoshi took out two thin, differently colored collars. Both were large enough to warrant the descriptor of "enormous."

"I can't believe collars that size actually exist," I said. "Who was even selling them?"

Are they made for tigers or something?

"They're custom made," Miyoshi replied. "That's why this took so long."

The collars had been designed so that a light tug could easily remove them. This way, they wouldn't be a hindrance in case of an emergency. According to Miyoshi, the hellhounds also needed collars to attach leashes to when going on walks outside. Additionally, she needed to attach dog tags that provided evidence of their permits and vaccinations.

Wait, she plans on taking them outside?!

"All righty then," Miyoshi said. "I'll place the red collar on the left one—Cavall—and the blue collar on the right one—Aethlem."

Just as Miyoshi had stated, she placed the collars on the hellhounds. The two beasts accepted the collars calmly, showing no signs of disliking them.

“Okay, switch places!” Miyoshi cried.

The two hellhounds sank into the shadows and immediately reappeared.

Huh...?

To my eyes, it simply looked as though the hellhounds had reappeared wearing the same collars as before.

“Hey Miyoshi, did they actually swap places?” I asked.

“Of course.”

Apparently, Aethlem was now on the left side wearing the red collar, and Cavall was now on the right side wearing the blue collar.

“In other words, the hellhounds switched places, but the collars didn’t?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

Attaching communication items to the Arthurs would be pointless if only the hellhounds switched places. In that case, the devices would simply be left behind.

“That’s pretty strange,” I said. “Still, only the hellhounds swapping places *does* kind of make sense, I suppose.”

It was disappointing that our original plan wouldn’t work out though.



“I agree,” Miyoshi said. “But there’s actually something more to this.”

“Something more?” I repeated.

Miyoshi took out a roll of mending tape. “Indeed.”

“That’s an odd thing to have on you.”

“You think? Mending tape is a pretty good substitute for pasting sticky notes onto documents.”

If the sticky notes were peeled off, your notes would get lost. This made them difficult to use on borrowed materials.

“Take a good look at this,” Miyoshi instructed, cutting off a short piece of mending tape and sticking it to the bridge of Cavall’s nose. “All right, you two swap places again.”

Same as before, the two hellhounds switched places. This time, Aethlem appeared on the right wearing the blue collar, and Cavall appeared on the left wearing the red collar.

Wait, what’s that?

Adorably, Cavall stuck out his face with the mending tape still stuck to the bridge of his nose.

“The tape switched places with him?” I asked.

“It sure did!”

From what Miyoshi could tell, anything attached to the Arthurs *could* be treated as an extension of their body.

“The problem was the mass of the object,” she concluded.

“How so?”

“If an object has more than a certain mass, it’ll be left behind whenever the Arthurs switch places, but if the object has less than that mass, it’ll move with them.”

I nodded excitedly. “Then depending on that mass, we could use the Arthurs as a means of communication! So what’s the weight limit?”

“About one gram.”

“Seriously? In that case, a thin piece of paper might work, but we also need something to affix it to their bodies. That won’t be easy.”

Seeing my disappointment, Miyoshi donned an intrepid smile, wagging her pointer finger in a sign of disagreement. “Kei, we’re living in the year 2018, remember?” she asked, pulling out something that looked like a small computer chip.

I frowned. “Is that a micro SD card?”

“Yep. These things weigh about 0.4 grams.”

Wait, seriously? They’re that light?

“Still, what are you going to use to attach the card to their bodies?” I pressed. “Is there any clip that weighs 0.5 grams?”

“Afraid not.”

“I’m begging you—*please* don’t say you’re going to make the hellhounds carry the cards in their mouths and then spit them out.”

“Nope,” Miyoshi replied. “I wouldn’t want the puppies to swallow the cards. Even if they didn’t, the cards would end up all sticky.”

“Well then, are you going to paste the cards to the bridges of their noses using mending tape?”

That would probably be less than a gram.

Miyoshi shook her head. “The card might come off that way.”

“Yeah, seems likely.”

Since only objects attached to the Arthurs’ bodies could swap places, where would a fallen item wind up? When I imagined the card floating eternally in an unknowable space, a chill ran down my spine.

“But anyway,” Miyoshi said, “a PE 1.0 fishing line is defined as being two hundred deniers.”

Why the sudden change of subject?

“Deniers?” I repeated. “As in the textile measurement for stockings and whatnot?”

“Yep, and incidentally, these are forty deniers,” Miyoshi responded, pinching her tights between her fingers and releasing them with a snap. “They’re still somewhat sheer, as you can see.”

Stockings tended to be twenty deniers or lower, though this depended on the manufacturer.

Miyoshi continued her explanation. “Even though deniers are units of thread thickness, two threads with the same diameter aren’t necessarily the same denier.”

Say what? Deniers measure the thickness of threads, but two different threads with the same denier don’t necessarily have the same diameter? That doesn’t make a lick of sense.

Seeming amused by my dumbfounded expression, Miyoshi cleared away the smoke and mirrors. “One denier is defined as one nine millionth of kilograms divided by meters.”

“In other words, weight per unit length.”

“Deniers were probably determined during a time period when there was no way of measuring thread diameter. That’s why the thickness of the same denier can vary depending on the material.”

“Interesting,” I said. “But for our purposes right now, mass is the most important factor, correct?”

“Yep. And the fact is, a two hundred denier thread weighs a little more than 0.02 grams.”

Miyoshi took out what appeared to be an object made from transparent string. Woven from fishing lines, it was a collar with a basket attached.

“And so, I made a pouch!” she exclaimed. “It weighs about 0.3 grams! The glue I used when assembling the basket was probably heavier than the thread.”

After putting the micro SD card in the pouch and placing the thin collar around Aethlem’s neck, she ordered the two hellhounds to switch again. Thus,

Aethlem swapped places with Cavall once more. When they reappeared, Aethlem was still wearing the ultralight pouch.

“That’s amazing!” I cried.

“But we need to make sure the pouch doesn’t touch anything else that’s in contact with their bodies. That’ll result in failure.”

If two objects came into contact, they would be treated as one, after all.

At that moment, the doorbell rang. When I unlocked the door, Naruse opened it and walked inside, carrying documents of some kind under her arm. “Good morning,” she greeted us.

“Good morning,” Miyoshi replied. “You’re here early.”

“Yes. Since the contract is ready, I wanted to come as soon as possible.”

Apparently, Naruse had arrived with the lease agreement for using land on the second level of Yoyogi Dungeon.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Inside Saiga’s office at the Dungeon Management Section, Miharuru examined her boss in silence for a long while. Laying with his face down on his desk, he didn’t move a muscle. After looking over Miharuru’s report, he’d collapsed with an audible thud.

“Give it to me straight, Naruse. Is this real?” All of a sudden, Saiga sat up, glaring at Miharuru with an agonized expression. “Hold on a second! Have I been repeating myself more than usual lately?!”

“Have some sympathy for me too, Boss.”

“So what the hell is all this?!”

Miharuru sighed. “Everything should be spelled out in my report.”

Said report contained information on the ridiculously named Heaven’s Leaks, which would be published tomorrow—or rather, late tonight. Moreover, this website would host translations for every single known dungeon inscription.

“And this isn’t a joke?” Saiga asked.

“No, I checked the site before its publication.”

They’re going to publish a translation for every single discovered inscription tomorrow? Saiga thought. *In a place totally unrelated to the WDA?*

When he imagined the pressure and inquiries he would face from all angles, Saiga’s head began to hurt.

“Who translated these?” he asked.

Miharu shook her head, inwardly apologizing to her boss. “I have no idea.”

“How hard do you think I worked to force that nightmare of an orb onto America? And where did that even get us? Some mystery person translated every single inscription, and they’re going to release them all to the general public?”

“You think this will turn out poorly?”

The Western alliance had poured hundreds of billions of yen into the auction, after all. D-Powers could claim to have no connection to Heaven’s Leaks, but based on the server and domain contract information, people would obviously suspect their involvement.

“Sorry for my outburst,” Saiga apologized. “I was just complaining. Our alliance bought that orb for national security reasons, so regardless of whether this site exists, it was still necessary. But without Otherworldly Language Comprehension, there would be no way of knowing if the site is legitimate, correct?”

“That does seem to be the case.”

“Well, if the WDA had actually been involved in this site, we would have earned the resentment of quite a few countries.”

In that sense, D-Powers’ decision to not involve any dungeon association might have been rather perceptive. Though to be honest, Naruse wasn’t sure if they’d even considered this.

“Even so...” Saiga trailed off, exasperated.

In her report, Naruse had included excerpts of the most important inscriptions. These excerpts matched almost everything from the Russian

documents. However, they also contained information that *hadn't* been included in Russia's documents, as well as contradictory details. Conversely, this seemed like a means of increasing the credibility of the site's translations. After all, the information contained within RU22-0012 seemed like something Russia would deliberately attempt to hide.

"Mineral drops, eh?" Saiga finished.

Miharu nodded. "From what I've heard, D-Powers is going to hold an auction for Mining at the start of January."

"From what you've heard?" Saiga repeated. "How are they going to manage that, exactly?"

In response, Miharu could only shake her head.

Saiga placed his hand on another document, which Miharu had submitted to him at the same time. "And tomorrow, you're going to publish information on the Yoyo-D Information Bureau website in advance?" he asked. "According to this, it'll read, 'We've confirmed that a certain monster drops Mining, and the matter is currently being looked into.' If only this had been some sort of bluff. So, what's the drop monster?"

"That's still unclear, but I think we'll know early next year."

"I see."

After hiding information on Mining for three months, had Russia progressed this far?

"Do you think the JDA should bid on the Mining orb?" Saiga asked.

"Huh? Regardless of its utility, we don't have the budget, right?"

"We made a decent commission from the Otherworldly Language Comprehension sale. If we don't spend a certain amount of money, our taxes are going to kill us."

D-Powers had sought out and obtained Mining—an orb that no one had ever seen before. Now they were planning on putting it up for auction. Speaking from common sense, this should have been impossible, but Saiga had accepted the matter without question. This realization caused him to chuckle dryly.

But right now, we need to think about how to mitigate the aftermath of D-Powers' actions, Saiga thought.

The week had just begun, but when he thought about how it would progress, he felt exhausted. And he hadn't even started working yet.

December 25, 2018 (Tuesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

It was late at night on Christmas Eve of 2018. Stars twinkled in the Tokyo sky, not to be outdone by the effulgence on the ground. A strong chill due to radiative cooling further excited the couples nestling up against one another. As presents were being delivered to the pillows of sleeping children, a single person from the United States accessed Heaven's Leaks, marking the beginning of a story that would rock the world.

According to Japan Standard Time, it was now midnight on December 25, 2018. The first user to access Heaven's Leaks excitedly jumped from one page to another.

"This must be Monica," Miyoshi said while watching a real-time analysis of what the user was accessing.

We had only given this URL to Monica and Naruse directly. Yesterday, Naruse had reported to Saiga, but since the JDA was fundamentally a government agency, they wouldn't access the website until work started for the day. On the other hand, Monica must have been waiting patiently for midnight in Japan.

Immediately, my phone vibrated, and I received a forwarded message from the contact address I'd given Monica. She'd simply written "AWESOME!" in English. From the looks of things, she liked Heaven's Leaks. A few minutes later, a flood of people began accessing the site.

"Do you think these are people monitoring Monica's communications?" I asked. "Or maybe a department related to the Dungeon Strike Force received a report?"

"That seemed to be the case at first, but the IP addresses are rapidly spreading across America," Miyoshi replied. "Perhaps someone posted

Heaven's Leaks on some message board or social media site."

Over in America, it was still the morning of the twenty-fourth.

A certain man heard about Heaven's Leaks from his friend, who'd sent the link to him as a joke. However, due to the outrageous contents of the site, he submitted it to Reddit without much thought.⁽¹⁸⁾ The title of his post was "Check out this bonkers site I found—it's fascinating!" Within the opening post, he wrote, "Whoever created this site put a whole lot of effort into it. They must have one hell of an imagination. If you like Harald Stümpke's posthumous work *The Snouters: Form and Life of the Rhinogrades*, you've gotta check this out!"⁽¹⁹⁾

Within moments, his submission amassed a large number of upvotes, shooting up to the top of the front page. Before long, people began leaving their impressions on this meticulously crafted website, discussing certain pages with interesting "translations." Within these discussions, one man posted a single comment that heralded the world plunging into chaos.

"Hey, you guys aren't gonna believe me, but I formed a party with a friend of mine who has a D-Card, and... We really can use telepathy?!"

The initial reaction of nearly everyone who read this comment was "What the hell are you talking about, ya dingus?"

In the blink of an eye, hundreds of people had replied to this comment. Though the vast majority of them expressed the same sense of skepticism in different words, a significant number of people possessed D-Cards. It didn't take too long before the validity of the comment was proven.

"Um, people have started talking about how this could be used to cheat on exams," Miyoshi said.

"Yeah, that's true," I replied. "If you made someone guaranteed to pass the exam into the leader, and the whole party took the test at the same time, it would be difficult to prevent cheating."

"Randomly issuing examinee seat numbers is probably the most you could

do.”

In other words, you would need to physically divide up exam halls. Securing a distance of twenty or more meters could end up being surprisingly difficult, but that was the only low-cost countermeasure I could think of. Other than that, you could check and confiscate the D-Cards of anyone registered with the WDA to verify that they didn’t belong to a party. That being said, confiscating D-Cards—which revealed a person’s skills—would cause even greater privacy issues than confiscating phones.

Miyoshi frowned. “But even if test sites jump through all those hoops, won’t it be for nothing if people just lie about not having D-Cards?”

Certainly, looking into whether someone had a D-Card would be difficult. At the present moment, there was no way of investigating this outside of the examinee giving a personal statement.

“Hmm,” I mused. “The dungeon associations of various countries will probably require some sort of office to answer inquiries about examinees having D-Cards.”

“But considering the sheer number of tests taken across the world, that would basically be impossible, right?”

True enough. Even if test sites *could* inquire about every single examinee’s D-Card ownership, answering those inquiries would require a huge amount of time and money. Creating an API that allowed the investigators to access the WDA’s explorer database would be the sole solution, but even then, the WDA couldn’t allow them unrestricted access.

“Looks like we’ll need a device that checks whether a person has a D-Card before a stat-measuring one,” I mused. “Based on what you mentioned the other day, aren’t certain values always zero for non-explorers?”

“That’s right. If we only wanted to verify someone’s ownership of a D-Card, we could probably extract that sole function and create a device that’s relatively cheaper. Even so...”

Miyoshi trailed off here, as if she’d just thought of something.

“Wait,” I said, recalling our discussion from a few days ago. “This is sounding

more and more like a tool to separate our species into the ‘new’ and ‘former’ humans.”

Once you became a new human, you could never return to being a former one. But of course, I couldn’t foresee the massacre of new humans by fundamentalists becoming a widespread danger.

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about,” Miyoshi said. “The National Center exams are being held on January nineteenth and twentieth next year.”

“The National Center exams...?” I repeated. “Oh, crap!”

“Announcing Heaven’s Leaks on Christmas made our schedule easy to understand, but did we just strike a huge blow against Japan’s university entrance exams?”

University entrance exams were the largest, most important tests conducted in Japan. These exams could have a major impact on the sort of life you would lead.

“Yeah, this is bad,” I said.

If our announcement had come earlier, perhaps countermeasures could have been put in place. Likewise, if we’d announced the website *after* the exams, perhaps the impact could have been minimized. However, what countermeasures could Japan possibly establish for tests of this scale in less than a month?

“This year’s exams...” I began.

“Are going to be rough,” Miyoshi finished.

She and I exchanged glances, our foreheads breaking out in sweat.

Looking at the monitor, Miyoshi blatantly changed the subject. “Oh, it looks like the discourse has changed to ‘Wait, could everything on this website actually be true?’”

“We always knew creating parties through the dungeon system would have a huge impact.”

Of course, if this led to D-Cards being used more frequently, that could put me in something of a bind.

Miyoshi cast a sidelong glance at my worried expression. “Just don’t form parties with people you don’t know,” she suggested carelessly.

Yeah, she was exactly right. Even if presenting your D-Card became required for exams, I probably wasn’t going to take any more tests for the rest of my life.

After examining the access logs and scrolling through various forums for a while, Miyoshi let out a small yawn.

“Should we go to bed soon?” I asked.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

The world had started moving, but for Miyoshi and me, it was time to hit the sack and venture off into the world of dreams.

Washington DC, United States of America

Curtis Hathaway—the first ever secretary of the US Dungeon Department—was growing flustered. During the USDD’s raid of Yoyogi Dungeon, they’d fallen behind the US Dungeon Strike Force. And after being thoroughly manipulated by two G-Ranked members of the ridiculously named D-Powers, they’d also failed miserably during the orb auction. In fact, they were now being suspected of interference. To make matters even worse, two of their agents who’d been investigating D-Powers’ base had been sent back to America by the Japanese government.

“Goddamn it,” Curtis swore softly.

In the end, had spending a significant portion of the USDD’s budget proven anything other than the fact that their active units were complete morons?

And now he was once again receiving an unbelievable report.

“Continue,” Curtis ordered.

Noticing his boss’s ill temper, a man in his early thirties—hair cut short and wearing a simple suit—broke out in a cold sweat. “The translations matched the portions published by Russia almost perfectly.”

“So even if this site is a convincing sham, does that mean the creator is in a

position to access the original Russian documents?”

“That’s a possibility, but according to the DSF, the portions *not* included in Russia’s original documents are also authentic...”

Curtis furrowed his brow, his expression uncomprehending. “Authentic?”

Only two people on Earth possessed Otherworldly Language Comprehension. While one lived in Russia, the other lived in America.

“Are you suggesting that Russia created this website?” Curtis asked.

“No, that seems highly unlikely, sir.”

Curtis’s subordinate had already looked over the new translations, which had been sent to him not too long ago. To his surprise, they’d contained passages not appearing in the original Russian documents, despite both of them being translations of the same inscriptions.

“Well then, did America create the website?” Curtis asked. “Is the DSF acting rashly? Perhaps under the president’s orders?”

“I’ve inquired about this, but the DSF seems to be uninvolved.”

“In that case, someone else single-handedly produced these translations? Using a 3.7-billion-dollar orb?”

“Most likely. After all, these new translations include important passages not contained within the Russian documents.” Pausing, the subordinate accessed the index of a section called *The Book of Wanderers* on his tablet. By clicking a link, he brought up a single inscription originally discovered by Russia. “Before long, this particular inscription will be the most relevant to our department.”

“RU22-0012... Mineral resources, eh?”

The USDD had been split off from the Department of the Interior. Since the DOI dealt with national resources, the USDD’s involvement would be a foregone conclusion. As Curtis briefly looked over the translations, his spirits rose. Based on this new information, he would have the chance to redeem himself for his recent blunders.

“If this is true, we need to redouble our efforts to explore the lower levels,” he declared.

“That’s true,” his subordinate replied. “Our only obstacle is—”

“Mining, correct?”

“Indeed. Shall we continue our exploration of Yoyogi, sir?”

According to the JDA’s updated website, a monster possessing Mining had already been identified, and verifications were underway.

“Would any country besides Japan be so lenient?” Curtis muttered to himself.

He then signed an order for the units remaining in Yoyogi to gather information on and obtain Mining.

Moscow, Russia, Central Administrative Okrug

Kurnikov shivered, feeling as though cold air had blasted him from the other side of the desk. A man with razor-sharp eyes—simply called The Director—looked over the report, which recalled Russia’s recent failures.

Six agents had been dispatched from the V Directorate of the Federal Security Service. According to the first unbelievable report, these agents had been knocked unconscious inside Yoyogi Dungeon. Later, foreign explorers had rescued them. At the time of their discovery, the agents had been completely disarmed, and thus no major problems had occurred. Following a simple questioning, they’d been released, later reporting to the Russian embassy.

The agents had no recollection of what had happened to them. In fact, the last man standing believed their downfall to have been the work of a demon. His comrades had disappeared one by one, and in the end, he had felt the lukewarm panting of death itself. At that moment, his consciousness had melted into darkness.

According to the next unbelievable report, five members of The Barrier—which belonged to the Foreign Intelligence Service—had been taken into Japanese police custody. In other words, they hadn’t even been in a position to commit suicide. However, because there had been no victims, the agents had simply been arrested for violating the Firearm and Sword Possession Control Law. On the surface, at least.

Seeing as Japan was a veritable paradise for spies, the agents wouldn't be charged with any serious crimes. But of course, their careers as intelligence operatives were over.

In the end, Russia had failed to thwart D-Powers. The result of this blunder appeared all too clearly in the report.

"Well then, *Comrade* Kurnikov," The Director began. "Are the translations on this website accurate?" [\(20\)](#)

Through sheer force of will, Kurnikov stayed the trembling in his hands. Nevertheless, he had no choice but to answer honestly. "The translations are mostly without error."

Due to unavoidable circumstances, an uneducated miner-turned-explorer named Ignat Severni had been forced to use Russia's copy of Otherworldly Language Comprehension. In the beginning, Ignat had required instruction in fundamental linguistic knowledge to become a competent translator. As a result, his work had been incredibly inefficient.

After receiving Kurnikov's explanation, The Director gazed at the webpage for RU22-0012. "In short, our homeland has completely lost its advantage?" he asked for confirmation.

As Kurnikov nodded, sweat pouring from his brow, The Director followed up with another blow.

"And after three months, what is our country's status on acquiring Mining?"

Even if the entire Dungeon Capturing Directorate searched for Mining, acquiring an unregistered skill orb from an indeterminate drop monster would take an unknown number of years. Regardless, Kurnikov couldn't make such a statement before The Director.

"W-We're currently performing diligent explorations with a focus on earth elemental monsters."

In other words, they hadn't even discovered what monster dropped Mining, much less acquired the orb.

The Director placed his elbows on the table, folded his hands together, and

looked up at Kurnikov while tapping his thumbs together. “Is Yoyogi a public dungeon?”

“Indeed it is, sir.”

“In that case, dispatch an exploration team to Yoyogi.”

If the information on the JDA website was accurate, then at the very least, a Mining drop monster existed in Yoyogi. Sending soldiers to Japan would be far more effective than having them raid a Russian dungeon that may not even have contained the drop monster.

“I’ll contact the JDA through the Russian Dungeon Association,” Kurnikov promised.

“Do so at once.”

“Of course, sir.”

Having said this, Kurnikov saluted and exited the room.

No ordinary person could stand against The V Directorate or The Barrier. Yet if both organizations had failed, spies and anti-personnel covert operatives were no match for these explorers. At least within the dungeons. If so, Russia would have no choice but to send a team of explorers itself.

The Director stood from his chair and looked down from his window, which was made from a special kind of infrared reflective glass. As people walked down the road, their countless footprints remained in the thin layer of snow.

In less than a week, Ded Moroz and Snegurochka would be walking around and handing out presents. [\(21\)](#) The Director would need to write a letter to them in order to receive the present he most desired.

Downing Street, England

In Trafalgar Square, four lion statues surrounded the sculpture of a naval hero who stood atop a high pillar, the cold rain dripping from his hat. His gaze pierced Westminster Palace, glaring in the direction of France. At the end of the naval hero’s gaze, a man from the Dungeon Department—which belonged to Defense Intelligence—popped the collar of his coat and crossed the road,

entering a building on Downing Street. Chief Mouser of the Cabinet Office Larry, the cat, sat by the window, having watched the man's approach through the drops of rain sliding down the glass.

The man gave his report while brushing water droplets off his coat. "I've confirmed that every inscription originating from our country has been translated as well."

"The States got their hands on a translator at the start of this month," the prime minister—master of Number 10—replied. "I applaud their speed, but why are they publishing the translations publicly rather than using a diplomatic paper?" [\(22\)](#)

"Well... America used their diplomatic channels to relay that they have no connection to these translations."

"Does that mean this is Russia's doing?"

The man from the Dungeon Department shook his head. "Unlikely."

For a while, only two sounds reverberated throughout the room. First was the air conditioner. Second was Larry chasing the water droplets flowing down the window, thumping them with his paws.

The prime minister paused to think before asking, "Then who did this?"

"By investigating the server and domain, we discovered the actual owner of the site to be one Azusa Miyoshi."

"And who is that? It sounds like a Japanese name."

"Yes, it is," the man from the Dungeon Department replied. "As I reported earlier, she's the manager of an auction house that deals in skill orbs."

"What? You're talking about the rumored orb hunter?"

"Indeed."

As soon as it had appeared, the skill orb auction house had captured the entire world's attention. At first, no state administrators had latched onto this profoundly dubious affair. However, because the JDA hadn't regulated the website, many concerned parties had paid close attention to the auctions, albeit skeptically. After all, the preservation of skill orbs would have a

revolutionary impact on the world. The ability to assign skills to the right people could become a huge advantage.

“And this time, she’s translated the inscriptions written in an otherworldly language?” the prime minister asked.

“To be honest, we don’t know if Azusa Miyoshi herself produced the translations.”

“Then did the States hack Russia’s classified information and release it to the public?”

“I don’t know for certain, but that seems unlikely.”

These new translations differed from Russia’s and—most likely—America’s as well. If this website had been an obvious sham, those two countries would have stayed silent on the matter.

“Did you look into this Azusa?” the prime minister pressed. “Does she seem to be an agent of some sort?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer...”

Her background had been easy to trace. Nothing had been hidden, and there were no suspicious points at all. Yet strangely enough, Azusa had begun making a name for herself as soon as she’d quit her job and acquired a DA commercial license.

The prime minister frowned. “Do you think she obtained some sort of special skill?”

“That would be the most easily digestible explanation, but I can’t imagine what the details of that skill would be. Also, these reports are still unconfirmed, but from what I’ve heard, she gave an extralegal Russian organization a taste of their own medicine.”

“A mere civilian managed that?”

“Yes, and there’s no indication that she’s under a Japanese organization’s protection.”

In response to this unbelievable report, the prime minister considered the matter for a little while. Then, seeming to regain his composure, he continued

his questioning. “And are the contents of this website—Heaven’s Leaks—true?”

In the end, this was all that truly mattered. For now, the translator’s identity had no bearing on the matter.

“These new translations matched Russia’s previously published documents almost perfectly,” answered the man from the Dungeon Department.

“What did the States say?”

“They’re still confirming things.”

The Dungeon Department employee used a guillotine cutter to remove the cap from his cigar, then lit it with a match. This particular cigar was named after a former, lionlike prime minister, who gazed spitefully from the back of a five-pound bill. [\(23\)](#) After placing the cigar in his mouth, he savored the mellow smoke, which reminded him of plain bread.

“Did you try forming a party with your D-Card as described on the website?” the prime minister asked.

“I did.”

“And what were the results?”

An awkward pause ensued. “It worked exactly as written.”

The man placed his cigar in an ashtray, pulled over a telephone, and raised the receiver. This telephone—shaped like a monolith—was a far cry from a smartphone.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Entrance

That day, Simon stopped me before the entrance of Yoyogi Dungeon. “Hey, Yoshimura, think you crossed the line there?”

“Huh?” I responded.

“Don’t play dumb with me. I’m talking about Heaven’s Leaks.”

“What makes you think we’re connected?”

“Are you kidding me? Azusa is the domain owner, right?”

Miyoshi wouldn't have acquired the domain under her real name. The Whois information must have shown up as a third-party company acting as a proxy.

[\(24\)](#)

"These days, resellers offer domain name registrations, right?" I asked. *"So what makes you so sure we're involved?"*

While speaking, I glared at Simon from the corner of my eye. Rather than responding to my question, he merely snorted, his expression prompting me to continue speaking.

"I want to be clear," I said. *"We're just renting out the domain space."*

"Is that right?"

"Does America even care who created the site in the first place?"

You could never predict who would acquire a skill orb at what time. Even in the case of Otherworldly Language Comprehension, America couldn't just walk around massacring whoever acquired it. Furthermore, someone else obtaining the orb and eventually publishing their own translations would have factored into their calculations.

"You think we don't care?" Simon retorted, his expression testing my resolve. *"After spending 3.7 billion dollars on it?"*

I responded with a small shrug. *"After winning the auction through international cooperation, the United States isn't planning on monopolizing the information, right?"*

America had wanted the language orb as a means of verifying the authenticity of translated information for themselves. If they'd planned on keeping the details secret and reaping all the benefits, they wouldn't have formed an alliance with other nations. By overextending the national budget, they could have afforded the orb by themselves, after all.

Simon accepted my counterargument all too easily. *"Yeah, I suppose not. Truth be told, we don't plan on raising any objections, regardless of whoever published the translations. For those of us who work in the field, it barely even matters."* After a short pause, he donned a serious expression and added, *"At least, that should have been the case."*

“Then not everyone in the United States agrees with each other?”

“A democracy allows for a wide range of opinions—that’s all I’m saying. But of course, the same could be said of any country in the world right now.”

Heaven’s Leaks had only revealed the existence of Mining. However, the JDA Information Bureau website—which had been updated on the same day—had an article suggesting that the orb had been found within Yoyogi Dungeon. And according to Naruse, they’d be publishing another article confirming the drop monster in the next few days.

In other words, the JDA would be publishing this information before acquiring Mining for themselves. Seeing as Yoyogi was a public dungeon, this was yet another part of what made the JDA so incredible. On the surface, the government couldn’t complain, but I still worried about them being angry with Naruse and company.

“Japan’s generosity never ceases to amaze me,” Simon said. “Explorers from around the world are going to flock here all over again.”

“Shouldn’t everyone just wait for the drop monster’s announcement and then hunt it down in their own national dungeons?”

“Sure, but even if that monster exists in their own national dungeons, it won’t necessarily drop Mining, y’know.”

Orbs had low drop rates, after all. The desire to hunt for one where a drop had already been confirmed was just human nature. Perhaps it was similar to buying a lottery ticket from a place that had already sold a winner.

“Thanks to that, my team’s also gonna stick around in Yoyogi for a little while longer,” Simon revealed.

Having said this, he saluted, winked at me, and returned to where his companions were waiting.

Washington, DC, United States of America

In the Oval Office of the West Wing, the leader of the world’s most powerful country sat at his desk, which had been constructed from the wood of a ship

that had gone missing and then been rediscovered. After confirming that the translated inscriptions contained no information about The Ring, he let out a sigh of relief. If the dungeons had capriciously written about that incident, he would have needed to brace himself for worldwide criticism. If possible, he wanted to avoid that.

At least until his term was over.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

It was still morning on the day Heaven's Leaks had rocked the world, and a beautiful girl with brown skin stood at the entrance of our office, smiling cheerfully.

"Hi there, Kaygo," Asha greeted me.

"Long time no see," I replied. *"Been feeling well?"*

"Ever since I had an enchantment cast upon me in Japan, I've been feeling amazing. Lately, every day's been a blast."

"That's great to hear. Come on in."

When Asha took off her shoes and entered the office, Miyoshi led her to the sofa and asked, *"How long will you be in Japan?"*

"Probably until the twenty-ninth," Asha replied. *"I'd like to stay longer, but if I don't spend New Year's with the family, my dad will kill me."*

"Huh?" Miyoshi cocked her head. *"Isn't Diwali the Hindu New Year?"*

"What's Diwali?" I asked.

Miyoshi sighed. *"How do you not know that, Kei? There's an event every year in Yokohama."*

"That's because Yokohama and Mumbai are sister cities," Asha added.

I nodded. *"Oh, I see. But since I used to spend the entire year in the office, that world is completely unknown to me. Ha ha ha... I'm going to make myself cry."*

"Don't be such a downer," Miyoshi chastised me. *"But anyway, it's a religious festival."*

“Similar to Christmas?”

“Something like that. But even in Hinduism alone, Diwali has a number of origins.”

Fundamentally, Diwali was associated with Lakshmi, but depending on the region, it could also be associated with Kali. Yet no matter where you went, the underlying meaning of the festival—the victory of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance—didn’t change. And apparently, the fourth day of the festival fell on what was considered to be New Year’s in India.

“But since India is a former British colony, the Western New Year is also celebrated in our country,” Asha said. *“Especially in my hometown of Mumbai.”*

Based on her explanation, Diwali took center stage in northern India, but seeing as the holiday was a Hindu festival, the Mumbai celebrations were grandiose as well.

“In the past, we had a lot of trouble with fireworks and firecrackers,” Asha continued. *“But not too long ago, the government started cracking down on them.”*

Last year, the Supreme Court of India had banned the sale of firecrackers during Diwali. Originally, this regulation had been enacted under the pretense of preventing air pollution, but from the sound of things, a fierce tug-of-war was occurring within the industrial spheres.

“Firecrackers and fireworks cause air pollution?” I asked.

Asha nodded. *“Well, that’s just a reflection of how many of them were being used.”*

“Incredible.”

I couldn’t even imagine the number of fireworks that would be required for such a feat.

“So anyway, I’ll be here until the end of the twenty-ninth,” Asha reiterated.

“In that case, we’ll take you somewhere special on that day!” Miyoshi cried.

Having heard no mention of this previously, I furrowed my brow.

“‘Somewhere special’?”

Nine times out of ten, Miyoshi was planning on doing something outrageous when she spoke like this.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she shot back with a smile. “I’ve got everything under control.”

You’re only causing my anxiety to spike even higher...

“Still,” Miyoshi said, “I’m surprised your Papa Bear is allowing you to visit us by yourself.”

“Well, it’s about time he let me leave the nest,” Asha replied.

You think he’s capable of that?

“So where are you staying?” Miyoshi asked.

“I booked a room at The Ritz, but as for today—” Asha cut off, glancing at Miyoshi with upturned eyes.

Miyoshi nodded with a bemused smile. *“All right, you can stay with us for tonight, but don’t expect the kind of service you’d get at The Ritz.”*

“Oh my gosh, you’re the best, Azusa! I’ve never spent the night at a friend’s house before.”

I didn’t know precisely when Asha had been injured. However, her accident having occurred before secondary school would make sense, seeing as she’d been shut up indoors since then. [\(25\)](#) In the worst-case scenario, at-home tutors could handle a person’s education, but the same couldn’t be said of interacting with friends.

At any rate, Asha had come all this way to Japan. We would have to show her a good time over the next few days.

“Speaking of which, do you two know about Altum Foraminis?” Asha asked.

“‘Altum Foraminis’?” I repeated, furrowing my brow. Hearing this strangely named religious order from Asha’s lips had completely caught me off guard. “As in the cult rumored to have a holy woman who’s going around healing famous people?”

“That’s the one,” Asha confirmed. “Do you know much about them?”

Based on my previous conversation with Miyoshi, the cult of Altum Foraminis were a shrewd bunch. As I recalled, they used a religious organization as a front for managing their so-called holy woman's healing magic. All the while, they received protection from powerful people obsessed with the occult.

"When people asked my dad about my recovery, he would answer that a sorcerer had healed me to obfuscate the matter," Asha said. *"After all, it didn't seem like the two of you wanted to be famous."*

"A sorcerer?!" I cried.

Wait, didn't someone call me that before?

"Kei, Monica said that Simon called you a sorcerer, remember?" Miyoshi asked. *"Maybe—"*

"Asha's old man started the rumor?!" I finished in a shout. *"Is the whole world talking about me?"*

"Lately, the rumors have died down quite a bit," Asha explained, *"but for a time, it was the most popular discussion in high society."*

What are you doing to me, old man?!

"So what does this have to do with Altum Foraminis?" Miyoshi asked.

"Since I'm a key figure in this story, people asked me about the rumors fairly often," Asha answered. *"But of course, most people would just laugh at the mention of a sorcerer and move on to the next topic."*

"So it was something of a discussion opener for light and easy, high society conversation?"

"Something like that. Usually, people don't ask serious questions at those kinds of parties, where people are introducing themselves and asking after each other's well-being. But at times, some of these people were rudely inquisitive about the events in Tokyo. Each and every one of them was—"

"Related to the cult?" I deduced.

Within any group, people without social decorum would be ostracized. Moreover, ostracization from this group would lead to losing business with the European Union's upper class. As such, acting in this manner struck me as quite

bizarre.



“To sum things up, those people wanted to know who cast the enchantment on me,” Asha finished.

Apparently they’d been very interested in us, their attitudes overzealous and creepy.

“And originally, Altum Foraminis had planned on visiting North America after Europe,” Asha continued. *“But those plans suddenly changed to Tokyo.”*

I didn’t know Asha’s source, but perhaps she’d learned of the cult’s movements through the information network of high-society discourse.

Guess those parties aren’t just a waste of money.

“Did you come all the way to Japan with your dad just to tell us this?” I asked.

“I really wanted to hang out with you two as well,” Asha replied bashfully. *“And on that note, I’ll go check out of my hotel right away!”*

Turning around, she raced towards the front door. Moments later, a luxury car—painted black—appeared as if from nowhere and stopped before the gate. After hopping into the back seat, Asha waved goodbye to us.

While admiring the vehicle’s deftness, I turned towards Miyoshi with an amused smile. “Was that car waiting somewhere on standby?”

“Kei. Asha’s bodyguards have been surrounding us for a while now.”

“Seriously?”

“They’re like a whole group of Agent Smiths,” Miyoshi smirked.

“If Ahmed is still helicopter parenting even in a relatively safe country like Japan, Asha won’t be able to leave the nest any time soon.”

“That’s a father’s love for you.”

“Yeah, but that old man is way too clingy,” I protested. “Think he’ll get into fights with anyone who bumps into Asha?”

“No, he’s probably not hovering around us that closely. And those bodyguards might be civilians, but they’re probably cooperating with the British agents.”

“Oh, right. Like that butler guy.”

I remembered the man from our first meeting with Asha. In addition to sticking to Ahmed's side like a butler, he'd also worn an expensive suit and had appeared to be with the British military.

"So," I said, "aside from your special plans on the twenty-ninth, what do you plan on doing today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow?"

"Let's see. Considering Asha's social standing, she's probably eaten plenty of gourmet food. For today, let's let her enjoy Chef Yoshimura's cooking while she rests from the flight."

"Uh, Chef who?"

Ignoring my quip, Miyoshi continued speaking. "As for foreigner-friendly tourist attractions, there's Ryogoku Sumo Hall, Kabuki-za Theater, Kaminarimon Gate, and the Tsukiji fish market. Wait, the Tsukiji fish market closed down. It's the Toyosu Market now."

"Are the Ryogoku Sumo Hall or Kabuki-za Theater open this late in the year?"

Miyoshi's fingers danced across her keyboard. "Unfortunately, the Ryogoku Sumo Hall is only holding a Masashi Sada concert on New Year's Eve, and the Kabuki-za Theater's final December performance is today."

"None of those work then."

"Well, the Toyosu Market is always open."

"Still, the most you can do is eat at the touristy restaurant area," I pointed out. "Do you think Asha would have fun watching the tuna auction through a window on the second floor?"

"True. In Tsukiji, you could watch from the side, but in Toyosu, you can only peek through the second-story corridor."

Knowing that wouldn't be sufficient, Toyosu Market planned on building a spectator's deck, but it wouldn't be usable until next year.

"Then what about Senso-ji Temple?" Miyoshi suggested. "Usually, you can't see the dragon engravings on the bottom of Kaminarimon Gate in pictures."

"On a hectic day, there are more tourists on that street than locals. I was shocked when I passed by recently."

“From what I’ve heard, there are a lot of Westerners around Shinjuku Golden Gai these days too.”

“That place is full of bars, right?” I asked. “Isn’t Asha a minor?”

“When we last met, she was nineteen, but...I don’t know her birthday.”

“Please tell me that’s not foreshadowing.”

Miyoshi shook her head. “After everything we’ve said about Asha’s dad, do you think he’d leave her alone on her birthday?”

“Yeah, but he could barge in all of a sudden.”

“You’re not being funny, Kei.”

“Regardless of our opinions on Ahmed, he *is* an important figure in Indian financial circles,” I said. “Could you imagine him ditching his parties in Japan to come hang out with his daughter?”

Miyoshi and I paused to consider this.

“Yep, sure can,” I finally decided.

“It’s entirely possible,” Miyoshi agreed.

A terrifying thought crossed my mind. What if he’d rented out Disneyland at this unreasonable time of year?

Miyoshi waved away my foreshadowing, blatantly changing the conversation. “W-Well, shopping in a ritzy place like Ginza probably wouldn’t be a novel experience for her at all. Instead, why don’t we go to a young, fashionable place like Harajuku?”

“Are you familiar with Takeshita Street?” I asked. “Because I don’t know the first thing about it.”

“I only know about the restaurants in Ura-Harajuku.”

“In that case, you’re still more knowledgeable than me.”

Miyoshi donned a wistful expression. “I’ve always dreamed of eating at a certain crepe shop over there...”

“Why not turn that dream into a reality?”

“Would you have the courage to eat a meal there?”

I imagined myself—a man nearing thirty—nibbling on a crepe while surrounded by young women. Worst-case scenario, I would be at least ten years older than them.

Ugh, no one wants to see that.

“Yeah, that’ll be a hard pass from me,” I answered.

“Exactly!” Miyoshi cried.

“But wait, aren’t you still at a safe age?”

“Once you start overthinking things, you can’t stop. That must be how self-consciousness manifests.”

“Is that how it works?” I asked.

“Pretty much.”

Once you designated something as off-limits, it would remain as such unless your mind changed in some way. I guess this was similar.

“A-Anyway, why don’t we ask Asha what she wants to do when she gets back?” I suggested.

After postponing our decision, we began analyzing the access logs of Heaven’s Leaks, which were truly a sight to behold.

National Center for University Entrance Examinations, Komaba

Komaba Street originated from the side of the University of Tokyo’s Komaba Campus. Near the end of this street, there stood an imposing building. Tall hedges surrounded the structure, with security guards stationed at the front gate. Unless you went looking for the sign, you wouldn’t find it, as it had been placed in an inconspicuous location surrounded by trees. Nevertheless, it read “National Center for University Entrance Examinations.”

After greeting the security guards, a man passed through the gate and jogged up to another man somewhat farther ahead of him.

“Good morning,” the first man said.

“Oh, good morning,” the other man replied.

As the two men walked alongside each other, they immediately began discussing the uproar that had started yesterday.

“Did you hear the news about D-Cards?”

“Indeed. The First Business Division received quite a few inquiries about them in just one day.”

If multiple people formed a party using D-Cards, they would be able to use telepathy. At first glance, this sounded ridiculous, yet by all accounts, it appeared to be true. In short, if one excellent student belonged to a party, every member could cheat to their heart’s content. For the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, this news had been a true bombshell.

“Inquiries?”

“Most of them were asking how we plan to prevent cheating. Mainly, people wanted to know how procedures would be updated to implement new countermeasures. However, a lot of people were also worried that if we *don’t* have any countermeasures, examinees without D-Cards will be at a clear disadvantage.”

“Countermeasures, eh? If we can’t come up with any plans, some entrance exam cram schools will probably use telepathy systematically.”

“It won’t just be the prep schools. High school friend groups will probably do the same thing as well.”

“And it’s not like we can just adjust scores to account for telepathy.”

“Even if this year’s National Center Tests are held on the latest possible date, it would be impossible to set up countermeasures now, right?”

Currently, no one even knew what kind of countermeasure would be effective. Furthermore, this matter would affect the secondary exams as well.

The National Center for University Entrance Examinations primarily administered tests, but they had another important job: conducting research surveys aimed at improving selection methods for university entrants. If they stood by and did nothing, their very reason for existence could be called into

question.

“Supposedly, telepathy can only reach twenty meters. What if we sat everyone that far apart?”

“When examinees apply to take the test, their seat numbers are issued sequentially, so guiding everyone to their place would be difficult. Plus, there are very few venues where we could separate eight people by twenty or more meters.”

When you considered child and grandchild parties, this was an even more unrealistic plan, but these men still didn’t know about those.

“If we notice a clearly abnormal score, why don’t we investigate it and penalize the examinee after the fact?”

“Sure, if we have information about the examinees’ seat numbers, we could compare scores to find out if cheating likely occurred. Still, these would only be suspicions, not solid evidence.”

“All that aside, this is a university entrance exam, not some regularly scheduled school test. Coming out on top is the whole point of these exams. Why would you let someone else take your high score?”

“Well, societal power dynamics could be involved. I don’t even want to consider this, but money could be a factor too.”

“In other words, a doctor might pay off a model student to help his idiot son pass the exam? That does seem all too plausible.”

“Paying off a model student would be far more reliable than trying to bribe your child directly into a university. It would also be harder to prove any sort of impropriety. Of course, this sort of scenario wouldn’t have much impact on the exam, as not many people would take part in it. Quite honestly, it’s not something we should get involved in.”

“I feel bad for the examinees, but so long as the cheating remains small in scale and we don’t notice anything, you’re probably right.”

These men were merely doing their jobs. Usually, they didn’t think about the individual students. Nevertheless, they would do their utmost to suppress any

discord that would lead to the public lambasting them.

“Even so, that line of thinking strikes me as a little too wishful.”

These were university entrance exams, after all. The results could very well influence the rest of one’s life. Who wouldn’t want to take advantage of an undetectable cheating method?

“Which department’s jurisdiction does this fall under, anyway?”

“Broadly, this concerns the business and general affairs departments.”

“General affairs?”

“On the other hand, if this turns into a joint research project with the JDA, it’ll fall under the people in charge of research support.”

“The secondary tests are only a month away. Should we be discussing something as easygoing as joint research?”

“Well, if we don’t start somewhere, we’ll never solve anything.”

“True enough,” one of the men said with a sigh. “Looks like things are going to get busy. So, what’s our first course of action?”

“I’m sure that inquiries are already being made at the JDA.”

“And now we’re just waiting for their response?”

“Pretty much. You never know—the JDA might already have a device that can detect telepathy. Even if no such technology exists, perhaps they could contrive a method to determine if someone owns a WDA card based on their address, name, and age.”

Even under better circumstances, this was a busy time of year, and now, a major problem had arisen. Feeling glum, the two men slumped their shoulders and entered the building.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Inside the Dungeon Management Section of the JDA’s Ichigaya headquarters, a single inquiry had reached Saiga.

“They want to identify D-Card holders?” the section chief asked.

“Yes,” his subordinate responded. “The National Center for University Entrance Examinations wants to know if there’s a method to determine if examinees are in possession of D-Cards.”

Considering the timing of their correspondence, this was no doubt concerning telepathy. Ever since news of the party system had been published yesterday, Saiga had anticipated this inquiry, and their initial contact time had been fast. Seeing as entrance exams were right around the corner, that made perfect sense.

“Understood,” Saiga replied. “After you pass this information along to the legal department and systems management, please reserve a meeting room for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Countless exams were held throughout the world. If no one devised a solution quickly, the whole social system of using exams to evaluate students would be in danger of collapsing. Directly after Heaven’s Leaks had gone public, everyone had anticipated this scenario, but the JDA hadn’t been able to apply any immediate countermeasures. After all, there was no section in charge of handling the influence of dungeons on society. At most, there was the public relations department, but this matter clearly differed from PR. Using a broad interpretation, it could be a sort of preventative legal issue, but fundamentally, that team existed to forestall employee scandals. That was the glaring implication, at least.

Saiga sighed. “One way or another, this matter was going to circle back around to us.”

Yes, he wanted the Dungeon Management Section to only oversee the dungeons themselves, but in reality, the management of explorers also fell under their purview. Quite conceivably, the telepathy issue could be an extension of that purview.

“Still,” Saiga muttered to himself. “Anticipating the influence of dungeons on society and keeping those effects to a minimum should be the job of the Dungeon Department, right?”

Three hours later, a meeting began in a small JDA conference room. There, the attendees would discuss if the substance of the National Center's request was actually possible. After Saiga's original conversation with his subordinate, the Ministry of Education and the Dungeon Department had also contacted him. As a result, all related departments were in attendance.

"Disclosing whether someone is a WDA member shouldn't be a problem," a member of the legal department said while viewing the documents in his hands. "When an organization other than the JDA manages a dungeon entrance, they require explorers to show their WDA Cards upon entry. Test taking could also conform to these same standards. But of course there's another problem—what should we do about the cost of responding to all these inquiries?"

After all, a large number of these inquiries would occur in a short period of time. Under ordinary circumstances, the JDA didn't have the capacity to deal with them.

Hearing this, a member of systems management raised his hand. "May I speak for a moment?" he asked, looking around at all the participants. "Just like all ID cards across the world, WDA IDs are used to manage registered people. As such, we can determine who the owner of an ID is, but conversely, determining whether a certain person actually owns a WDA ID would be quite difficult. In this case, we would probably be searching by name and date of birth, but if two people were identical in these respects, errors could arise."

Since the subject of these searches would be examinees, there would likely be quite a few individuals with the same birthday. If you considered the matter probabilistically, there would be over fifteen hundred examinees with the same birthday. And this number didn't even include those taking the test late or for a second time.

"If the address matches their name and date of birth, that's clearly the same person. But on the other hand, if their registered address and current address are different, we won't find a match. Of course, if there's an input error, we obviously won't find a match either."

A program could display all similar address data and run verifications based

on the individual, but from a privacy protection standpoint, creating that sort of UI was a horrible idea. Furthermore, if a registrant's personal information changed, they would have to notify the JDA. However, if a person forgot to do so, they wouldn't receive any sort of penalty. Rather, they simply wouldn't receive their postal items. Currently, the JDA only mailed the WDA license and its attachments to their members. Without a doubt, plenty of people had forgotten to update their address or chosen not to do so.

The systems management employee had folded his hands atop the table, twitching his fingers nervously. "As you can see, there are quite a few holes when trying to prove someone has a WDA license," he declared. "Moreover, having actual people check addresses at the test sites would be next to impossible. National Center test admission vouchers only contain a person's name, gender, birthday, and a photo of their face. Asking each examinee their address and entering it manually would be madness."

Depending on the venue, even the secondary exams could have more than forty-five hundred examinees. If addresses were verified manually and you supposed that each person took twenty seconds, this process would require a total of twenty-five hours. And to do this simultaneously at almost seven hundred locations across the country? Just thinking about the cost made everyone want to abandon this idea.

"Entering the examinee's test number would be the most realistic. Once the National Center has given us the keywords necessary for searches, I could imagine there being a system that queries the JDA."

"Is that legally acceptable? We would be directly obtaining personal information from the National Center without the individual updating their privacy agreement. Then we would be sending our information back to the National Center. Is that within our ability?"

The man from the legal department had been listening silently to the conversation, but when a subject concerning him arose, he lifted his hand and spoke. "In this case, the JDA would merely be answering whether an individual owns a WDA ID. As I mentioned at the outset of this meeting, that would currently be legal."

“Ideally, we could receive and answer all these inquiries when the exam’s application acceptance period has reached its deadline,” a system development employee said. “That way, the momentary system overload will disappear, and we can all throw our hands up in celebration.” At this, he shrugged in resignation. “But of course, if an examinee acquires a WDA card *after* the deadline, these measures would all be for naught.”

A student could acquire a D-Card just before the exam date when they believed the JDA to have finished answering inquiries. Such a trick would work at least once.

“But D-Cards are the real problem, right? There are people who own WDA IDs who don’t have D-Cards. Likewise, there might be a lot of people who own D-Cards but not WDA IDs.”

While this would prove problematic for the JDA, the WDA had been established after the appearance of dungeons. They couldn’t rule out the existence of such people. Nevertheless, the National Center wouldn’t demand investigations into these unique individuals, as they were—most likely—so few in number.

On the flip side, many more people had probably acquired a WDA ID and never defeated a monster. Using the method under consideration, it would be impossible to prove if someone had a WDA ID but no D-Card.

“Do we have no other choice but to trust the examinees to self-report?”

“If a later investigation reveals any falsehoods in their self-report, the student will be disqualified or have points deducted from their score. The National Center will have to create such a rule and make it well known to the public.”

“So in the end, on-site verifications will be too difficult?” Saiga asked, summarizing the discussion up until this point.

“I believe so. After preparing the service and API in advance, we’ll let the National Center’s computers directly carry out the inquiries of their own accord. As far as our response goes, that would be the most realistic, don’t you think?”

In other words, Saiga thought, the JDA would be saying, “We’ve provided you with a service counter. You can devise how to use it for yourself.”

“For a fixed period of time before the exams, we could also stop issuing WDA IDs to students taking the tests. But that’s about the most we could do to help.”

If investigations were conducted well before the test, this could prevent examinees from obtaining D-Cards after the National Center had sent their inquiries. Yet in the case of older adults taking the exams, they wouldn’t be able to prevent sending WDA IDs to these individuals on the basis of age. So long as the JDA couldn’t access the National Center’s application information, people would likely fall through the cracks. And even if the JDA *could* access this information, rejecting these individuals would be impossible if they registered with the JDA under a different address than the one used on their test application.

“Understood,” Saiga said. “Thank you for sharing your views, everyone. After my section has finalized all the details, I’ll send them to your various departments. If necessary, we will also launch a formal project. I look forward to working with all of you on that.”

With these words, the meeting was adjourned. While voicing their miscellaneous thoughts, the participants all left the conference room.

“Still, the day we’ve all been dreading has finally arrived,” someone noted.

“I suppose so,” another person agreed. “Despite science fiction and fantasy having become reality, our daily lives aren’t much different. Sad, isn’t it? But since our modern social system can’t respond to all these changes, we’re going to face a lot of troubles during the transition period.”

“At the very least, let’s hope that non-explorers don’t storm us with pitchforks and torches.”

“Don’t even joke about that. I’d rather not be burned alive as a scapegoat.”

No arguments there, Saiga thought while listening to this conversation with half an ear.

“If only we had something like D-Powers’ status-measuring device,” he muttered to himself. “Something that could produce results on the spot.”

Research on D-Cards hadn’t advanced very far. Once people had discovered how commonplace the materials were, formal research on them had stopped.

After all, the cards themselves were so fantastical that no one had ever found a good starting point. Furthermore, because they had so little use, and WDA licenses had become so widespread, the value of researching D-Cards had diminished. Yet with news of the party system, that research would likely start up again.

A device that could determine if someone owns a D-Card?

“Wait a second,” Saiga mumbled.

When Naruse had given her report on the status-measuring device earlier, she had mentioned something about a defect. Shooting to his feet, Saiga raced out of the conference room and into the lobby. He then took out his cell phone and called Naruse.

“Naruse speaking,” she answered.

“It’s Saiga.”

“Boss?”

“The other day, you mentioned D-Powers’ status-measuring device having a defect. Something about the measurement of non-explorers.”

“Yes. The device can’t measure the stats of people who don’t have a D-Card. It’s not really a defect. From what they’ve told me, people without D-Cards just don’t have stats.”

“That’s it!”

“Huh? What’s going on, Boss?”

“Oh, um, I’ll explain later,” Saiga said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Well, I’m glad to be of help. Talk to you later then.”

Saiga returned to his desk and began writing a document about the recent inquiries. Because this matter concerned D-Powers, he had no choice but to compose it himself. When he’d finished the document, the time for him to leave work had already passed.

“Speaking of which, D-Powers hardly ever looks at emails sent to their public address,” Saiga muttered to himself.

Thus, he sent the document to Naruse's address. If this worked out, D-Powers could very well become the saviors of society.

"But we only have a little over one month until the secondary exams."

However, even if this did work out, D-Powers would firmly oppose being called saviors. When Saiga imagined their displeased expressions, he broke out into a delighted smile.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Two hours later, Asha had checked out of her hotel and returned to our office.

"I'm back," she greeted us. "What were you two talking about?"

Miyoshi and I had just been discussing where to take Asha, but considering the time and everyone's current energy levels, going out right now would be painful.

"Actually, we were wondering if there's anywhere you'd like to visit in Japan," I said.

"Places I'd like to visit?" Asha repeated.

"Y'know, like Sky Tree, Toyosu, Ginza, or Kaminarimon Gate."

"Hmm... What about Akihabara?"

Wait, Akiba? How did I overlook that?

Miyoshi nodded. *"In a sense, Akiba is one of Tokyo's most famous tourist attractions."*

The world was a big place, but Akiba was probably the only location where you could find enormous banners of beautiful, two-dimensional girls proudly hanging from the sides of buildings. They seemed to have been greatly decreasing as of late though.

"Did you want to go to Radio Kaikan, Niku no Mansei Steakhouse, or UDX?" I asked.

"Or somewhere deeper like Junk Street?" Miyoshi suggested.

"I want to eat curry," Asha replied.

"Curry?" I asked for confirmation.

"I've heard that Akiba has the largest concentration of curry shops in Tokyo."

Indeed, there were a number of curry shops east and west of the train station. There were even more if you crossed the Kanda River to the south. I didn't know if this was the largest concentration in Tokyo though.

"Um, you know that Japanese and Indian curries are quite different, right?" I asked.

"As an Indian woman, I'm obligated to try out Japanese curry for myself!"

"Curry, eh...?"

"What?" Miyoshi asked. "Do you not like curry, Kei?"

"No, I like it just fine. Still, it's obvious when you're eating really bad curry, but it's not as obvious when you're eating really good curry."

"Oh, right. Curry is hard to rank."

I nodded. *"Honestly, I feel like all curry that isn't bad is relatively good."*

"No wonder it's a national dish."

"What are you two talking about?" Asha asked. "Was my idea no good?"

"No, we were just talking about where to get good curry," I replied. "Trying to decide which shop to visit."

"All of them, of course!"

"All of them? As in each and every shop?"

Nope, we'll never be able to eat that much curry in a million years. How many shops does she think there are?

"If you visited all the restaurants by yourself, you'd never be able to eat at all of them," Miyoshi said. "You'd obviously collapse after just two."

No arguments there, and Akiba has way more than ten curry shops.

"But I still want to try them all!" Asha cried.

Apparently, an online friend of Asha's—an American otaku—had instilled in her the wonders of Akiba's abundant curry. At the time, Asha had given up hope of ever going herself, but even then, she'd been somewhat jealous.

Grinning, Asha pointed to Miyoshi and me. *"And having the two of you with me is manna from heaven!"* [\(26\)](#)

No, she can't mean...

"You want the three of us to only order one plate at each shop?!" I cried.

We would never be able to visit every shop otherwise. If the owners ended up treating us to extra curry like we were the impoverished family in *One Bowl of Kakesoba*, we would meet an untimely end. Still, most of those owners would just see us as impeding their business.

"Kei," Miyoshi said. *"Since Hinduism is concerned with food cleanliness, wouldn't passing around a single plate be a bad idea?"*

Upon hearing this, Asha smiled. *"Our household is pretty lax about that."*

"In that case, everything should be fine so long as Asha takes the first bite," I said. *"Since the three of us will be sharing, we can't ask the restaurant to give us individual plates."*

"Let's secretly carry around our own spoons!" Asha cheered.

"Still, doesn't this strike you as obstructing business?" I asked Miyoshi in Japanese.

"If we go about this normally, that would be true, but—"

"You have an idea?"

"Yep, just leave it to me! I'm already working on a solution unique to Akiba!"

Huh? What's that supposed to be?

Her expression overflowing with confidence, Miyoshi hopped on the internet and began calling various places.

"What are you doing, Azusa?" Asha asked.

"I'm preparing a secret technique. One that will allow us to walk around and

order a single plate for three people."

Seeming impressed, Asha folded her hands in front of chest as if in prayer.
"Ah, secret Japanese arts."

"All right!" Miyoshi cried. *"What you're about to see are laser-cut stencil sheets, plain T-shirts, and hooded jackets!"* After returning with a mountain of supplies, Miyoshi removed them from her bag and handed them to us like presents. *"I also have acrylic paint, but this right here is our secret weapon! Ta-da!"*

With that, she took out a bottle of cloudy white, translucent liquid.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Fabric medium, naturally."

Mediums could be mixed with paints to give them various textures. When mixed with acrylic paint, fabric medium could be used as a cloth colorant. It improved how well the paint adhered to the cloth, and it prevented the color from fading in the wash.

"Here's what you do," Miyoshi said, affixing a stencil sheet to a T-shirt. She then colored in the pattern using a mixture of acrylic paint and fabric medium.
"And voila!"

She held up the T-shirt, which had the words "Curry Daiou" written on the chest in an extremely tacky Gothic font.

"Kaygo, Kaygo, what does it say?" Asha asked.

Oh, right. Asha can't read kanji.

"Umm," I hesitated. *"Something like Curry the Great, maybe?"*

"Kei, that makes it sound like there's a king named Curry," Miyoshi said.
"Wouldn't it be 'The Great King of Curry'?"

"But wouldn't that be 'Curry no Ou-sama'?" After saying this, I turned back to Asha and resumed speaking in English. *"Umm, it says Curry Daiou, which means...a king who loves curry, I guess?"*

"Oh, Curry Daiou!" Asha cheered.

"Still, you didn't forget that kings are men, right?" I asked Miyoshi.

"Of course not."

Miyoshi painted the next T-shirt with the words "Curry no Oujo-sama."

"What does this one say?" Asha asked.

"None other than a princess who loves curry," Miyoshi replied.

"Any Japanese person would read that as 'princess of the kingdom of curry,'" I interjected. "And isn't that the name of a manga?"

"I'm giving the people a little taste of Akiba!"

"Well, please stop doing that. It's going to invite misunderstandings."

Upon hearing this, Asha began cheering, *"Taste of Akiba! Woohoo!"*

"So...your plan is to walk around eating curry while wearing these shirts?" I asked.

I didn't think this alone would justify giving three people one plate.

"Nope, there's more," Miyoshi answered. "Here's the finishing touch!"

She then placed a very thin stencil to the back of one of the hooded jackets, coloring in the pattern. Once finished, the jacket read, "My Prayer: Akiba Curry Pilgrimage."

"I've definitely seen a similar jacket somewhere before," I remarked. [\(27\)](#)

"People who live in Akiba love events," Miyoshi added. "I'm telling you—this will satisfy everyone. And if we take off the jackets in the afternoon, everyone will see them as some sort of joke."

"Still... This is so embarrassing that I might sneak off into a corner with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and start mumbling to myself, 'He he he... I have no interest in festivals. I'm the sort of man who likes to eat by himself in silence.'"

"If you wear sunglasses to hide your face, it should be okay."

Let me get this straight. Two people—one of them a suspicious-looking man in

sunglasses—are going to lead a beautiful Indian girl around Akiba? While wearing these jackets with that ridiculous phrase? And we’re only going to order one plate for three people?

“This is definitely going to blow up on social media,” I said.

“Kaygo, Kaygo!” Asha called out to me. *“Is it okay if I wear this?”*

Miyoshi nodded. *“It’s perfect!”*

“You think so...?” I asked.

West Shinjuku

While heading home from a patent attorney’s office in West Shinjuku, Miharuru Naruse received an email.

As a whole, the WDA managed intellectual property rights associated with dungeons. Within various countries, they cooperated with agencies similar to Japan’s Patent Office. Nevertheless, Miyoshi had asked Miharuru to look into the details of the formalities.

“Huh...?”

Miharuru had opened the email in a location where she wouldn’t block foot traffic on the sidewalk. “Could you ask D-Powers to create a device capable of determining if someone has a D-Card?” Saiga had written, also emphasizing the JDA’s schedule.

“And he wants it done by this year’s college entrance exams?!”

Though Miharuru found this schedule ridiculous, Saiga had written at the end, “I’m leaving everything in your hands, so please, do whatever you can to convince them!”

“Um, whatever I can...?”

Even after brief consideration, Miharuru knew this schedule wouldn’t be possible. D-Powers still hadn’t applied for intellectual property rights concerning the status-measuring device. After all, she had *just* visited the patent attorney in order to research the legal process of doing just that. If D-

Powers manufactured the device according to this schedule, it would be out on the market before their intellectual property rights were recognized.

“They’ll never go for that.”

Even so, this was her job. Sighing in resignation, she boarded a taxi that was just passing by, asking the driver to take her to the Yoyogi-Hachiman intersection.

December 27, 2018 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Upon descending the stairs into the office that day, I found Miyoshi sitting in front of the computer, arms crossed and wearing a grave expression.

“Morning,” I said. “You’re up early.”

“Good morning. Yeah, I guess so.”

“Where’s Asha?”

“Still sleeping,” Miyoshi replied. “She must have been tired.”

“Well, the curry shops in Akiba don’t open until around noon anyway.”

“Change of subject, but what do you think of the matter that Naruse brought to us yesterday?”

“Oh, about the D-Card verifier?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

“What do I think, huh? Development aside, is it even physically possible to manufacture the number needed?”

Miyoshi shook her head. “Providing devices for one portion of the test sites might be possible, but doing so for the entire National Center? That would be incredibly difficult.”

The National Center had around seven hundred test sites across Japan. Furthermore, the number of examinees at each venue ranged from one hundred to over four thousand, excluding the Braille test centers.

“There are going to be over five hundred seventy thousand examinees,” Miyoshi continued. “Assuming one device per one hundred people, we would need to manufacture fifty-seven hundred units.”

“Next year’s National Center exams will be on January 19 and 20. Considering the distribution and preparation of the devices, we would only have around two weeks for production.”

“You’re not even factoring New Year’s into the equation? Doesn’t that remind you of a certain company we used to work for?”

“Wait, isn’t it normal to ignore holidays during an emergency?!” I cried.

“Not at all—especially for the Bon Festival and New Year’s. But anyway, what do you think about that time line?”

“Since we don’t know how long the manufacturing process will take, it would be safer not to accept this request.”

Even the JDA must have known they were asking for the impossible.

Miyoshi nodded. “Normally, I’d agree with you one hundred percent.”

Normally? That’s a suggestive way of phrasing things.

“This is our next problem,” Miyoshi continued. “What do you think?”

As I approached her seat, I noticed email software being displayed on the monitor. In a single day, or perhaps from late last night until this morning, she had received over five hundred emails.

“Is that all spam?” I asked. “Just filter and delete all of it.”

“I already did that.”

“Seriously?”

“In other words, these messages all came from a legitimate mail server,” Miyoshi explained. “Also, I received them on our party account, which is tied to my commercial license. This isn’t even a public email address, by the way.”

“What does that all mean?”

“Basically, all important notifications come to this account, so unlike my random free address, I can’t just ignore them. But more importantly, this

couldn't have been a dictionary attack, seeing as this email address is a string of mostly meaningless characters."

In summary, no one could have sent these emails without knowing Miyoshi's address, and all of them required looking over.

"So, what are the messages about?" I asked.

"Who knows? The senders couldn't even write a proper subject line!"

Half the subject lines were meaningless phrases such as "Hello" and "Nice to Meet You." The ones titled "Inquiry" were marginally better, but still meaningless.

Miyoshi glared at the monitor with a sulky expression. "People who confuse the first line of their email with the subject line are all a bunch of idiots."

"Slow your roll, Miyoshi. That kind of controversial statement could start riots."

Despite having said this with an amused smile, I understood the feeling all too well. Whenever I had a large number of emails, I felt a powerful urge to delete all messages with these kinds of subject lines.

Also, around thirty percent of the emails had empty subject lines. Many smartphone mail apps weren't designed to let the user write a proper subject. Instead, they immediately jumped to the message input screen. If a person was forced to use this sort of app without any training, perhaps you couldn't blame them for skipping the subject line.

Another ten percent had simply written "Re:" in the subject line. These people had probably pressed the mailer's reply button and written their message.

"Do they not understand what 'reply' means?!" Miyoshi shouted, practically frothing at the mouth.

If Miyoshi had only received a few emails, she could have put up with or ignored them without a fuss. However, after being forced to deal with hundreds of messages, I couldn't fault her for going a little crazy. At the very least, those senders needed to prepare themselves for a long wait before Miyoshi dealt

with them.

After opening an email with a decent subject line, Miyoshi began mumbling to herself, “People who include long-winded seasonal greetings in their emails are a bunch of shitheads.”

Whoa, she’s pissed.

Since these seasonal greetings belonged to the mysterious realm of business etiquette, you simply had to shrug them off. Even so, I preferred when people summarized their greetings in a single paragraph so that you could skim past them.

“Is this why you looked so dour when I came down the stairs?” I asked.

“Yep,” Miyoshi answered. “Based on the subject lines and the few emails I’ve already read, they’re all inquiries about a device that could identify D-Card holders.”

“There’s something funny going on here, right? I mean, we didn’t hear about this from Naruse until late last night. Why are people coming to us directly? And isn’t this email address supposed to be private?”

“Information about us possibly having a D-Card verification device must have leaked from somewhere. Based on that alone, it could’ve been Midori’s lab, but if you consider the timing and my email address, the source of the leak was almost certainly the JDA.”

I frowned. “No way it could have been Naruse, right?”

“I don’t think so. After we forced her to use Otherworldly Language Comprehension, she’s in too deep.”

“Uh, in too deep...? But hold on a second.”

Logically, we should turn everyone down on this matter, I thought. But if universities from all across Japan are appealing to us, what can we do?

“Will you even be able to turn them down?” I asked.

“That’s the problem.”

From the other side’s point of view, we would look like people who had

willfully overlooked the collapse of society, no matter how well we argued our cause. After all, it would become known that we had possessed the means of salvation. In the worst-case scenario, we could end up being treated as the villains who'd destroyed society.

"Suppose the JDA anticipated an unfavorable answer from us," Miyoshi said. "If they leaked this information in such a way that we couldn't refuse, that person would have to be quite the tactician, don't you th—"

"Nope," I interrupted. "If someone actually did that, they would just be an idiot."

"Yeah, I guess so."

To be frank, having universities and the Ministry of Education hold grudges against us wouldn't bother Miyoshi or me in the slightest. More importantly, we weren't refusing to ever make D-Card verifiers—we just couldn't do so right away. Eventually, we would start manufacturing the technology. These had the potential to become a much larger business than the status-measuring devices, after all.

"Either way," I said, "whenever we *do* create the D-Card verifiers, the whole world will have no choice but to buy them, right?"

"I don't think anyone will be able to find an alternative solution that easily."

For starters, if there had been a feasible alternative with a realistic cost, we wouldn't have received this flood of emails.

"Having Naruse come cry to us would've been way more effective," Miyoshi observed. "Especially against you, Kei."

Wait, am I that much of a pushover...? Eh, probably.

"And truth be told, if we're only verifying someone's ownership of a D-Card, the device should have a relatively simple structure," Miyoshi noted. "All we have to consider is whether we can convolve the values of a particular sensor and fit them into a calculable range."

"So the problem is the number of devices we'd have to manufacture?"

"That's *one* problem, but we also probably wouldn't be able to file for and

obtain the dungeon patent on time. If we're forced into doing this, the product will come out before we can patent it."

"Huh?" I asked. "But so long as we apply for a patent, it should be effective for the first-developed product, right? Even if someone else creates a generic device, files for a patent, and raises an objection, our product came out first. In that case, there shouldn't be a problem."

"You're exactly right when it comes to patents, but aren't you worried about being accused of insider trading?"

"Come again?"

Suppose a person related to a company acquired information that could have a major influence on stock prices. Afterwards, that person proceeded to buy or sell those stocks before the information was made public. This would be an example of insider trading, which was an illegal act.

"First, consider the timing of the leak," Miyoshi began. "Now, consider how we're being forced to manufacture a product because that leak created a situation in which we practically can't refuse to do so. Doesn't that strike you as somewhat suspicious?"

"Yeah, it does seem a little *too* convenient."

"If this isn't a coincidence and someone is pulling the strings, wouldn't you be angry?"

"Huh? Well... If someone out there is playing us like a fiddle, and everything goes according to their plan, that would definitely grind my gears."

"Right?! I'd like to give them a taste of their own medicine!"

Looking at Miyoshi, who spoke boldly while grinning from ear to ear, I offered a silent prayer to no one in particular. *Please, let this all be a coincidence. Don't let this string-puller actually exist.*

"And while I'm at it, may we have world peace," I mumbled to myself.

In any case, we decided to hash out the details of this matter with Naruse later. But at least for now, we would ignore her email.

And so, while Miyoshi and I busied ourselves with this and that, Asha woke up

and came down the stairs.

“Morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” I replied. “Did you sleep well?”

“Sure did. What are we doing today?”

“Getting curry in Akiba, remember? We’ll walk around while wearing the cosplay we made yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah! I’ll go get ready!”

Later, the three of us set out in high spirits, but we soon discovered that most curries contained meat. And so, our voyage met troubled waters.

Yet on that day, we became the stars of Akiba.

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Message Board [Giving Away] Heaven's Leaks 1 [Dungeon Secrets]

1: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast ID:P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-0133

Plenty of strange things happen in the world.

For instance, can you believe that the information acquired through the use of a four-hundred-billion-yen orb is being published for free?

A Christmas present from God delivered on Christmas 2018.

Could this be real?! Only two people in the whole world can verify its authenticity.

To believe or not believe! In the end, that is your decision!

Next thread at 930.

2: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>1 Pog.

3: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

This thread is already up?

4: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Next thread at 930? We're gonna hit that in less than a minute.

5: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

I've done a quick read of the site. What's this about telepathy?

6: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>5 It's already been verified on places like reddit. Apparently, it's true.

7: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Does this mean everyone will need a D-Card just to function in society?

Without one, you'd be left out of your class's telepathy network. You might as well be told to go kill yourself.

8: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

But since the max number of party members is eight, it won't be possible to create huge formations like that, right?

9: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

There's talk of child parties.

10: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Child parties?

11: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Hold on a second. Does that mean parties can be created infinitely? Like the child of a child?

12: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

A new age has arrived! Everyone will be connected through telepathy!

13: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Considering the distance limit of twenty meters, that probably won't be possible lol

14: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Yeah, about that.

If not for the limited distance, someone could start whispering into your head in the middle of the night while you sleep. Yikes.

15: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Back in the day, school classrooms were 7 meters by 9 meters. Now, they're at least 9 meters by 10 meters. In that case, you could speak to the neighboring classroom.

Do things like walls matter?

16: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>15 From what I've heard, telepathy pretty much ignores barriers.

17: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Whoa, that's amazing.

18: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Other message boards were discussing the ins and outs of how this could be used to cheat on tests.

19: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Well, you'd still need at least one smart person in your party.

20: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

That's sort of like the internet. After one intelligent person's idea spreads like wildfire, it seems as though everyone is just as smart.

21: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Still, telepathy test takers—rather than proxy test takers—could probably make a killing...

22: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>21 That would be a crime.

Go to stupid jail BONK

23: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>21 Finding customers would be difficult. Plus, a telepathy test taker would need to place within the top 100 of the national mock exams to establish credibility.

24: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>21 A profession for the chosen ones!

25: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>21 You would probably make more money taking the exams every year than actually going to college lmao

26: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

If countermeasures aren't put in place soon, this'll turn into a major problem.

The National Center exams are next month, remember?

27: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

I bet examinees are dying to get their hands on D-Cards right about now lol

28: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

But only if they have coconspirators, right?

29: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Entrance exam cram schools could send in their applications together and have their seating numbers issued sequentially. That way, they would occupy an entire classroom.

What if a group of people aiming for elite universities gathered in one classroom and took the National Center exam as a team? Their scores would be unbelievable.

Something like this could happen all too easily.

30: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Practice courses for acquiring D-Cards are going to start popping up. Specifically, they'll be aimed at cram school students with the highest grades.

31: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Sorry to burst your bubble, but apparently, those courses already exist.

32: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Seriously?!

33: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Of course, these D-Card acquisition courses originally had nothing to do with exams, but in light of recent events, I feel as though the nuance around them is going to change overnight.

34: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Still, there aren't many high schoolers who have D-Cards *and* plan to take university entrance exams. Couldn't the JDA just prohibit them from acquiring D-Cards until January to prevent cheating?

35: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>34 How did you come to that conclusion? Their age?

Also, that solution would favor adults retaking their entrance exams. In reality, there's no perfect countermeasure.

36: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Couldn't the JDA just prohibit the acquisition of *all* D-Cards, not just for students?

37: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

What's to stop people from acquiring them in foreign countries? Plus, that would favor those who already have D-Cards.

38: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

So if the JDA prohibits high schoolers from acquiring D-Cards, the solution would be to fail the entrance exams your first year and retake them the next.

39: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Wow, that's...one hell of a solution. But after a year, won't there be some way to combat this?

40: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

How? You expect something that can determine a person's D-Card ownership status and party status to appear within the year? That's a little naive, don't you think?

41: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

In other words, this year's our big chance to take qualification tests like the bar exam!

42: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Wouldn't the inclusion of oral exams help prevent cheating?

43: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Short essays would be effective as well. Everyone can't just write the same thing, after all.

44: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Oh, and if you're sitting by the window, someone could give you the answers from outside!

45: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Uh, if someone was unfolding test materials within twenty meters of the exam site, that would be hella suspicious!

46: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Telepathy is pretty impactful and all, but Mining seems just as crazy.

47: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Yeah, but we still don't know what monster actually drops Mining. The real discussion will start once we have that information.

48: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

And the fiftieth level—where gold supposedly drops—is still a long way away.

Yoyogi has only been captured up to the twenty-first level, right?

49: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

But what minerals can we expect to drop?

If you obtained Mining and only hunted on the twentieth level, would you be able to turn a decent profit?

50: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

If the twentieth level dropped a precious metal, then sure, but the key word here is *mineral*. If the drop turned out to be iron ore, bringing it back to the surface would be a waste of time.

51. Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Iron ore roflmao

52: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Could the drop mineral be determined by some sort of loot box system? If so, the first person to cause a drop has a huge responsibility!

53: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

I for one shall quietly wait until forty-nine good people have acquired Mining in Yoyogi.

54: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

And when will that be...?

55: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>53 You think someone who sits around waiting could make it to the fiftieth level?

56: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Oh, heavens no! (:

But perhaps, someday, I shall! (:

57: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

orz

58: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Before all that, we need to find out what monster actually drops Mining...

59: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Ah, it seems so far away...

60: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Man, everything sucks and then you die.

61: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Putting aside Mining, which probably won't be acquired for some time, is this talk about food for real?

62: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Good question.

63: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Finally... Drops on the amateur levels! My excitement is immeasurable, and my day is perfected!

64: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Still, when will the number of explorers ever reach five hundred million...?

65: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Probably in an instant.

66: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Huh?

67: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

This topic blew up on Weibo. [\(28\)](#) China might be able to establish a system that forces all adults to register as explorers.

68: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

That was fast! The inscriptions have already been translated into Chinese?!

69: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

No, Heaven's Leaks has an English version.

It spread across the web through reddit in the blink of an eye.

70: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

What will the government do if there are no dungeons nearby? China only has one known dungeon, right...?

71: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Apparently, they're going to transport entire villages.

72: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Seriously?

73: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Think China will be able to take care of registering five hundred million explorers all by themselves? AAAAAH, FOOD DROPS!

74: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

True—China could probably reach that number without any help.

75: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

According to the discussions, India and Africa will probably follow suit.

76: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Wait, wait, wait. Only eighty or so dungeons have been found across the world, and currently, there are around one hundred million explorers, right? If those one hundred million people registered in the span of three years, that would mean over one thousand people acquired a D-Card in each dungeon every day.

77: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Well, those first days were truly something to behold. Every day in Yoyogi rivaled Comiket.

78: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Comiket has five hundred thousand attendees in three days. Based on the videos from three years ago that I've seen, Yoyogi definitely seemed to draw similar crowds.

79: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

In order to register four hundred million explorers across eighty dungeons, each dungeon would have to register five million people. If ten thousand people registered in each dungeon every day, it would take nearly two years to reach five hundred million.

Even if China tried to accomplish this by themselves, it would still take four hundred days if they registered one million people every day. And if they registered one

hundred thousand people every day, it would take eleven years.

80: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Indeed. Even if we have the denominator, time and efficiency are the real problems.

81: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

So basically, this will take one to two years, minimum, no matter how hard we exert ourselves?

82: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

I see. Either way, I'm starting to feel a little excited about amateur level drops.

83: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Yeah, I get that.

84: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Think explorers will be fired up about Mining for a little while then?

85: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Definitely.

86: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

We also need to talk about safe zones and safe levels.

87: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

If I found one of those, I'd want to set up a base immediately. Even though we don't know how large they might be.

88: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Huh? Is this one of those “early bird gets the worm” situations?

89: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

It seems like the JDA is going to announce rules related to land use.

90: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

But if you occupied the area before the announcement, that would be okay, right? Laws don’t apply retroactively in Japan.

91: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

That might be true in Japan, but dungeon interior bylaws fall under the jurisdiction of their country’s DA.

92: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Would modern nations and organizations retroactively apply bylaws...? Never mind, already know the answer to that one.

93: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Still, the safe zones and areas don’t appear until the thirty-second level. Yoyogi hasn’t been explored past the twenty-first level.

94: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

If Yoyogi’s lowest level turns out to be the thirty-first, I’m going to cry.

95: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Since the world’s top-ranked explorers have all gathered

here, Yoyogi's capture rate is probably going to start speeding up.

96: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

That had to do with Otherworldly Language Comprehension, right? Won't everyone head back to their own countries now?

97: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

>96 Maybe so

Team I of the SDF will have to give this their best shot!

98: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Expect others to do all the work for you, eh? LMAO

99: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

All that aside, who translated the inscriptions on Heaven's Leaks?

100: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

You're seriously asking that *now*?

101: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Speaking from common sense, it would have to be America or Russia.

102: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Neither of those countries would go through the trouble of publicly releasing this information on a dungeon domain.

103: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Even if America did release the translations publicly, they would use a .gov domain.

104: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Well, at the very least, it wasn't me.

105: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Me neither.

106: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Nor was it I, good sirs.

107: Anonymous Leak Enthusiast

Yeah, that's enough of this lol

December 29, 2018 (Saturday)

Koto City, Ariake

“Uh, Miyoshi,” I said, “in a sense, this might be an incredibly Japanese place, but is this *actually* the outing you decided on?”

As we exited the Rinkai Line station, the faint scent of seawater wafted through the air. At that moment, we encountered an oppressively large crowd of people.

“Kaygo, what’s going on?” Asha asked. *“There are people everywhere.”*

The convention wouldn’t open for a little while longer, but even so, a huge line of people had queued up before Yagura Bridge. There were enough attendees to make you wonder, “Where the hell did all these people come from?”

“This is Japan’s largest comic-related festival,” I answered.

“Wow.”

“That’s right,” Miyoshi chimed in. *“This is Comic Market—the pride of Japan and the holy land of otaku all across the world!”*[\(29\)](#)

Asha’s eyes sparkled. *“I don’t really understand, but that sounds amazing.”*

Miyoshi continued walking alongside the line of people. While casting a sidelong glance at the massive crowd, she turned left at the Washington Hotel.

“Hey, Miyoshi,” I said. “The back of the line is on the opposite side.”

“Don’t worry about that. I have a circle ticket.”

According to Miyoshi, our destination was circle entrance B of the east hall. Since Yagura Bridge would be blocked off a little farther ahead, we would have to continue from below.

“Isn’t this against the rules?” I asked.

Miyoshi shook her head. “Trading a circle ticket for money or something of equivalent value is prohibited, but I was given this as a gift. Also, I *do* plan on

helping out, so everything should be fine.”

“Oh, I see. Still, you have a lot of friends in unexpected places.”

“You can thank this particular circle for that. I suffered a lot of trauma at their hands.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Kei, there were tons of fanatics at my old university. If you gave them the slightest bit of attention, they’d trap you into hanging out with them for all eternity.” Miyoshi shook her head in an exasperated manner. “They even made me play video games with them. When I first saw their monitors, I couldn’t believe that fourteen-inch CRTs with 4:3 screens still existed.”

Oh, crap. What would she say if she saw the twenty-one-inch CRT with a 4:3 screen back in my old apartment?

Since I hadn’t turned the thing on in ages, I didn’t even know if it still worked. It was surprisingly difficult to dispose of an old TV in Tokyo.

“So anyway, my friends sent me on journeys to defeat Werdna and collect gold pieces with *Lode Runner*.” Miyoshi nodded emphatically, closing her eyes and crossing her arms. “Only underestimate fanatics at your own peril.”

“Sounds like you were quite the gamer,” I remarked. “I’ve never heard this before.”

“I haven’t played many games outside of that time period. This group of friends basically kidnapped me when they were recruiting for their club. By the time I finished *Wizardry* and *Lode Runner*, I couldn’t have escaped even if I’d tried. I never played fighting games or anything like that. But all things considered, it was relatively fun.”

Miyoshi’s smile twitched somewhat.

We continued down a relatively wide sidewalk alongside the Yurikamome overpass. Before long, a building with four upside-down pyramids forming a square came into view on our right. This was Tokyo Big Sight—Japan’s largest international exhibition center.

“For now, let’s say hello to the circle that gave me this ticket,” Miyoshi

decreed. "If we find the person we're looking for with them, all the better. But if she's not there, we'll have to search for her in the cosplay area. Afterwards, we'll just look around the convention with Asha and enjoy the atmosphere."

"You think she'll be able to enjoy it...?" I wondered.

"She looks fine to me."

As she walked, Asha was delightedly looking over a thick catalog.

Wait, she can't read kanji, right? Is she learning anything from that?

"There are this many people who draw comics?" Asha asked.

"Most of them are amateurs though," I replied.

"But nowadays, a lot of pros and companies also attend Comiket," Miyoshi added.

"That's amazing!" Asha cried. *"So once all these artists have gathered here, what do they do?"*

"Hmm," I mused. *"Sell the works they've self-published, I guess?"*

"Seriously? All these people create books themselves? On paper?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Wowzers!"

Though Asha seemed astonished by this, Japan might have been the country with the most individuals creating paper books. After some consideration, I couldn't think of any other countries that came even close.

"Currently, around seventy-five thousand books are published in Japan each year," Miyoshi said. *"But thirty-five thousand circles participate at each Comiket, which happens twice a year. If every circle puts out an average of one new work per convention, that number would rival the annual amount of traditionally published books."*

"That's amazing," I declared. Afterwards, I approached Miyoshi and spoke to her in a whisper. "By the way, what are Asha's bodyguards doing since we're entering the convention with a circle ticket?"

"No one is allowed to spend the night outside the convention center, but if

you line up at 4:30 a.m., you should be able to enter as one of the first groups,” Miyoshi explained. “That’s what I told them.”

“Four thirty in the morning?! That’s hours before the first train departs!”

“Apparently, there are a lot of other options, such as staying in one of the surrounding hotels.”

“Are any of the hotels around here available at this time of year?”

“Kei, those bodyguards are pros,” Miyoshi pointed out. “You don’t need to worry so much.”

“Yeah, but they’re basically professional *thugs*, right? I really don’t want them shaking someone down for a circle ticket, y’know?”

Miyoshi groaned. “Well, let’s pray that doesn’t happen.”

Obviously, the average Japanese person and foreign bodyguards wouldn’t have the same common sense. Based on what I’d seen, those guys would do anything to be near Asha.

“Umm, the genre code is 432,” Miyoshi said. “In that case, their booth should be in East Hall 3.” [\(30\)](#)

After getting through reception at nearly the last minute, we took our ticket stub and entered the east hall. There, I glimpsed men who looked like Asha’s bodyguards entering one at a time.

“Whoa, whoa, they’re already on standby?” I asked. “How the heck did they manage that?”

“I don’t think they entered with a circle ticket,” Miyoshi replied. “The preparatory committee or some other affiliated company must have let them through. Delivery or security, maybe?”

Yeah, the second one makes sense. These guys are security guards, after all. Even if they’re only guarding one person.

“Well, they’re not pros for nothing,” I acknowledged. “I have no idea how their minds work.”

Regardless, they hadn’t come here to buy books. So long as they were able to

enter, that solved all our problems.

“Oh, my friend’s over there,” Miyoshi announced.

She then ran over to a booth where a small goth woman with a short, one-length bob sat.

“It’s been too long, Miyabi,” Miyoshi greeted her friend. “Good thing the weather is so nice today.”

“Oh, Meowshi, you’re late! I’ve already finished setting up!” The woman named Miyabi stuck out her tongue slightly. “But since I’m not selling too many copies, I finished in a flash.”

“Sorry about that, but stop calling me *Meowshi*. Where’s Queen Shi, by the way?”

“As soon as we put out the display volumes, she ran off to the changing rooms,” Miyabi replied, shrugging as if this was a usual occurrence.

Normally, the cosplay changing rooms opened after 10:00 a.m. However, circle participants could use them from 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.

“Even though she’s a one-woman circle?” Miyoshi asked.

“Well, she asked me to combine our booths,” Miyabi answered.

“That girl never changes!”

“No kidding. So anyway, Meowshi, who’s the old man and this little hottie?”

“The old man is a senior employee from my old workplace, but right now we’re... What are we, exactly?”

Being called an old man caused my face to twitch, but I quickly regained composure and introduced myself.

“Something like colleagues,” I answered. “My name is Yoshimura. Thanks for the ticket.”

“Wow, you sound so adult! I’m Sae Tasuku—a friend of Meowshi’s from our university days.”

Since Miyoshi had called her Miyabi, I donned a curious expression, wondering which was her pen name.

“When we first met, I misread the kanji for Sae Tasuku as Miyabi Sasa,” Miyoshi explained. “Ever since then, she’s been Miyabi. But anyway, our friend here is a true Indian heiress. Her name is Asha.”

“My name is Asha,” she repeated in stilted Japanese. “It is nice to meet you.”

“Ooh,” Miyabi cooed. “You speak Japanese?”

“Yes, a little bit.”

“But she’s better at English,” I noted.

“Oh c’mon, don’t ask me to speak foreign languages.” At this, Miyabi puffed out her chest. “Japanese people need only speak Japanese!”

Even so, she began speaking to Asha in broken English. For some reason, a fair number of my countrymen and women would speak to foreigners in clumsy English, despite knowing that they understood Japanese.

“So, who’s Queen Shi?” I asked.

“A girl named Shiori Orihara,” Miyoshi replied. “She’s going to make a certain something for you.”

“A certain something...? Wait, is that why you brought me here?”

“Of course not. We’re just taking the opportunity while showing Asha around. But anyway, Queen Shi is incredibly talented. Await her finished product with bated breath.” Having said this, Miyoshi turned towards Miyabi, who was having an incomprehensible conversation with Asha. “So, is Queen Shi currently being surrounded by spectators in the garden?”

“Well, the event still hasn’t started,” Miyabi answered. “It’s still way too early for that. Since she hasn’t come back yet, she’s probably hanging out with her cosplay friends in the loading bay.”

“Got it. We’ll go look for her.”

“She’ll come back if you just wait. The booth inspection still hasn’t happened yet.”

Miyoshi shrugged. “Still, no point just standing around.”

“Asha,” I said. *“We need to go meet with a cosplayer right now. What do you*

want to do?”

Seeing as a few Agent Smiths had approached us, it was probably okay to let her roam free for a bit.

“Cosplay?” Asha repeated. *“I want to go with you! We have to make the most of the festival!”*

Miyoshi chuckled. *“The real festival hasn’t even started yet.”*

“Whoa,” Miyabi interjected. “You sound so intellectual speaking English. When did you get so fluent, Meowshi?!”

“Most of the latest scientific papers are written in English. Well then, we’ll see you in a little while.”

“Safe journeys!”

As we entered the cosplay area, the sheer number and variety of costumes surprised Asha.

“From what I’ve heard, we have these kinds of events in India too,” Asha revealed. “But none of them are nearly as big as this one.”

While looking around the venue, Asha dizzily walked from place to place, seeming fascinated. Since the horde of Smiths were sticking to her like white on rice, I decided to not worry and let her be.

“My goodness, is that Lady Azusa?” a woman asked. “It’s been too long.”

In response to this sudden greeting, Miyoshi and I both turned around. A tall, slender woman with a nice figure stood there. She wore a gothic dress—black and flamboyant—along with a pink wig.

Who’s this?

“Hey there, Queen Shi,” Miyoshi replied. “How’ve you been? And what are you wearing?”

“I remade Ultimate Madoka’s outfit into a gothic style,” Queen Shi responded with a mischievous giggle. “I chose black on purpose. You want me to use the 25th Anniversary Performance in London as the base for your request, right? This costume served as practice for that.”

“You even used a complex draping technique on the skirt. You never cease to amaze, Queen Shi.”

“Not to sing my own praises, but the costume itself is a work of art. The problem is...” Here, Queen Shi paused to mime sobbing. “No one can tell that I’m supposed to be Ultimate Madoka!”

“That’s because you look nothing like Madoka,” Miyoshi replied. “You need to cosplay as a more adult woman.”

“But cuteness is justice, y’know?”

“If you wanted to wear something black, you should have at least chosen Demon Homura.”

“Yes, but reworking that character design into a gothic dress would be a little too difficult.”

Wow, is this what it’s like to be on the receiving end of an incomprehensible conversation? Coming from Miyoshi, that’s pretty novel.

As I considered this, Queen Shi looked in my direction.

“So who’s this good chap?” she asked.

Uh, good chap?

“Oh, I’m Yoshimura. It’s nice to meet you.”

When Miyoshi nodded, Queen Shi approached me and started patting me down.

“Wh-What the hell?!” I yelped.

“My, my! You’re more solid than you look!”

“Hey, Miyoshi,” I whispered. “Is this girl okay?”

“She’s just taking measurements,” Miyoshi answered. “Be quiet and let her work.”

“If the genders were reversed here, this would definitely be grounds for a sexual harassment lawsuit.”

Once she’d “measured” me thoroughly, Queen Shi took out a notebook and

jotted something down with a pencil. Afterwards, she slammed the notebook shut, inhaled deeply, and stretched her back. “Phew!” she cried while looking up at the ceiling. “My creative juices are flowing! I was getting a little fed up with only working on anime clothes lately.”

Just then, Asha returned. She circled around Queen Shi, delightedly taking in her cosplay.

“Is this a friend of yours, Lady Azusa?” Queen Shi asked.

“Yep,” Miyoshi replied. “You could call her an Indian princess, I suppose.”

“My word! A princess, you say?”

“Yes!” Asha chimed in. “I’ve become the Queen of Curry!”

Asha was probably referring to the Princess of Curry she’d cosplayed as the day before yesterday. However, two things had gone awry. First, the Japanese words for “curry” and “boyfriend” sounded very similar. Second, she had mixed up the words for “princess” and “queen.” As a result, the meaning had transformed into something else entirely.

“Huh?” Queen Shi asked, looking in my direction. “You’ve become your boyfriend’s queen?”

Miyoshi snorted, holding her stomach and trying to suppress her laughter. Asha merely tilted her head, seeming curious about what was so funny.

“Um, Asha,” I said in English. *“She thinks you just announced having become my queen.”*

“*Seriously?!*” Asha’s face turned bright red, and she began waving her hands in a flurry. “Chigamasu!” she shouted, trying and failing to say, “That’s not right,” in Japanese. “Chigamasu, chigamasu!”

Using her finger to wipe a tear from her eye, Miyoshi turned towards Queen Shi. “Anyways, what are your current goals for the future?”

Queen Shi folded her arms and smiled somewhat morosely. “Sadly, I can’t be a cosplayer forever. The end of the Heisei Era seems like a good time for me to call it quits. Fortunately, I’ve been getting a lot of commissions, so I’m thinking about opening a clothing workshop that specializes in cosplay.”

“Huh? What about your corporate job?”

“Well, financially speaking, I can’t just up and quit right away.”

“In that case...” Miyoshi trailed off, looking in my direction.

After giving Miyoshi a small nod, I sent her a telepathic thought. *Just make sure the funds from our company can’t be traced back to us.*

Roger that, Miyoshi responded. *By the way, it’s almost lockdown time, so you should head back to Miyabi’s booth.*

Uh, lockdown time?

It’s something of a standby period before the festival opens. You won’t be able to move from your section.

Oh, got it.

Miyoshi invited Queen Shi to a corner of the area, and the two began discussing something. I couldn’t hear their conversation, but based on Queen Shi’s surprised expression, it was probably about an investment. However, since Queen Shi would be making a certain *something* for me, I’d be immediately exposed if we had financial ties. As such, we couldn’t use the same investment method as we had for Midori’s lab.

“Kaygo, Kaygo,” Asha called out to me. *“This event lasts for three days? Up until New Year’s Eve?”*

“Yeah, but apparently, the vendors switch out.”

“Seriously? All the people at these looooong lines of desks switch out?”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“Wow.”

Once the event had opened, Asha watched people flood the outer perimeter, dumbfounded. *“It’s kind of scary, isn’t it?”* she asked with a serious expression.

Indeed, this event could turn into a bloodbath immediately after opening. That being said...

I shrugged. *“It’s not much different from being chased by bulls, sliding down hills on huge logs, or chucking tomatoes and oranges at each other.”*

"I see. That is what festivals are like, I suppose."

"If you trace them back to their origins, the purpose of festivals was to offer thanks and prayers for a bountiful harvest."

But here at Comiket, the people harvested promotional items and lewd manga.

"Amazing," Asha marveled. *"So this is a modern Japanese festival, huh?"*

She then left to examine a nearby space.

"Kei," Miyoshi addressed me, having rejoined us, "it seems like Asha is getting wowed by all the wrong things. Does that not bother you?"

"Hey, foreign teppanyaki restaurants that claim to serve 'Japanese food' put on those weird performances, right? Just like those places, a little white lie won't hurt anyone, so long as you're having fun."

"You think so?"

While casting a sideways glance at Miyoshi's skeptical expression, I picked up a book from Miyabi's booth and began rifling through the pages.

"Pfft!"

Unable to contain a snort of laughter, I frantically returned the book to its original place. I then whispered into Miyoshi's ear, who was sitting down with a relaxed expression.

"Hey, Miyoshi. Is this area selling lewd manga targeted towards fujoshi?"

"That's pretty much all you'll find here."

"Seriously? Should we really be showing these—"

Before I could finish with "to Asha?" I heard her yelling a little farther up ahead.

"Wh-Wh-What the hell is this?!"

At that moment, a circle of space formed around Asha, and the Smiths began moving.

Even if she couldn't read kanji, a picture was worth a thousand words. How

would a sheltered rich girl react to seeing lewd fujoshi manga, exactly?

“Do I even need to guess?” I mumbled to myself.

“Looks like you’re already too late,” Miyoshi smirked.

Damn it, why is she acting like this is someone else’s problem?!

Slipping out of the circle booth, I dashed towards Asha. “*Don’t panic!*” I called out to her.

“K-Kaygo?” Asha responded. “*Wh-What the hell is this stuff?! I need to call my father and have him burn all these books at once!*”

As Asha’s face turned bright red, her legs wobbled, eyes rolling around in their sockets.

“*Slow down there, Asha!*” I shouted. “*This is culture! Yeah, culture!*”

“C-Culture?!”

“Y-Your country has books about sexual love too, right? Like, umm, the Kama Sutra, for instance!”

The *Kama Sutra* was a famous, classical Indian treatise on intimate love. Its second chapter described sex acts in stark detail, but according to the author, this wasn’t meant to stimulate lustful desires. However, from the perspective of our filthy modern minds, most of us couldn’t help but wonder, “Then what the hell is it supposed to do?”

“By *Vātsyāyana*?” Asha asked.

Miyoshi, I spoke telepathically. *Who’s Vātsyāyana?*

The author of the Kama Sutra, she replied.

“Th-That’s right,” I said out loud. “*India also has a lot of mithuna statues, right?*”

Mithuna basically referred to a couple making love. Thus, if you were to picture mithuna statues as lovers having sex in outrageous positions, you wouldn’t be wrong. That being said, there probably weren’t enough of these statues for my argument to be convincing.

“W-Well, when you put it that way...” Asha trailed off.

Yes, it worked!

When I glanced around the area, I found us standing in an open, circular space that resembled a stage. Each time someone tried to take a picture of us with their phone, the Smiths shook their heads, blocking these would-be photographers. If I had to guess, they'd come from places where you needed to be wary of gunfire. Dealing with these sorts of situations was probably second nature to them.

As we did this and that, Asha—who seemed to have calmed down—suddenly lifted her head. *“I-If this is culture, I suppose it’s excusable!”*

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh. *“That’s right.”*

“A-And I have a duty to study Japanese culture!”

“Um, what now?”

Though I couldn't possibly imagine what Asha would say next, a sense of dread came over me.

The sheltered young lady turning into a fujoshi, eh? Miyoshi spoke to me telepathically. *I’ve seen that one before.*

I grimaced. *Why are you treating this like it’s someone else’s prob—*

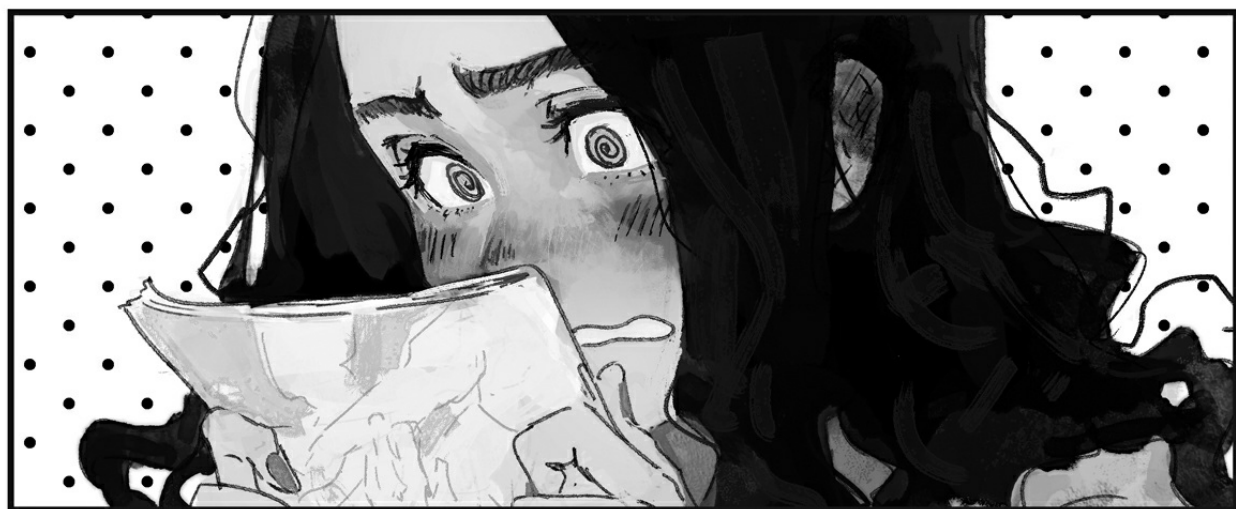
Asha pointed from one end of a desk to the other, barking an order to the Smiths. *“I-I want you to buy everything from here to there!”*

At that moment, a cheer rose from the spectators. Some of them must have understood English.

“What is she supposed to be, some kind of oil tycoon...?” I mumbled to myself.

As I watched Asha's collection of lewd manga rapidly piling up, I slumped my shoulders in dismay.

“Kei, this is bad,” Miyoshi said. “Asha is going home today, right? If she brings this many volumes with her, there's no way she'll be able to hide all of them. If her Papa Bear finds out that we introduced her to this sort of ‘culture,’ he'll murder us.”



Gah! I have to worry about that too?!

“M-Maybe we could send them to her later,” I suggested.

Miyoshi shook her head. “Take a good look at Asha right now. She’s not leaving without those books.”

“Ugh...”

I imagined a mountain of lewd manga being loaded onto a private jet. Of course, Asha’s father would check to see what they were. And what would his reaction be? The mere thought sent a shiver down my spine.

“Security checks on private jets are almost nonexistent, and the CIQ lets plenty of things slip through the cracks,” Miyoshi said. “There shouldn’t be any problems on that front, but if her Papa Bear finds them... How do you think he’ll react from a religious point of view?”

“No matter how lax her family might be... Even some Japanese people don’t understand this sort of thing,” I agreed. “Explaining this away as LGBT literature probably won’t work either.”

“It originates from yaoi, after all.” [\(31\)](#)

“Wait, what are the Hindu views on art and idolatry again?”

“Idolatry is forbidden in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam because of the events that happened in Exodus,” Miyoshi explained. “But since there are sculptures of gods in Hinduism, it can’t have been a problem.”

“Huh? Idolatry is forbidden in Christianity? Even though they have so many paintings, sculptures, and crosses?”

“Apparently, Protestant churches don’t have those things. On the other hand, Roman Catholics consider them ‘symbols,’ not ‘idols.’”

“For real?” I asked.

“According to their doctrine, if you’re viewing God Himself through a sculpture, that’s a ‘symbol’ and not an ‘idol.’”

“So it comes down to a matter of faith?”

"I guess so," Miyoshi agreed.

In that case, the majority of people who likely viewed those things as art were actually committing idolatry, which was a sin in Christianity. I almost began to worry about their number of adherents plummeting because of this.

Yeah, not my problem. But man, religion is way too complicated. I'm not cut out for it.

"Still, looking at works of art like the Sistine Chapel might make a believer even out of me," Miyoshi said.

Umm... Looking back, my first impression of the Sistine Chapel was "Wow, Adam's dick sure is tiny." But that's just how boys in lower elementary school are, right? Right?

"If we could create a faith-detecting device, do you think it would sell?" Miyoshi asked.

"That sort of tech would definitely wind up dead and buried in the darkness of history," I replied. "And how would we even detect something like faith?"

"What if the display just never showed anything? Religious people love to believe in things they can't see."

"Dangerous words, Miyoshi..."

"Kaygo, Kaygo!" Asha called out to me. *"I can't carry all these! Help meee!"*

"Wait, Asha. How many volumes did you buy?"

"I'm researching Japanese culture! What other choice do I have?!"

Of course, I couldn't possibly place them in Storage or Vault around all these people. Feeling resigned, I piled the books behind Queen Shi's space, seeing as she hadn't come back from cosplaying. Being only one half of one of the long desks allotted to circles, the space was pretty small. However, since her belongings were little more than a single cloak, there was plenty of room to spare. Around noon, people could start coming and going from the convention center as they pleased. When the time came, I would ask the Smiths waiting outside to carry these books to their car.

"Kei," Miyoshi said. "This has gone way beyond enjoying a teppanyaki

restaurant that claims to serve authentic food. I'm not taking responsibility for whatever happens."

I narrowed my eyes. "Uh, didn't *you* bring Asha here because you wanted to introduce her to 'modern Japanese culture'?"

"Either way, I'll take her fujoshi awakening over Big Sight being burned down any day."

"Yeah, no arguments there."

As I watched the Smiths buying up books, the sheer absurdity of this situation overcame me. Even the convention center itself felt out of the norm.

"In a place like this, those bodyguards just look like a group of cosplayers," I noted.

Miyoshi nodded. "Even though they're just men in black suits and sunglasses."

When things had finally settled down, I had Asha sit down behind Queen Shi's booth. I then decided to ask her something that had been bothering me. If this turned out to be a problem, her Papa Bear would probably kill me, after all.

"So anyways, Asha," I began. "*Speaking of culture, is Hinduism okay with BL?*"

I had seen mithuna statues depicting threesomes and foursomes but never just two men.

"*What's BL?*" Asha asked.

"*Umm, how should I phrase this? Homosexuality, I guess?*"

For some reason, I felt as though BL had a subtly different nuance, but I had no other word to describe it.

"*India has people like the hijra, so I don't think it's some huge taboo,*" Asha said. "*Regardless of how things might have been in the past, the Supreme Court ruled this summer that gay sex isn't a crime.*"

Originally, hijra had been intersex people, but nowadays, they were mostly men who dressed like women. Still, the Supreme Court of India was debating those issues?

“Interesting,” I said to Asha. I then turned towards Miyoshi and spoke in Japanese, “Looks like we might be in the clear.”

“In the clear?” she repeated. “Wait, what’s happening over there?”

Due to the men buying up all the books, people had begun treating Asha like the daughter of an oil tycoon. Before long, vendors from distant booths began approaching her with tributes of books. Of course, Asha happily bought all of them.

Hold on, does the word “tribute” imply a gift rather than a purchase?

In the end, Asha also bought all the remaining books from Miyabi and Queen Shi’s combined space, seeing as she’d caused them so much trouble. After receiving their signatures, she proclaimed with a truly satisfied expression, *“I’ll be back next time!”* She then hopped aboard the enormous station wagon that had come to pick her up, heading back to the hotel. The Smiths weren’t using a sedan or limousine because of the large volume of cardboard boxes they’d needed to load onto the vehicle. What a capable group of guys.

After seeing Asha off with exhausted smiles, we left Big Sight as well. Comiket was one of the most crowded places in the world. If anyone came here without the proper resolve, they’d wind up crushed to death.

Much to our amusement, the topic “Daughter of a Real Oil Tycoon?!” began flooding social media that night. Much to my surprise, speculations of Asha being the same “Princess of Curry” who had appeared in Akihabara also popped up.

“Those are terminally online people for you,” Miyoshi laughed.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Phew,” I sighed. “What an incredible place. I’m exhausted.”

“You sound like an old man, Kei,” Miyoshi chided me. “Everyone else goes there twice a year.”

“Exactly! What are they trying to prove?! And anyway, how are you supposed to walk around that huge venue in one day?! It’s impossible, goddamn it!”

“That’s why you walk around with a catalog in one hand, having planned a detailed strategy in advance.”

“Are we going to war or something...?”

Exhausted and terrified of the dispersing crowds, Miyoshi and I gave up on using public transportation. Instead, we decided to splurge, taking a cab home from Ariake.

“Huh?” I asked. “The lights are on in the office.”

“Naruse must be there.”

“Oh, yeah. With the translations finished and Asha coming to visit, we haven’t seen her in a while.”

Though we still needed to work out the details of the D-Card verifier, the JDA had gone on holiday for New Year’s. Even if we continued our preparations, they weren’t in a position to correspond with us. Uh, wasn’t everyone worried about this crisis leading to the collapse of society?

Miyoshi nodded. “While we hung out with Asha, I asked Naruse to research how we might register intellectual property rights for the stat-measuring device.”

“Wow, that’s our full-time supervisor for you,” I replied. “I wouldn’t have expected the Dungeon Management Section to oversee intellectual property rights, but they have their fingers in every pie.”

“Naruse’s become something of a personal concierge, hasn’t she?”

“Does that mean she can’t say no to whatever we ask?”

Miyoshi did a double take. “For a second there, I could’ve mistaken you for a horny old man.”

“Are you trying to kill me?!”

After stepping out of the taxi, we joked around while walking the short distance to our office. We then climbed up the porch and opened the door. However, I never would have imagined the horrors waiting for us inside.

“We’re home,” I said.

Naruse stood on the other side of the entryway with her head bowed, seeming ready to prostrate herself.

“I’m so sorry!” she cried out.

“Uh, what?” Miyoshi and I asked simultaneously.

That day, our party was forced to ascend to the next level.

Epilogue

Sometime Later

Jinnan, Shibuya City

In one corner of the NHK Broadcasting Center, a plump, bespectacled man tossed a business proposal printed on A4 paper onto a desk. “This is going to be difficult, Haru.”

“Why?” Haruki Yoshida—the self-proclaimed “dungeon researcher”—didn’t even look at the paper. Instead, he continued speaking while gesturing excitedly. “Ever since that inscription website went public, everyone’s been talking about telepathy, Mining, and safe zones. It’s finally here! The age of dungeons!”

Haruki had branded himself a *researcher* in an attempt to ride the dungeon craze. However, just as his business had started taking off, any mention of dungeons had disappeared from television.

Then, America’s Team Simon had cleared Evans Dungeon a few months ago. Thanks to this, a revival had seemed on the horizon. And just recently, the JDA had uploaded the incredible Wandering Manor video, which had packed a greater punch than a Hollywood movie. Similar videos would undoubtedly turn a profit. Haruki had tried requesting the help of the Wandering Manor’s filmmaker, but the JDA had turned him down, refusing to reveal their name.

The bespectacled man pointed to the proposal atop the desk. “Also, this would be better suited for commercial broadcast. It’s a bit too sensationalist for us. Why not bring this to Discovery or National Geographic? Or better yet—Netflix?”

“Those places require connections. If public broadcasting is a no-go, at least *introduce* me to those commercial broadcasters.”

“Hmm... Someone like Ishizuka at Central TV might produce this. *Hiroshi*

Kawaguchi's Expedition Team is having a popular revival right now. Have you tried thinking along those lines?"

"That was ten years ago," Haruki pointed out. "Also, you want this to be a variety show, not a documentary?"

"Dungeon documentaries don't draw numbers these days."

That's why I brought this to you, Haruki thought with gritted teeth.

Since public broadcasters operated through licensing fees, they didn't care as much about numbers as commercial broadcasters. Yet these days, news surrounding dungeons had very little value. Recently, the clearing of Evans Dungeon had been a hot topic, but nothing else had garnered attention. TV stations hardly ever reported on dungeon capturing progress or any new developments concerning drop items. Explorations often took a dark turn, after all. The simple lack of footage was another major problem, as a shortage of on-site recordings would lead to boring programming. The combination of all these factors had led to the current situation.

"And anyways, are there any high-level explorers who would say yes to such a difficult proposal?" the bespectacled man asked. "From what I've heard, they make plenty of money already. Convincing them to work for your benefit seems like a tall order. I mean, your ultimate goal is beyond the tenth level, right?"

Haruki nodded. "I already have my eye on someone in Yokohama for this job."

"Yokohama?"

"Indeed. He exclusively raided the loot box dungeons before they were regulated. Right now, he's a YouTuber, so he understands the value of exposure."

"Hmm," the bespectacled man mused. "Well, it would be nice if you could get a regular time slot."

"I'd be fine with a special to start out with."

"Either way, if you're going to bring this proposal to someone, you should create a pilot first."

"Of course," Haruki agreed.

“I don’t think a documentary will fly. You should start thinking of this in terms of a mockumentary.”

Mockumentaries were works of fiction made to look like documentaries. Haruki did his best to bottle up his resentment while listening to the bespectacled man’s unsolicited advice.

“Yes, of course,” he repeated.

Mumbai, India

Gulping, Asha flipped through the pages of a lewd manga. Just then, she heard someone walking down the corridor. Panicked, she hid the manga, opened the book she’d been reading until a few days ago, and began sipping tea while feigning a composed expression. Ahmed—who’d come to check on his daughter—knocked before entering her room. After greeting him with a smile, Asha decided to ask her knowledgeable father something that had been in her mind.

“Dad, dad, I have a question.”

“What is it, Asha?”

“Do you know what *topping all the bottoms in an all-out attack* means?”

“Topping all the bottoms...in an all-out attack?”

First part aside, “all-out attack” sounded like someone hastening to buy out a company in a takeover bid, even while a rival company tried to interfere. Confused, Ahmed glanced at the book his daughter was reading. It was *Fishes and Dragons* by Lithuanian author Undinė Radzevičiūtė, which had won the EU Prize for Literature in 2015.

Does that phrase really appear in Fishes and Dragons? Ahmed wondered. As he recalled, one of the parallel narratives featured a modern setting with women of three different generations living in an apartment. Perhaps the phrase appeared in this part of the story. The mother character was an erotic novelist, but Ahmed didn’t think this phrase had sexual connotations.

“I’ve never heard that full phrase,” Ahmed admitted, “but perhaps it means

launching a comprehensive assault in all directions.”

“All different directions?” Asha repeated.

“Indeed. In the case of corporate takeovers, it could refer to putting legal pressure on the other party’s bank and clients, leaking unfavorable information, and taking measures to successfully proceed with the buyout. What brought up this question?”

“Well, um, I heard that men like you top all the bottoms. In an all-out attack, that is.”

What does that mean?

“I suppose that’s the image I’ve cultivated,” Ahmed replied. “But when it comes to buying out businesses, I do my best to not show my horns.”

“Wow. That’s pretty cool, dad.”

Having said this, Asha stood up to brew her father tea.

“Where’s Soldea?” Ahmed asked.

Soldea was the maid who took care of the house.

“I wanted to be alone right now, so I just had her prepare the ingredients and tea set,” Asha answered.

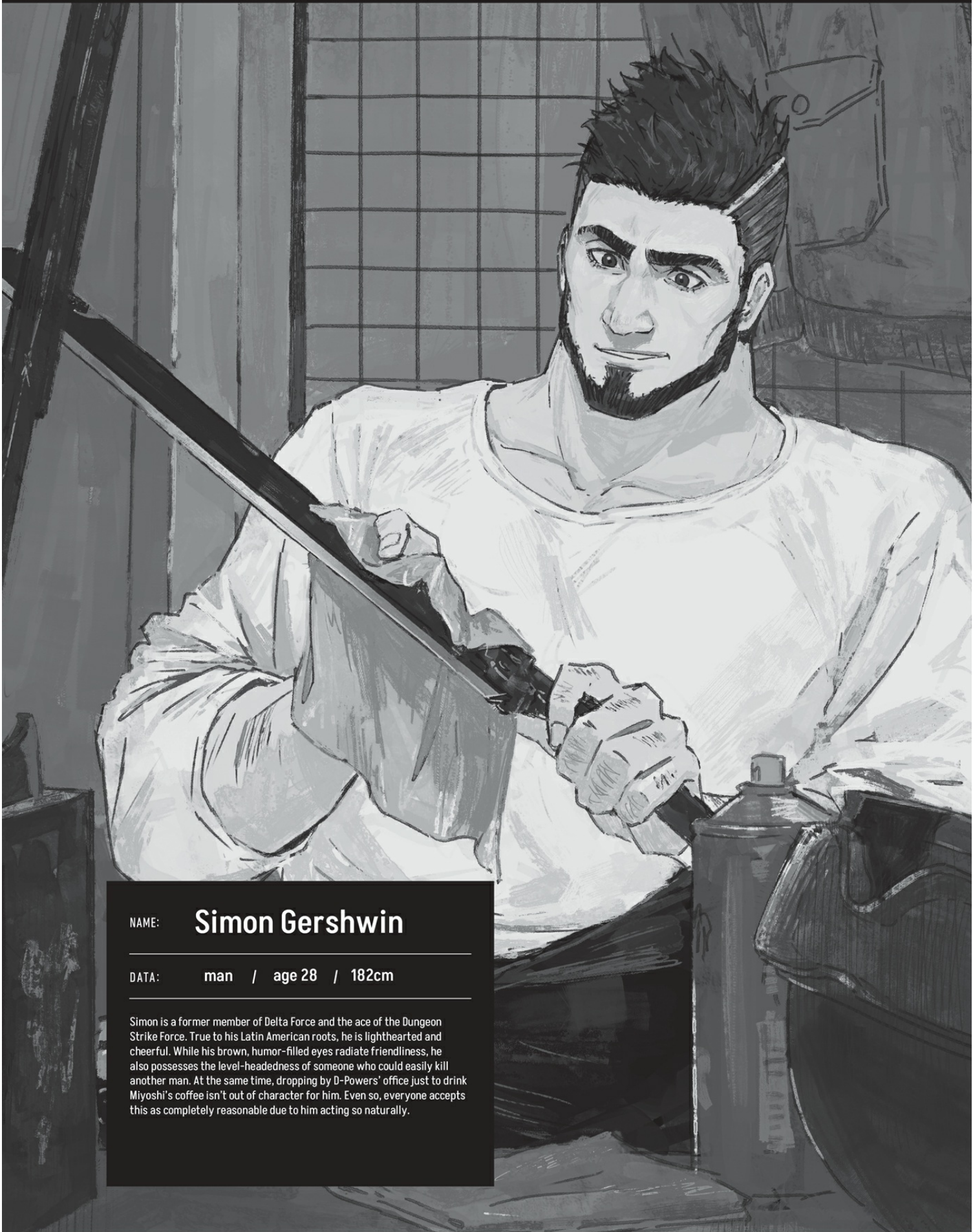
Ahmed nodded. “Does that mean you’re going to brew the tea for me yourself?” he asked with a delighted smile.

“Yes, although Soldea is a lot better at this than I am.”

“Even so, I’d rather drink your tea.”

Asha’s quiet laughter echoed throughout the room. “You’re too much, dad.”

That afternoon, gentle sunlight enveloped the Jain household, and it seemed as though this peaceful happiness would last forever. So long as Ahmed didn’t ask anyone what “topping all the bottoms” meant, at least.



NAME: **Simon Gershwin**

DATA: **man / age 28 / 182cm**

Simon is a former member of Delta Force and the ace of the Dungeon Strike Force. True to his Latin American roots, he is lighthearted and cheerful. While his brown, humor-filled eyes radiate friendliness, he also possesses the level-headedness of someone who could easily kill another man. At the same time, dropping by D-Powers' office just to drink Miyoshi's coffee isn't out of character for him. Even so, everyone accepts this as completely reasonable due to him acting so naturally.



NAME: **Joshua Rich**

DATA: **man / age 30 / 188cm**

Beneath his shrewd aura and unguarded smile, Joshua is Team Simon's exceptional scout. Despite giving off the somewhat listless air characteristic to wealthy men, he adopts a noble bearing when interacting with women. In fact, his dating history is so over the top that Natalie often teases him about it. Though Joshua comes from a well-to-do family, he managed to become a decent adult while still doing whatever he pleased.



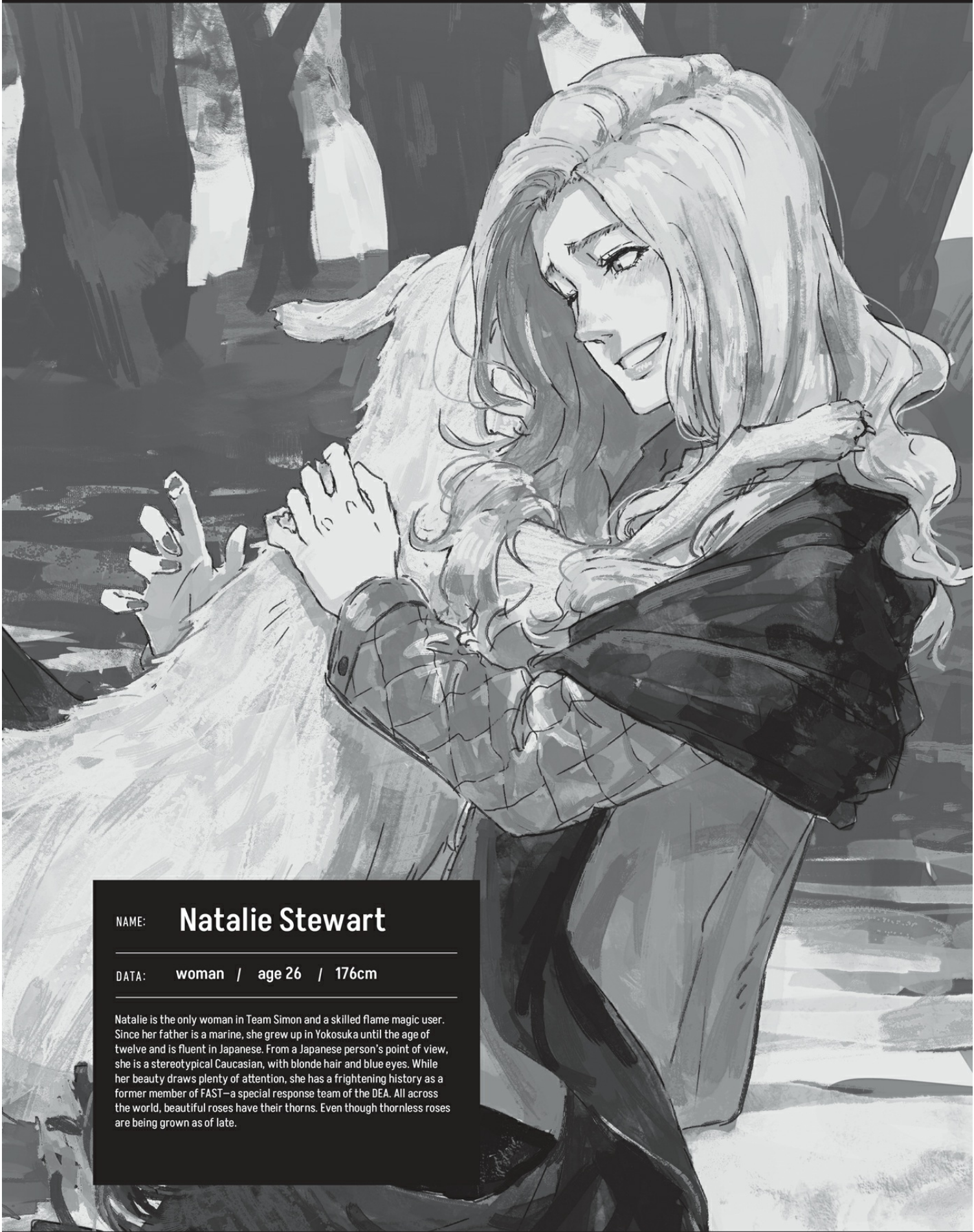
NAME:

Mason Garcia

DATA:

man / age 27 / 195cm

As Team Simon's sole vanguard, Mason strikes at his enemies like a spear. In contrast to his large build, he is good-natured, somewhat sensitive, and cares about his comrades. However, he leaves the intellectual work entirely to his teammates, seeing as he hates thinking about complicated matters. The way in which Mason follows around his teammates is reminiscent of a certain bear from the Japanese children's song **Mori no Kuma-san**. Yet even if you ran into Mason in a forest, he wouldn't eat you, unlike Simon or Joshua.



NAME: **Natalie Stewart**

DATA: **woman / age 26 / 176cm**

Natalie is the only woman in Team Simon and a skilled flame magic user. Since her father is a marine, she grew up in Yokosuka until the age of twelve and is fluent in Japanese. From a Japanese person's point of view, she is a stereotypical Caucasian, with blonde hair and blue eyes. While her beauty draws plenty of attention, she has a frightening history as a former member of FAST—a special response team of the DEA. All across the world, beautiful roses have their thorns. Even though thornless roses are being grown as of late.

1 Underground Temple Entrance

This temple appears to have been carved out from the underground bedrock.



2 Courtyard

The genomos chased Myoshi and Keigo into this creepy, excessively large space.



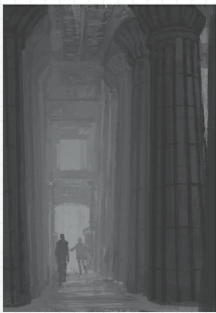
3 Pillared Corridor

Egyptian columns with Gothic arches overhead. The dungeon is mixing up its settings again.



4 Hypostyle

Unlike the sculpted human figures that serve as columns in Greece, these pillars are realistic depictions of plants.



5 Before the Inner Sanctuary

The entrance to the birth canal. In other words—well, you get the picture. This narrow corridor leads to the inner sanctuary.

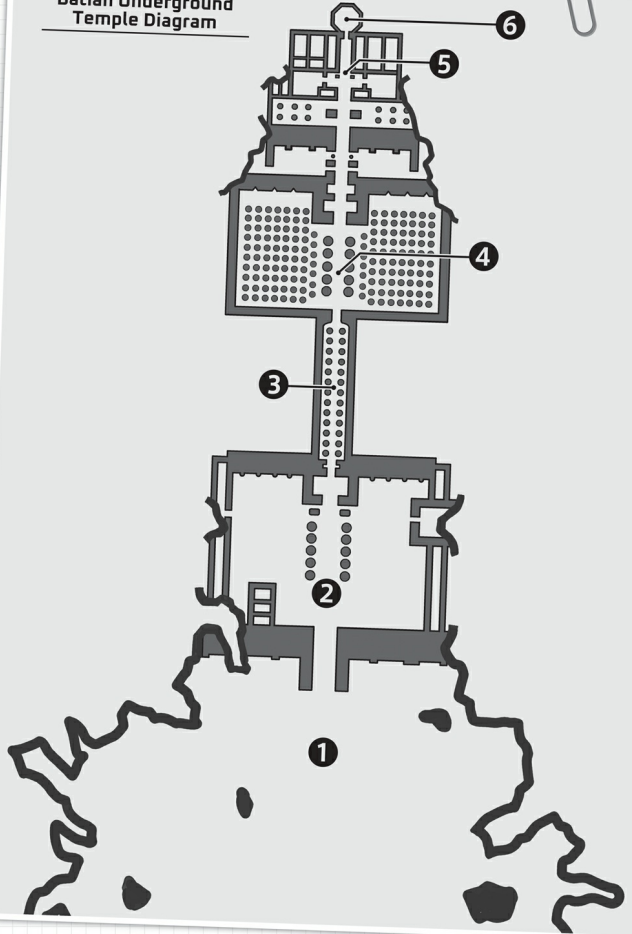


6 Inner Sanctuary

This is where Enlail (probably) resurrects. From here, you are led to the mountaintop like a sheep to the slaughter.



Batian Underground Temple Diagram



Afterword

“As autumn deepens *I oft begin to wonder* What my neighbors eat” - Basho Matsuo (Changed “do” to “eat.”)

How is everyone faring on this beautiful autumn day? The season for wild game has arrived, and I—Kono—am sincerely concerned about my waistline. I’m also celebrating my good fortune at being able to publish volume 3 of *D-Genesis*. Halloween has passed, and while Beaujolais Nouveau Day is on the horizon, the pandemic isn’t showing any signs of calming down.

As the long sobs of violins of autumn wound my heart with monotonous languor, restaurants are closing down one after another. Since there is no longer any place for me to escape to on this Earth, we have no choice but to wait for a vaccine or drug while also slowing the spread of the virus as much as possible. All breathless and pale, when the hour sounds, I remember the old days and I cry.

As for me, I’m particularly worried about the crowds in Toyosu. If the chefs there contract the virus, it’ll be game over for me too. And I go in the ill wind that carries me here, there, like the dead leaf.

(Bin Ueda’s translation of *Chanson d’automne* into Japanese is the best.)

Speaking of Beaujolais Nouveau, this wine is famous for its ridiculous (my apologies) advertising slogans. People even make a game of comparing each year’s slogan to decide which one is the best. However, these have been toned down in recent years, which I find incredibly sad. I hope they someday return to such slogans as “This level of quality—not present in recent years—only comes around once a century.”

Indeed, this is the sort of year that only comes around once a century. At any rate, I hope this book provides you with at least some comfort during these uncertain times.

In this volume, D-Powers finally exposes the party system, and thus telepathy

rocks the world. This ability is practically cancer to a variety of exams, as there is no way of preventing telepathy at the test sites. However, since tests are a means of establishing a hierarchy, an exceptional person would only give answers to their rivals under unique circumstances. For instance, if the test subjects were very few in number, or at a part-time job where one's individual pass or failure isn't the ultimate goal.

Of course, exceptional students could sell their services to people like doctors who have children taking the exams. If a few of these exceptional students gathered together, they could turn this into a highly lucrative part-time job. Since even college students can take the National Center tests (which will become the Common Test for University Admissions in 2021), as well as other entrance exams, they could be rolling in dough after four years! However, if you turned down prestigious colleges four years in a row, you would likely be found out. Furthermore, I don't know if you can retake the entrance exam for your personal university and major.

And after a year, you tend to forget the information required for an entrance exam, which could be another hindrance. I learned this all too well while working as an at-home tutor during my college years. Being a tutor for high school seniors is incredibly difficult. The pay is decent, but if you take tutoring seriously, preparation can eat up a lot of time, which significantly lowers the hourly pay. In the end, the job can turn out to be as difficult as being an actual teacher. Also, students can suddenly ask difficult questions that you didn't prepare for, which can be almost impossible to gloss over. Why would you raise a question that requires thirty minutes of answer time during a two-hour class? How am I supposed to deal with that?!

Don't give up, Kono!

Ahem. And now back to our regularly scheduled program.

As a counterpoint, qualification exams measure if a person's abilities exceed a determined standard. Since it would be totally acceptable if everyone received full marks on such exams, they would be perfect for the aforementioned *part-time job*. In fact, having telepathic assistance would be incredibly helpful for tests such as the bar exam's short-form answer portion.

At first, I thought telepathy might cause the collapse of society when everyone started accidentally voicing their innermost thoughts. Yet after deeper consideration, I decided this wouldn't have too much impact, as you could simply choose not to form a party. As such, I don't plan on commenting too deeply on this subject.

More importantly, erasing the language barrier from international projects would probably have a much greater impact. There are many excellent researchers who can't speak English very well, and being unable to think clearly when using a foreign language is quite normal. In my opinion, it's more effective to hire an interpreter rather than lower someone's abilities by forcing them to hold conversations in a foreign language.

Additionally, this would eliminate any con artists who only excel at speaking foreign languages and nothing else. But honestly, I don't know if any such people actually exist (LOL).

Of course, telepathy being useless over the internet would be a major problem.

Now then. Anyone who read the web novel of *D-Genesis* will probably have noticed, but starting in this volume, the story has begun to shift dramatically. Though Himuro didn't have as many opportunities to appear in the web novel, he even became a victim of EVIL Miyoshi in the published version. I'm almost certain he'll be playing an active role going forwards. Likewise, Haruki Yoshida—the dungeon “researcher” Keigo found suspicious in the first volume—will be participating in the Yoyogi story. He'll be taking Tenko along for the ride as well.

Furthermore, Saito and Mitsurugi will showcase—here and there, at least—what happens when a person with high stats goes out into the real world.

(Probably.)

Thanks to all this, my list of changes is getting out of hand. Even though I'm the one writing this story, I'm worried about there being mistakes of some kind...

In the next volume, our main duo will finally establish D-Powers LLC, and they'll begin running the boot camp. In the web novel, D-Powers established a public company, but due to the sort of business they're operating now, an LLC is

more convenient.

As an aside, I quite like Isabella and Cathy. I'm really looking forward to the next volume, where Cathy is supposed to enter into the story. I want her to have an even bigger role this time around! Not just for rock-paper-scissors! On the same note, I want to move up Isabella's appearance and have her get involved with Keigo a bit more. She's a femme fatale who can manipulate men's dreams by kissing them. Pretty cool, right?

Incidentally, will Asha attend the summer 2019 Comiket? And finally, will her Papa Bear realize the meaning of *topping all the bottoms in an all-out attack*?!

Well then, I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Annotations

1. [Batian Peak](#): The real Batian Peak has an elevation of 5,199 meters. As one of Mount Kenya's several peaks, it is the second highest mountain in Africa.
2. [Incidentally, Mount Kenya isn't named after the country](#). Instead, the country is named after the mountain.
3. [MPK train](#): This is MMO terminology. A train is when someone leads around a group of pursuing monsters. MPK stands for "monster player kill." Thus, an MPK train is when someone leads a group of monsters to kill another player.
4. [Sergeant Hartman](#): Hartman is probably the world's most famous demonic drill instructor. He appears in the 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*. According to the original work, Hartman trains an overweight, dim-witted young man into the model recruit during boot camp. Yet on the night before the recruit is to leave the training facility, he shoots Hartman, killing him.
5. [Gama](#): Gama are caves found in various parts of Okinawa. Usually, they are entrances to limestone caverns.
6. ["In 1983, she published a book of stories collected from the Maasai people."](#) *Oral Literature of the Maasai* by Naomi Kipuri is an interesting anthropological book about the Maasai people. According to the author, this book "recommends itself to the general reader," which means that the English is very understandable. (Says who?) A man named Luka Sunte wrote a book called *How Luka of the Maasai Dug a Well with a Smartphone*. During a Twitter interview with the *Mu* fanzine, he stated that "Enkai is one god." When asked if Olapa was also a god, he answered, "Yes."
7. ["In a better time line, the tech should've been implemented in 2015."](#): A reference to *Back to the Future Part II*.

8. [*“Yetis, abominable snowmen, ice crawlers, and snow almirajs appeared on this floor.”*](#): Yetis and abominable snowmen are apelike creatures believed to live in the Himalayas. Ice crawlers resemble snakes or caterpillars. Snow almirajs are horned rabbits.
9. [*Declaration of Helsinki*](#): The Declaration of Helsinki was adopted in 1964 and has been revised many times up till now. Developed by the World Medical Association, it is a statement of ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. However, it is not legally binding.
10. [*Grade*](#): In this case, “grade” is a mining industry term that refers to the mineral content of an ore.
11. [*D-Factor*](#): Miyoshi mistakenly mentions D-Factor in the previous volume. I secretly revised this for the second edition. Wait, you read the first edition? Erase it from your mind!
12. [*Article 239 of the Civil Code*](#): According to this law, if someone picks up unowned, moveable property and claims ownership, the property becomes theirs. Suppose you were on a mountain that wasn’t a mine, and you picked up a diamond in the rough that just so happened to have “fallen” on the ground. If you claimed ownership, that diamond would become yours. But just so we’re clear, you’re not allowed to actually dig. The second clause describes immovable property, which will return to the national treasury in similar cases. In other words, Japanese land that belongs to no one will become property of the state.
13. [*“Would permanently residing somewhere in a dungeon for twenty years make that area yours?”*](#): This is in reference to Article 162 of the Civil Code. According to this law, if you occupy someone else’s land peacefully and publicly for twenty years, it will become your own. Furthermore, if your occupation began with good intentions and no negligence, ten years will suffice. Conversely, twenty years will still suffice even if you had malicious intent. Or so they say, at least.
14. [*Clark Kent*](#): A reference to the character Superman, who was created by writer Jerry Siegel and illustrator Joe Shuster. The representative American hero who conceals his identity while performing acts of heroism. This goes

without saying, right?

15. [Shizuya Kondo](#): A reference to *Shizukanaru Don* by Tatsuo Nitta. Despite being a yakuza boss, Shizuya Kondo enjoys his afternoons by working as an employee at an underwear company.
16. [Node hours](#): The use of one node—the sum of which comprise a computer—for one hour is equal to one node hour. Since the K computer has 88,128 nodes, borrowing the entire computer for one hour is equal to 88,128 node hours. Six million node hours would be equivalent to monopolizing the K computer for a little over sixty-eight hours.
17. [The Polano Plaza by Kenji Miyazawa](#): A story about a summer festival held in an open field illuminated by white clovers.
18. [Reddit](#): Reddit is a large American message board. Individual boards are called subreddits, and threads are called submissions. Upvotes and downvotes allow users to vote on what they like and dislike. The front page contains a list of submissions that have garnered the most upvotes during a set period of time.
19. [The Snouters: Form and Life of the Rhinogrades by Harald Stümpke](#): *The Snouters* is a book about fictitious creatures called Rhinogrades that walk on their noses. Per the gimmick, the book was posthumously compiled by German zoologist Gerolf Steiner, whose supposed friend—Harald Stümpke—went missing during a survey of the Hy-yi-yi archipelago. *The Snouters* is filled with fascinating gimmicks, including the illustrations as well as an account of the demise of Stümpke and the Hy-yi-yi archipelago.
20. [Comrade \(Tovarishch\)](#): Currently, this isn't a common address in Russia. According to speak-russian.cie, a substitutional address doesn't exist in modern Russian. For example, you would call a woman "young lady" regardless of her age.
21. [Ded Moroz](#): Ded Moroz is a snow wizard appearing in Slavic folklore. He was chosen as replacement for Santa Claus to remove the religious connotations from Jolly Old Saint Nicholas. Even up to the present day, he has continued to serve as Russia's counterpart to Santa Claus. Rather than Christmas, Ded Moroz delivers presents on the night of New Year's Eve.

Snegurochka is his granddaughter.

22. [Number 10](#): A nickname for 10 Downing Street, which is the residence of the British Prime Minister.
23. [Cigar](#): The back of five-pound notes contains a portrait of Winston Churchill called *The Roaring Lion*. A Churchill is a large cigar, twenty centimeters long and a little less than two centimeters thick. These cigars were named after Prime Minister Churchill due to his fondness for them.
24. [Third-party company acting as a proxy](#): Whois information is public information about a website's domain administrator. Since this led to privacy concerns, it became common for resellers (third-party companies that offer domain name registrations) to provide a different address, name, and phone number on your behalf.
25. [Secondary School](#): In India, children begin attending secondary school around the age of fourteen. Asha probably went to an international school.
26. [Manna from heaven](#): This is an English phrase meaning "a saving grace." It's similar to the Japanese phrase "watari ni fune," which means "a ship at a crossing."
27. ["I've seen a similar jacket somewhere before."](#): A reference to *Tsurikichi Sanpei* by Takao Yaguchi. When the character Gyoshin first appears, he's wearing a fishing vest with a similar phrase written on the back."
28. [Weibo](#): Sina Weibo is China's version of Twitter.
29. [Comic Market](#): Japan's largest doujin—or indie manga—exhibition. A circle ticket allows creators to enter separately from the general public.
30. [Genre codes](#) classify publications and signify what franchises they belong to. Incidentally, 432 is *Haikyuu!!* Miya Taira—the illustrator for *D-Genesis's* adaptation in *Comp Ace*—was probably somewhere in the background. Or so I like to think. The combined booth system allows two circles to be placed right next to one another. Since Yoshimura doesn't really understand Miyoshi's conversation with Queen Shi, I wanted people who are similarly lost to share in his confusion.
31. [Yaoi](#): Yaoi is written using three hiragana characters: ya, o, and i. This is

an abbreviation for “yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi,” which means “no climax, no punch line, and no meaning.” Early BL manga had no story, containing only depictions of sex, which gave rise to this word. Incidentally, BL is an abbreviation for “boys’ love.”

D GENESIS

WRITTEN BY
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ttl

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared





And they were calling to one another:
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
The whole earth is full of his glory.







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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 3

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D GENESIS DUNGEON GA DEKITE 3 NEN Vol.3

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