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GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared





It has been three years since the dungeon had been made.
I've decided to quit job and enjoy laid-back lifestyle
since I've ranked at number one in the world all of a sudden.

DUNGEON







When my vision cleared, I realized I'd landed on top of Miyoshi, practically pinning her down. I scrambled to my feet, whipping out a shield in anticipation of the blow that was sure to come. But instead of a deafening whack, what I heard was—

**“Cheerily, cheer up, cheer up,
cheerily, cheer up!”**



Turning around, the only thing in my field of vision was a small...bird? Its gray feathers were trimmed with white edges, its beak and belly a burning, brilliant orange. But its eyes, rather than black like I'd expected, shone a deep indigo. Almost like benitoite.

“Come again?”

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The worst is not. So long as we can say, "This is the worst."

— *EDGAR, King Lear Act 4 Scene 1 / William Shakespeare*

Prologue

Washington D.C., United States of America

“Nukes?”

United States President Albert Handler and White House Chief of Staff Nick Mulberry were listening to National Security Adviser John R. Dalton’s report in the Oval Office.

Given the urgency of its content, Falcon Industries’ report had been passed directly to the National Security Council for analysis—which in turn had brought Dalton to the Oval Office this night.

“Correct, Mr. President.”

Handler scrutinized Dalton’s face for some sign of a joke, but found none.

The NSC’s analysis had concluded any explosive which failed to fully vaporize the cleaners risked allowing more to regenerate from their pieces, hastening the onset of a stampede scenario. What they needed was enough heat to eliminate all monsters in the dungeon at once. Conversely, explosive force and fragmentation were elements which only served to get in the way. It was true—only nuclear arms were suited to the task.

Still...

“You’re asking me to go down in history as an even bigger fool than Truman.”
Handler looked up at Dalton.

The story of Harry Truman being strong-armed—just after being sworn in as vice president and a hasty promotion to president following Franklin Roosevelt’s sudden death—by then Brigadier General Leslie Groves into approving the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was now widely known.

Yokohama’s current population was 3.7 million, with 43 million in the Greater Tokyo Area. Dungeon or not, he couldn’t approve the use of nuclear arms in such a population-dense locale, even ignoring Japan’s particular aversion to the

subject.

“If humankind stood on the brink of extinction,” Dalton protested, “other nations would back you.”

“The brink of extinction?” Handler raised his voice at Dalton’s unexpectedly grim phrasing.

“If we act quickly,” Dalton explained, “we may yet contain the damage to a single floor of a single building in Yokohama. Otherwise, by 1 p.m. EST(1) on January 23, we’ll be dealing with 240,518,168,576 slimes—enough to have buried the entire Greater Tokyo Area.”

The Greater Tokyo Area measured approximately 14,314 square kilometers. The numbers Dalton had just quoted would mean eighteen slimes per square meter. “Buried” was no exaggeration.

“Furthermore,” Dalton continued, “by 5 a.m. on the twenty-fifth, Japan itself will be sitting under 7,696,581,394,432 slimes. Three days later, there will be enough to cover the surface of the earth.”

The surface of Japan measured approximately 378,000 square kilometers. The earth’s surface was around 1,350 times bigger than Japan’s. Following only ten or eleven divisions after having covered Japan, the slimes would subsume every continent.

“Mr. President, if we do not act, we may be consigning humanity to doom by the twenty-eighth.”

“B-But...”

The situation was too far removed from reality. Handler’s mouth couldn’t form a response.

“If we do act, we solve the situation with the risk of minor radiation leakage in the Yokohama area at most.” Dalton spoke as though this consequence were trifling. “Or would you rather American soil be crushed under a tidal wave of slimes just a few days from now? Mr. President, at the rate they’ll be upon us, they’ll flatten the West Coast in a second.”

It was true—Handler knew it. If the number of slimes necessary to bridge the

Pacific Ocean suddenly doubled in count off the West Coast, the mass would be equivalent to an enormous tidal wave—a slime tsunami. And it wouldn't take more than another six hours for the entire world to face a similar threat.

“Mr. President, there’s no time. Whether or not we use the weapon, we have to begin preparations for the chance we do.”

Handler listened to Dalton silently. Dalton spoke as if there were no reason to fuss over the use of but one tactical nuclear weapon when faced with a potential threat to humanity. *No, there is very much a reason to fuss*, Handler protested mentally, but still refrained from responding.

However, preparations were necessary. Handler knew that much. If timing and circumstances forced their hand into action, being *unable* to act would be out of the question.

“Mr. President, sir, your decision,” Dalton pleaded.

Handler let out a sigh. *“Look, we can’t turn Yokohama into a sea of fire. Let’s get that straight. If we do use nuclear arms, I want their use limited to the dungeon and the dungeon alone. Do we have suitable munitions for that purpose?”*

The most suitable munitions, SADMs⁽²⁾, had been used by the Green Light Teams of the Cold War, but those units had been disbanded in 1989. With nearly three decades having passed, it would take time to ascertain whether any of the teams' portable nuclear munitions remained.

“Leave it to us,” Dalton replied. *“We’ll find something suitable.”*

Judging from the speed of Dalton’s response, Handler guessed that “we’ll find” was more a matter of “we’ve found.” A small grin spread across on Handler’s face. However, he added one final caveat.

As President of the United States, all responsibility would fall on him—that was the burden he bore as the leader of the most powerful nation on Earth.

“If I give the okay, it’s under the condition that nuclear weapons are used only after we’ve confirmed the cleaner can still multiply outside dungeon grounds, and at the last second before the creatures would overflow Yokohama.”

With that, he signed the paper Dalton had presented. All that was left to do now was to think of a suitable time to break the news to Japan.

Dalton began making calls as soon as he'd left the Oval Office.

"We've retired nearly all portable tactical nuclear arms, but..."

The voice on the other end of the line shook from uncertainty. Nevertheless, its owner reported all he knew. The bulk of nuclear munitions still in service offered yields, or blast power, ranging from 600 kilotons to 2.2 megatons—even the smallest would be overkill for Yokohama.

"This is a direct order from POTUS," Dalton responded. *"Forget the military—put a word in with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and every other lab you can think of. Try to get ahold of any remaining W54s⁽³⁾. There might still be some from Camp Hardy sitting in Okinawa. If not, find prototypes."*

"Yield settings?" Nuclear devices nearly all contained modules allowing the user to select different options for the yield.

"Believe me, I wish I could say, 'The higher, the better,' but we're looking to contain the blast to a single underground floor. Area 9,000 square meters and height three meters."

In addition, it wasn't the blast size they needed, but the thermal energy.

The fireball of the blast at Hiroshima had ballooned to a diameter of four hundred meters in 0.2 seconds. Within three seconds, the ground at the hypocenter had reached scorching temperatures between three thousand and four thousand degrees Celsius.

The dungeon was a mere 60 by 150 meters, or 9,000 square meters. They wouldn't need a fraction of that power now.

"Don't worry about any structural damage to the outer walls. Not a concern," Dalton went on. *"Given those figures, what yield would you recommend?"*

"If you want the blast to fill the entire volume of the floor, you'd need a radius of about...22.55 meters."

"Which gives us?"

"Well, using GI Taylor's dimensional analysis of the Trinity blast...we'd need about 9.637×10^9 joules, or just under ten tons of TNT."

"Perfect." The fact that the measurement came out just to the power of a W54 seemed practically a sign from the heavens. *"Buy us a little leeway with the setting,"* Dalton instructed.

"Understood. Will the team conducting the mission be DSF?"

An uncharacteristic pause preceded Dalton's response. Several things he'd read in the material prior to his conversation with Handler now weighed on his mind.

"Team Simon?" Dalton asked.

"They are in Yoyogi right now. And the DSF's top."

"They're certainly talented," Dalton admitted. *"But perhaps a little...too independent, too high-minded, don't you think?"*

"Independent?"

"Ever since transferring to the DSF, they apparently hardly even think of themselves as US military anymore."

"Then what do they think of themselves as?"

"Would you believe me if I said 'superheroes'?" Dalton replied.

The voice on the other end of the line let out what sounded like a sigh.

But Team Simon's brand of hero was quickly becoming outdated. Nowadays even the most righteous hero needed an edge. A tool—even a powerful one—that couldn't be used was a tool that needed to be discarded. *Time for the heroes of yesterday to cede the way to their successors,* Dalton thought.

"In any case," Dalton responded, *"the last thing we need on this mission is a bunch of would-be supermen acting on their own moral code."*

"Then who?"

"Who indeed..."

Dalton had heard about the United States Dungeon Department's blunder during the Otherworldly Language Comprehension incident. If Curtis wanted to

salvage his department's reputation, this could be the perfect opportunity. Dalton figured he could arrange to have some USDD troops pose as Falcon Industries employees, entrusting the real mission to them under the pretense of having them escort Team Simon.

Hearing Dalton's instructions, the man on the other end of the line uttered a curt "Understood."

"In addition, tell Team Simon that the weapon they're carrying is an experimental thermite module. We don't need any sudden moral scruples getting in the way."

"So they won't know they're carrying a nuclear weapon? Isn't that a bit risky?" Dalton understood the thrust of the man's question: "How would it feel to be involved in what could be compared to an assassination attempt without your informed consent?"

"Don't worry. We'll let them know before the mission is over," Dalton responded. *"When they can no longer interfere."*

The man hesitated for a moment, then offered another "Understood."

"Fly out to Yokohama. We'll have the team brought in by helicopter to the site. I'll secure the route. Make sure the equipment is there within twenty-four hours. If we get right on it—" Dalton glanced at his watch. It was just past 8 a.m. (10 p.m. JST on January 17). *"We should still be just in time to save the world."*

Dalton nodded to himself, satisfied.

Chapter 7: Yokohama Peril

January 18, 2019 (Friday)

National Security Adviser Uchitani's Residence, 1:30 a.m.

"Ibe...do you have any idea what time it is?" Uchitani asked groggily.

He had picked up the phone in bed, and now cast his eyes over to his bedside clock. The day had just barely changed over.

"I'm sorry," Ibe answered. "This is a matter of the utmost urgency."

The utmost urgency? So urgent it couldn't have waited until morning? Uchitani blinked.

"Not just for the cabinet," the prime minister continued, perhaps sensing his conversation partner's hesitancy. "Perhaps for all of Japan."

Ibe wasn't normally one prone to exaggeration. Uchitani flipped a mental switch, and was suddenly in work mode.

"This doesn't seem like the kind of conversation we'll be able to have over the phone, does it?" came Uchitani's wry answer.

"Sorry," Ibe responded.

"Your office?" Uchitani asked.

"No. I'm gathering everyone at Tomigaya. There shouldn't be any reporters snooping around there at this hour, but just in case, try to keep a low profile. If word gets out that I've called the National Security Adviser to my private residence in the middle of the night... Well, you can imagine."

Uchitani could. In times of crisis, one could accidentally exacerbate public alarm by being too open early on. And this was, from the prime minister's words, certainly such a time.

"I'll be over shortly," he responded. "Although I'm not sure how low a profile I

can keep."

There was only one entrance, and security was going to be tight.

"I'll tell security to let everyone through like they would any other guest. No fuss. You'll be fine."

Uchitani steeled himself for what lay ahead. He had forgotten that the prime minister could sometimes think a bit like a child.

Tomigaya, Shibuya City

"Telling us to come here in the middle of the night, in cars the media wouldn't recognize... What the hell's going on?"

Director of Cabinet Intelligence Murakita wasted no time trying to get abreast of the situation upon opening the door to the prime minister's private address.

"Et tu, Murakita?" Uchitani asked.

Surprised at being called out to by Uchitani, who had apparently arrived just before him, Murakita's voice wavered in his response. "U-Uchitani? They called you out here too? Good god, this really must be some kind of national crisis."

"Personally, I'm still hoping it's a prank." Uchitani flashed a strained smile.

Some sort of difficult issue faced them—that much was clear—but it continued to elude Murakita why only he and the National Security Adviser had been summoned. Murakita checked his watch. "Nearly 2:30," he mumbled.

"Think we're going to see a ghost?"

It *was* almost the witching hour.

"At a meeting of career politicians? It's a given we'll see some people halfway there."

"Aha, you're not wrong," Uchitani chuckled.

The two were still sharing a laugh when Ibe arrived a moment later carrying a tray of tea. *So, there's at least time for a drink*, Uchitani thought. That alone filled him with some relief.

“Sorry, this is all I’ve got on hand.” Ibe passed his guests their cups.

“No, this is quite perfect,” Uchitani responded. “But what on earth is it, at this hour?”

Ibe stared at the floor for a moment, then looked up. “I’ll get right to it. What are my options for ordering an evacuation of the area surrounding Sakuragicho Station?”

“E-Excuse me?” Murakita stammered. *No public notice, no official recommendation, straight to an evacuation order?* “Why?”

“I have a reason,” Ibe answered. “But I can’t say what it is.”

Ordering an evacuation without providing a reason? It would be a field day for the press, and for the opposition party—it could even call into question Ibe’s mental capacity to serve.

“Well,” Uchitani began cautiously, “in the case of an evacuation order for a natural disaster, you could use Clause 1, Article 60 of the Basic Act on Disaster Management to have the mayor of Yokohama order an evacuation. Or have her designate a danger zone under Clause 1, Article 63...”

Designation of a danger zone would allow for the mayor to issue an evacuation order accompanied by monetary fines for failing to heed the order. Other approaches would only allow for softer “recommendations.”

“Mori?” Ibe asked.

Fumiko Mori had first been elected Yokohama’s mayor in 2009, and had maintained power across three consecutive elections. At first her ties to major parties had been complicated by various stances she had taken, but recently the Democratic Liberal Party had given her its endorsement, which would make it easier for Ibe to call in a favor.

“I’ve heard she was reluctant to give up the bid for the casino resort development.⁽⁴⁾ Maybe I can dangle some backing as a carrot...”

“Mr. Prime Minister, that’s...” Uchitani began. There had been no earthquake, no approaching tsunami, no typhoon. No heavy rain or flooding rivers. There could be no invoking a law on disaster management without a disaster

occurring. “That is to say, we can’t offer an appropriate means of calling an evacuation if we don’t have any information,” he corrected himself. “For example, there are other laws that can be used for appointing a danger zone. There’s Article 21 of the Flood Control Act, Article 28 of the Fire Service Act, and Article 114 of the Civil Protections Act. But each one has its own stipulations for use.”

“Civil Protections Act?”

The Civil Protections Act—full name “Act Concerning the Measures for Protection of the People in Armed Attack Situations”—pertained to civil defense in armed conflicts. If a nuclear weapon were brought into Yokohama, that could certainly be argued to fall under an “armed attack situation.”

However, Ibe couldn’t use that as his reason for calling for an evacuation. Right now, he didn’t even know if the bomb would actually be employed.

“You see, the thing is,” he started, “some hours ago I received a call from President Handler.”

“Shinzo, I’m talking about probability here,” Handler’s voice oozed over the phone.

It was the middle of the night, yet the president of the United States had called Ibe directly. What was more, the contents of the call left him at a loss for words.

Back when he’d worked for Kobe Steel, Ibe had spent some time at the New York branch office, picking up a reasonable level of English. However, he wasn’t sure he had the confidence to summon the vocabulary he now needed.

“I—b—”

What President Handler had informed him of was a potential countermeasure to a certain problem in Yokohama. At the same time, he’d been sent data containing details on the situation, various predictive models, and multiple potential response plans.

Both the JDA and the Japanese government’s Dungeon Agency had received

Falcon Industries' report at 4 p.m. on January 17, and municipal offices had closed at five. It was now 1 a.m. on the eighteenth. The information hadn't yet reached the cabinet or the prime minister's office.

As the JDA was already actively working on contacting the necessary parties, the Dungeon Agency had somewhat underestimated the speed with which the situation was changing. Additionally, they had been hoping to entrust most of the response to the JDA anyway. The JDA, of course, had no direct line to the Cabinet Office.

In comparison, bureaucratic processes in the States appeared to have moved with great speed, identifying the situation as an urgent threat and advancing plans straight to the president's desk for approval.

It was the last of those potential options that had given Ibe pause.

"B-But nuclear weapons... Surely..."

"Shinzo, I don't like it any more than you. And I know how Japan feels about nuclear weapons, but look," Handler crooned, *"this is like a contagious disease. If we don't nip this thing in the bud, it's going to spread to other countries."*

If a contagious illness wasn't contained, it had the potential to cause a problem for the entire human race. If it were a deadly virus, America wouldn't hesitate to use nuclear weapons to scorch the infected location. Not if the alternative was humanity's extinction.

But the problem this time seemed far less severe in comparison. It was just one monster in a dungeon, dividing once every six hours. That was all.

Even after twenty-four hours, there would still only be sixteen individuals. Containing the situation would be a simple matter of defeating them. That was a job for the JDA and Ministry of Defense. If they'd identified the situation as being a potential danger, they would likely already be on the move.

And if they failed?

Ibe hadn't had time to think that far yet, with the official report yet to reach him. He'd only heard what the US president had presented. He still couldn't even determine whether the JSDF or other Japanese explorers were equipped to handle the job.

He wrapped his sleepless mind around the situation, willing the cogs to turn, to provide a way to push back against Handler's claims, but the information was just too sparse. The cogs ground against one another, locked helplessly in place.

"Shinzo, I'll be frank with you," Handler intoned. "Whether or not we have Japan's blessing on this, although we certainly hope we do, we plan to take every measure available to prevent a global catastrophe."

"In other words," Ibe choked, "the nuclear option..."

There were 3.7 million people in Yokohama. A nuclear weapon, in the midst of all that?

If this were a nightmare, Ibe was waiting to wake up. He could feel beads of sweat forming on his brow.

"I cannot deny it," Handler said. "It's on the table."

Handler spoke softly, but Ibe recognized the resolution in his voice.

"Now, you can go complaining about the tyranny of superpowers to the United Nations," Handler invited, "but..."

Ibe caught Handler's drift. Before a verdict would be reached—before there would even be time for discussion—the situation would already have been resolved.

"Now look, if it were me, of course I wouldn't want nuclear munitions being used in Los Angeles.⁽⁵⁾ So I'm going to do everything in my power to avoid it. And even if it's only in a dungeon, this is still the middle of a city. We'd only use the smallest arms available to do the job."

"B-But still..."

"Shinzo, nuclear arms are just another tool in the box. And we can't ignore this problem, you've got to understand."

"I-I do understand. But you can't expect me to make a decision here, over the phone..."

"The clock's ticking. I don't intend to contact any other leaders over this, but you'd better get your people together right away."

Right away?

Judging from the materials Ibe had been handed, the situation *was* urgent. The absolute latest they could reach a decision was 7 p.m. JST on January 19.

"We need you to face the situation head-on and come to a decision," Handler urged. *"Otherwise..."*

Ibe swallowed.

"Well, it might be better to just duck your head down and say you didn't know," Handler concluded.

Truth be told, right now feigning ignorance didn't sound like a bad option. That was, if it wouldn't be political suicide.

"Think of the nuclear option as insurance," Handler continued to urge. *"That's the world we've lived in every day since the start of the Cold War, right? The JSDF and DSF can still work something out. I'm just talking contingency plans. I thought you might want time to think it over."*

That sounded fair enough, and if they merely waited and observed, they would already be too late by the time drastic measures became necessary.

"Always thinking about the worst-case scenario is kind of a politician's curse."

"Albert."

A new sense of resolve in his voice, Ibe called Handler by his first name.

"What is it, friend?"

And so Ibe issued a few final conditions for the use of the weapon Handler had proposed.

"So you were able to get them to agree to hold off until division has been observed outside the dungeon, and to hold off until 6 p.m. on the nineteenth?"

"That was as much as I could manage," Ibe said.

That was indeed the extent of Ibe's bargaining room at this point. Forget having his own plans to offer, he hadn't even been aware of the situation until Handler had called.

"At any rate," Ibe continued, "regardless of whether we inform the citizens of the truth, we'll need to conduct an evacuation if the time comes."

"So that was what your 'I need a way to order an evacuation, but I can't say why' was all about." Murakita nodded.

America might use nuclear weapons in Yokohama. Leave your homes!

Nope. That kind of message wouldn't fly. The second they made the announcement, the media would treat it like a paranoid exaggeration, and they would fuel a few good years of attack ads. If they had to pour their efforts into convincing people of the claim's veracity and confronting false claims, they would only be exposing Japan to further danger.

The people had a right to know, but even the most idealistic journalist could imagine what kind of chaos would come from spreading around a blunt message like "Japan might not be here tomorrow." Far, far more than any mere political exposé could manage. No, if they had to come out with the truth, better to save it for memoirs, after the danger had passed.

Worst-case scenario, there would be groups evangelizing thrill-and pleasure-seeking at all costs, explosions of violence, attacks against society—those scars wouldn't simply fade after the crisis was over. Japan might survive, but at what cost?

"I know that resorting to a certain number of...half-truths...to avoid a panic would be the standard play," Ibe admitted, "but you have to admit making like a rogue journalist and just deciding each and every citizen can do what they will with the truth sounds pretty appealing right about now."

"That would be abdicating your leadership," Murakita pointed out.

There was no such thing as absolute freedom. A shepherd had to look out for their flock.

"Right, right. Plus, we'd take a licking from the opposition over it," Ibe responded.

So this, too, is the burden of statesmanship. Ibe sank forlornly into the couch. To Uchitani and Murakita, it looked as though his body had shrunk.

His position was unenviable. Any course of action brought with it great risks. And would, in natural order, become cause for great criticism.

"No matter who kicks and screams at this point, America is set on using the bomb if it needs to," Ibe said. "Even if I could leverage some international pressure to change that, if the situation gets any worse, there's the very real possibility that Yokohama could be wiped off the map."

The influence on the markets would be catastrophic. If the situation got as bad as America's models predicted, other countries would agree with *containing* it to Yokohama no matter the cost.

"And we don't have time to call the Diet together," he added.

Or, no, that wasn't it. Even if they called it together, it wouldn't make a difference. Who would permit another country's use of nuclear weapons on their soil? Even if there were some members who agreed, they'd keep their mouths shut for fear of being labeled traitors by their opponents in the next election cycle. If there *was* a next election cycle, that is.

No, he wouldn't be able to get guidance from the Diet at this point—just an outpouring of complaints. Time would be wasted on drafting a formal referendum condemning America's actions. What practical difference would that make?

But if he didn't do something, monsters from Yokohama Dungeon would be at the capital in five days. Later that same day, more than twenty percent of Japan would be covered in undulating slimes.

And the next day, Japan would cease to exist.

"Maybe parliamentary democracy isn't all it's cracked up to be." Ibe smiled.

While the Diet was prudent, its lack of expedience could sometimes be a shackle. This was proving to be one of those times.

Uchitani, who had been silently listening to the conversation until now, finally spoke up. "Article 18 of the Basic Act of Dungeon Management. You can base your evacuation order on that." The decisiveness of his tone urged immediate action.

Article 18 of the Basic Act of Dungeon Management specified that a danger zone could be appointed based on dungeon-related threats. It shared similar verbiage to Article 63 of the Basic Act on Disaster Management.

“I’d need to discuss it with the Dungeon Agency and JDA,” Ibe responded. “How large an area would it allow us to designate?”

The greatest potential dungeon-related threat currently theorized was a stampede, but none had ever occurred. How great an area one would require evacuating remained ambiguous as well.

With so many unknowns, negotiations with local authorities seemed likely to break down into total confusion.

“We could probably designate a wider area by saying it’s a monster that breathes radiation,” Murakita offered.

“Can’t think of a more fitting monster for Japan, can you?” Ibe smirked.

Now all they had to do was draft a warning about a threat resembling a bipedal dinosaur awakened by atomic testing and they’d be in shape.

“No good,” Uchitani countered. “All monsters are recorded in the WDA database. You can’t just fabricate one. It might be better to tell the truth.”

However, talk of cleaners and slimes wouldn’t exactly communicate the urgency of the situation. It was the circumstances, more than any individual monster, that plagued them. With their current information, they wouldn’t be able to designate more than a small area for evacuation by January 19. Too small for the threat of a nuclear weapon.

“That’s not going to get us the area we need by the nineteenth, is it?” Ibe asked.

Even if it were a super small warhead—even if it were set to go off within the dungeon’s walls—they were still dealing with a nuclear bomb. They would need to clear at least a kilometer radius from the blast.

Murakita straightened up. “Mr. Prime Minister, if you’re willing to bend the truth, there *is* a way to easily mandate an evacuation.”

Murakita was an expert in intelligence. He knew well the efficacy of a well-

timed, well-placed lie.

“Give me a straw now and I’d grasp it,” Ibe responded, his voice shaking with exhaustion.

“We’ll need cooperation from the JSDF, but we can say we found a dud shell.”

In the seventy years since the end of the war, much unexploded ordnance had been disposed of. According to the Ministry of Defense’s Joint Staff Office, 1,480 shells were uncovered in 2018 alone. Cases had declined sharply since the ’70s, but around fourteen hundred were still discovered annually in the waters surrounding Okinawa.

“Dud disposal...” Ibe murmured.

A 250-to 500-kilo bomb permitted evacuation ranges of up to three hundred meters. A one-ton bomb should give him clearance for at least a kilometer. However, that depended on other factors, such as the area of discovery. Ordinarily, blockades would be erected to reduce the size of the danger zone.

“No matter what, I’ll need to get in touch with Mori,” Ibe said.

Evacuation areas always had to be coordinated with local governments.

“Leave that to me,” Murakita answered.

“And press response? Coordination with the JSDF?”

“That as well.”

“This is beyond confidential. Don’t change your schedules too much tomorrow. Murakita, you take the lead. Uchitani, you bring Hashidaka up to speed.”

Ibe was referring to the deputy chief cabinet secretary for crisis management, the first-line decision-maker for the cabinet’s response to emergency situations. Kyoshi Hashidaka, who currently held the post, had joined the cabinet after stepping down as the superintendent general of the metropolitan police.

“If we’re acting in secrecy, then you’ll probably want Murakita to talk to Hashidaka too,” Uchitani responded.

“Why?”

Murakita smiled, and took over from Uchitani. “Because we’re former college classmates. And we entered the Police Agency at the same time.”

“Then it wouldn’t be strange for the two of you to meet in private.”

“But come to think of it, Uchitani is a fellow alumnus too,” Murakita added.

“One year removed,” Uchitani protested.

“Then Murakita takes the lead on Hashidaka. Have him come to the Prime Minister’s Office using the tunnels from the Cabinet Building. And have him start gathering National Security Council members for a meeting, strictly behind the scenes.”

“Consider it done.”

“In addition, I want to call an emergency minister meeting first thing in the morning to explain the situation, including the unexploded-shell plan. Call up the ministers of foreign affairs and defense, and the National Public Safety Committee chair and chief cabinet secretary.”

“Posthaste.”

At least now they had a plan in motion. Feeling a smidge of relief, Ibe sunk deeper into the couch.

“Still, hiding the use of a nuclear weapon from the public...” he lamented.

“I’ll stake my name on this crusade, proclaiming its justice beyond the grave,” Murakita ribbed.

The line he’d quoted had been written by Ibe’s grandfather. Generally, it was interpreted as showing a lack of repentance for the war. However, Ibe could also read into it a lament on the necessity of continuing to dig a hole deeper.

“I won’t endorse any warmongering, but I would like people to understand just a bit how difficult decision-making can be,” Ibe responded.

Ibe could see it now: if news of the plan got out, he’d be lumped in with his grandfather—the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. *So then what am I supposed to do?* he wanted to shout.

“We can’t break off ties with America, and we can’t turn our backs on the

world.” Ibe’s face showed his exhaustion, but there was a certain resolution to his words despite their hushed tone. “A politician lives and dies by results. But he can’t think only in the short term. Sometimes hypocrisy just can’t be avoided.”

Even if he was harangued over making secret agreements, his choice was clear. There was nothing to do but to quietly play along with America’s plan for now.

Justice, uprightness, acting aboveboard—those were concepts for people with no real problems on their hands. Career politicians knew that better than anyone else.

Ibe closed his eyes as if deep in thought, but soon the sound of snoring filled the room.

Murakita and Uchitani left quietly, taking care not to wake the prime minister from his sleep.

And so the curtain opened on what promised to be a truly tumultuous two days.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor

“So, what’s the big idea waking us up this early? The world better be ending.”

This was *not* good for beauty sleep, Natalie grumbled. If anyone present wondered what someone who spent her days in underground caverns fricasseeing genomos was doing complaining about beauty sleep, they didn’t voice it. He who fears drowning goes near no wells.

“Funny you should say that,” Simon answered, passing her the tablet displaying the president’s orders.

According to its contents, time was rapidly running out.

“So should we get going right away?” Natalie asked.

“Nope.”

Their response window was broken into six-hour sections. As long as they

were there between the same two cleaner reproduction cycles, it didn't matter much if they took a bit of time heading up.

"If we radio ahead, Falcon Industries will have any necessary equipment ready by the time we hit topside," Simon explained. *"Lucky for us, they were in the country for a demo."*

"Demonstration?"

"When their tests were done at Yokohama, they were going to show off a porter here."

"Damn." A look of disappointment hung in Mason's eyes. *"Too bad."*

"Never mind that." Simon tapped the tablet lightly with the back of his hand. *"What do we do about these guys?"*

"Sorry, Natalie, but it looks like you'll be our main weapon." Joshua turned to the team's flame-magic user.

"Are you joking? My magic won't hold out long enough to get through thousands of slimes," Natalie answered. *"They'll divide again while I'm resting up."*

"But explosives and projectiles are out. And we can't go hacking the cleaners up without creating more." Joshua shrugged, sensing a nonstarter.

"The real best weapon would be raw heat..." Cathy piped up. Since she'd been sent off by D-Powers with her parting gift—a skill orb—on the thirteenth, she'd been free to join Team Simon and dive the eighteen floor until she had to return for pre-boot camp preparations on January 26.

In truth, Cathy's inclusion in this dive had been a direct request from Miyoshi, so that Cathy could test out her orb. Thus, although she wouldn't be participating in the mission, she was present for the conversation now.

"Like a flamethrower?" Simon asked. *"Can we even get our hands on one?"*

"The marines retired them in the seventies," Cathy replied. Following the Vietnam War, they'd been phased out in favor of thermobaric weapons.

That's right. Cathy was originally a marine, Simon thought, recalling the contents of her resume. *"So what about now?"* he asked.

"Well, currently the marines get thermobaric grenades from Picatinny Arsenal. The XM1060, they're called. I wasn't around, but I hear they saw active use fifteen years ago in Afghanistan."

"What kind of firepower are we talking?"

Most grenades were set to have a wounding radius of fifteen meters.

"I've heard one could blow apart a stone wall from a distance of one-hundred yards. But I don't know detailed specs."

"Damn. We'd be crawling with cleaners from the blast. Anything with less impact, more heat?"

"Maybe thermite-based weapons. The M14 or TH3."

"Hand grenades?"

However, with a wounding radius of only two meters, the M14 and TH3 presented the opposite problem—their area of effect was too small. Their main use was in disposing of weapons and equipment that had to be left at a site, or boring through steel walls and fences.

"Let's just toss a bunch of napalm in and be done with it," Joshua suggested.

"Not bad. What about napalm bombs? Can we get 'em?" Simon asked.

Despite some continued use in flamethrowers, Napalm-B had been banned for use in explosives following the Vietnam War.

"No," Cathy replied. *"M202s?"*

"FLASH?" Simon asked. The M202 FLASH, or **F**lame **A**ssault **S**houlder weapon, was an incendiary weapon that had replaced World War II-era flamethrowers. It was technically still in service, although rarely used. *"What about ammo? M74 incendiary shells?"*

"Probably none sitting around with the JSDF," Cathy answered, *"but the Republic of Korea Armed Forces might have some."*

"Thinking about putting that request through in time?"

"Maybe MCIPAC..." Cathy put her hand to her chin.

"So you don't know for sure?"

“It’s a hunch. Should I try contacting Major General Locke?” Cathy offered.

Major General Locke was the commanding general for Marine Corps Installations Pacific, or MCIPAC.

“Do you have his direct line?” Natalie asked.

“Okay, hate to do it, but I’ll put in a request with Martinez,” Simon cut in. *“Apparently the brass told him to look out for us while we’re in Japan. And he did say to contact his secretary if we needed anything.”*

“I’m pretty sure that was just lip service,” Natalie responded. *“But if ever there were a time to test his sincerity...”*

“At a time like this, if only Merr-Sonn Munitions thermal detonators existed,” Simon mused.

“Merr-Sonn’? Never heard of them.” Natalie tilted her head.

“You wouldn’t have,” Simon responded, *“unless you were there for the fall of the Galactic Republic.”*

“What are you talking about?”

Simon smiled, then got up. *“At any rate, let’s have Falcon grab as many heat-based weapons as they can, and just hope collectors haven’t snapped up all the old M2 and M9 flamethrowers.”*

Aboard the Tokyu Toyoko Line

Under a cloudless winter sky, Miyoshi and I boarded the train from Meiji-Jingumae to Sakuragicho just past eight o’clock.

Holding the dangling strap for balance on the crowded train, Miyoshi let out a huge yawn, quite unbecoming of the fair young lady she apparently fancied herself.

“Late night?”

“Verily. Thanks to our new patent application, I had to spend last night rushing to put together our report.”

“Finally time to let the world in on the secret of the slimes...”

We were expecting a literal wall of slimes to be blocking the entrance to the dungeon. With bullets and projectiles off-limits due to the risk of spawning more cleaners, our slime-killing strategy was going to be more important than ever. We could no longer keep it to ourselves.

Particularly because we wanted to leave most of the response to the DSF and JSDF.

And so we had spent most of last night making preparations to introduce the world to the wonders of benzethonium chloride—patent pending, of course.

Yoyogi Dungeon, First Floor

One Night Prior

“Think we could have packed more sprays?” I grumbled.

We’d dashed off to Yoyogi Dungeon, right after Naruse had left, to prepare for our part in averting the worldwide crisis that had suddenly been laid at our feet.

First, we were going to need a way to deal with the slimes.

We decided to turn in a dungeon patent application for our slime-killing method to protect our financial interests when we made it public. But doing so meant another round of research to back our claims.

“It’d be really helpful if they just sold small sample sizes,” Miyoshi commented.

Surfactants were used across a wide range of scientific fields, and came in several different types. We’d spent hours transferring all the ones we could get our hands on into hundred-milliliter spray bottles.

“But, c’est la vie! We don’t know what exactly it is about the benzethonium chloride that produces the effect, so we couldn’t preemptively narrow our options down.” Miyoshi extracted a tablet from Storage. “Anyway, no time like the present! Let’s get testing!”

We had a mountain of surfactants to get through. Nothing to do but to just

wander around spraying them on slimes one by one.

“First, anionic,” Miyoshi commanded.

“All the bottles labeled ‘anionic,’ then? Got it.”

“Yep. Please go in order, one through six.”

I took out the trigger spray bottle labeled “Anionic #1” and nodded. “Here goes! Anionic number one!”

“Fire in the hole!”

I gave a nearby slime three spritzes. Each contained about 0.3 milliliters, for a one-milliliter testing size total.

“Noting alkylbenzene sulfonate: no effect,” Miyoshi intoned.

“I feel like I’ve heard that compound name somewhere before.”

“It was one of the main substances blamed for causing toxic foam around wastewater a few years back. If dodecylbenzene’s a bust too, we can probably write off all the alkylbenzene variants.”

“All right. Anionic number two! Take this!”

The bottle let out a quick hiss, the surfactant misting down on the slime.

The slime shook like a dog walking out of a bath, but showed no signs of damage.

“Aaand that’s top-shelf alcohol ruled out.” Miyoshi made a note on her tablet. “Go ahead and give number three and number four a try.”

“Shouldn’t I get a new slime? Probably not good to mix fluids.”

“True. If you could.”

“Roger.”

Keeping an eye out for any wandering explorers, we made our way through Anionic #6, ruling out all of the anionic samples.

“Shoot. I was hoping the olefin sulfonates would have some effect, given they’re an element of fish toxins, but...”

“Nothing at all,” I responded.

Though if the toxins had effects, they might not show up right away.

“Okay, next, nonionic.”

“Not cationic?” Cationic was the category to which benzethonium chloride belonged.

“We know those should work, so let’s check the others first.”

“Good point.”

I extracted Nonionic #1 and pointed it at a new slime.

I squeezed the trigger and the compound mist descended onto the slime. No obvious change took place.

The same was true of #2 through #5. As I took out Sample #6, something caught my eye.

“Why is this one not spray-type?” I asked.

“Oh, there’s a reason,” Miyoshi responded cryptically. “Just lather some on.”

“Okay...”

I dribbled a little of the jellylike substance out onto the surface of the slime.

“No reaction.”

“Hmmm...” Miyoshi sounded slightly frustrated. “Noted. No effect.”

Her reaction had me curious. “What is this stuff?”

“Menfegol.”

“What is that? It sounds like something you summon out of a pentagram.”

Longer chemical names would at least give you a sense of their compositions, but with ones like this, if you didn’t know them, you were out of luck.

“A nonionic pine resin extract surfactant. Ugh, I had to go through hell to get this.”

Miyoshi crossed her arms and nodded. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it looked like her face was getting red.

“Why? Did you need some kind of license to buy it?”

“No. In fact, you used to be able to order it directly from Eisai,” she said, referring to a particular pharmaceutical manufacturer. “But now... I had to extract it from a bunch of Love Dome Girlsguards.”

“Love Dome Girlsguards’?”

What in the black hell unknowable feminine product is that?

“It’s a condom with contraceptive jelly.”

Oh. That’s actually way less weird than I was expecting. What a weird name...

“And the contraceptive is a surfactant?”

“Yep. They used to sell them under the name ‘Epoca,’ under the old CandyFloat series branding.”

“Huh.”

Ignoring the somewhat evocative name, you’d have never actually guessed what the product was under the old branding. Worst-case scenario, someone might have mistaken it for a box of actual candy. I began to see why they’d changed it to “Love Dome.”

“The ‘O’ on the box is formed by a hand giving the ‘okay’ sign,” Miyoshi continued. “And the packaging is this snakeskin box I guess designed to appeal to women? The people at Okamoto Condoms are crazy.”

“Snakeskin appeals to women?” I was flummoxed.

“Well, at least in north and south Osaka. It’s like a military uniform.”

“Ah. I can see it.”

“Oh, but apparently they have a Danbo-box version too!” she said, referring to a cute cardboard-box character known for merchandise tie-ins. “I saw it when I was placing the order. That one was cuter. Or...well, actually it was just Danbo, but that’s cute!”

Apparently it wasn’t merely urban legend—Danbo really *could* turn up anytime, anywhere.

“They also made this ‘condom boot camp’ training video,” Miyoshi continued, on a roll. [\(6\)](#) “It was hosted by this character, Sergeant Condo, and he shouts at

the audience that they can go right back up their fathers' shafts if they don't have an Okamoto condom on hand!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"And that wasn't all! When you put it on, you had to shout 'Excalibur!' from the bottom of your heart."

"Well...it's hard to say anything. That's not so different from what we do," I admitted.

We were the ones running an *actual* nonsensical boot camp and shouting "I reject my humanity!" every time we used an orb.

At any rate, Miyoshi had apparently had to extract the jelly used for Nonionic #6 from the tips of one contraceptive condom at a time. It brought no joy to speak of or hear.

And the fruits of her labor...had withered on the vine.

"I also kind of had high hopes for the polyoxyethylene nonylphenyl ether, Sample number five," she commented.

"I mean, hey, I'd put my hopes in a chemical like that. Its name is certainly long enough."

"And thankfully understandable this time. It's just the components in order."

Granted, I wasn't sure how understandable it would be to someone without a background in chemistry. *Would you even know where to split the name?*

"Since you're bringing it up right afterward, don't tell me, is that one also...?"

"Yep. A nonionic surfactant with a protein denaturation effect. Also used in spermicides."

"Just hearing serious-sounding science words like 'protein denaturation' gives you some confidence it'll work as a contraceptive, huh?"

"Yeah. Although it also sounds kind of scary. But at such a small dose, it doesn't have any harmful effect on the human body. Although I hear wearing them hurts like the dickens for guys with STDs."

"Seriously?!"

Ooo-kay, we're going a little too deep on the deep-dive here. I gave a put-out smile.

We moved through the rest of the surfactants. Ultimately there wasn't a single success among the nonionic samples.

"Then I guess we shouldn't get our hopes up for the amphoteric types either," Miyoshi inferred, "though let's test them just in case."

The amino acid-based samples were a bust, as were the betaines and the amine oxides.

Finally, we were left with the cationic types, which provided the most vexing results of the day.

"So all cationic surfactants are actually quaternary ammonium salts, right?" I asked.

"Very good, Kei! You know your stuff!"

I took out the bottles labeled "Cationic #1" and "Cationic #2."

"Well I *did* used to do STEM work. I got curious about mechanisms of action, at least. So, should I start with our VIP, the benzethonium chloride?"

I pointed Cationic #1 at a nearby slime and gave it a spritz. The slime instantly burst into a wet puddle, unable to withstand even a mere 0.3 millimeters.

"That'll never cease to amaze me," I commented.

"Maybe it's weird to point this out now, but what's really amazing is that we still don't know exactly why that works." Miyoshi cocked her head. "What do you think causes such a violent reaction?"

"What? I mean... It's a surfactant. It reduces the surface energy so the slime can no longer hold its shape, right?"

"But then the other surfactants should do the same—or at least produce *some* more reaction than they did."

"Well, if the slime-killing efficacy stems from the antibacterial properties, could it be protein denaturation, or enzyme inhibition?" I struggled to recall my antibacterial mechanisms.

"If that were the case, then Nonionic number five should have produced a reaction too."

Right, the polyoxyethylenamagig or whatever.

"Okay," I responded, thinking. "Well, then maybe some effect on metabolism? Induced glycolysis or lactic acid oxidation? It could damage the membrane, causing bacteriolysis. A phosphorus or potassium leak?" I felt like I was grasping at straws.

"Inducing glycolysis *could* result in the collapse of the protoplasmic membranes... But in that case..."

Miyoshi grabbed Cationic #2 from my hand, then fired at a nearby slime.

The slime jiggled but held its shape. Miyoshi shrugged.

"Let me guess. In that case, you'd expect that one to have had an effect too."

"That was benzalkonium chloride." Miyoshi fired two more times at the slime, both to no more effect than the first. "That's weird."

"What's weird?"

"Benzalkonium chloride and benzethonium chloride are nearly identical."

"Nearly?"

"They're the same in terms of antimicrobial spectrum, same mechanism of action—they even produce the same side effects when they're used. What's so different?" She pulled the trigger one more time. Nada. "Is there something going on outside of normal science?"

So, we have already surpassed the realm of science... Miyoshi's slightly dramatic statement got me thinking.

Of course there could be some minuscule chemical difference we were overlooking, but—

"Hey, Miyoshi."

"What?"

"Remember the first time we went diving, when that dodecyl benzene sulfonate didn't have any effect?"

“Yeah?”

“Well, what were you thinking after that, when you tried the benzethonium chloride?”

“Hm?” Miyoshi tilted her head. “Hm. I’m not exactly sure, but I remember thinking that all the slimes around here looked kind of like bacteria.”

That tracked. Seeing them ooze on the cavern walls with their cores on display, anyone could be prompted to think of a cartoonish diagram of a bacterium structure.

“I was thinking the same thing. And did you know at the time that benzethonium chloride was an active ingredient in household antibacterial Makiron?”

“Of course.”

“So you were thinking the slimes looked like bacteria, and Makiron was an antibacterial agent.”

“Kei, ohmigod, are you saying—?”

Maybe, just maybe, *we* were the reason the slimes were weak against benzethonium chloride.

It made sense. We’d been comparing them mentally to bacteria, and then Miyoshi had sprayed an antibacterial agent on them. Because we’d *expected* them to be weak to it, they were.

Of course I couldn’t rule out Makiron playing a role.

“So,” I said, “if the slimes had flagella, maybe those Nonionic number five or number six samples would have worked.”

They were spermicides, after all.

“Then maybe,” Miyoshi responded, “other monsters...?”

“Possibly. Although if the ordinary explorer’s impressions have that much impact, you could wind up with the opposite too.”

“Opposite?”

“Help me! God! Nothing fazes this thing! It’s invincible! Any monster scary

enough to cause that kind of reaction..."

"Could actually wind up stronger."

"Maybe."

There were any number of explorers fighting monsters at that very moment. It was frightening to think that one of their reactions might change an entire species's physiology.

"Kei," Miyoshi responded flatly, "you haven't gone crazy from all the cleaner fumes, have you?"

I couldn't help but smile. "No, but it sure seems like I might have."

Even though I'd been feeling confident about my theory, there was another part of me—the part raised to believe in normal science—that wanted to read myself the riot act.

"You do know that the role of natural science is to *explain* the rules behind the world around us. Not to *make* them, right?" Miyoshi uttered condescendingly.

"Give me a break," I shot back.

Still, there was no way to prove that the act of discovering natural laws didn't give form to the law itself. If the law remained consistent afterward, there'd be no way to tell.

Humans determining rules for the natural world like some kind of gods? Yeah, right. Maybe my head really isn't on straight.

"However—as much as I hate to say it—I feel like you're probably right." Miyoshi put Cationic #2 back into Storage. "The way the dungeons work does align *way* too strongly with human culture."

"That was part of my thinking too."

"A while back you talked about the dungeons maybe having a 'designer.' That maybe whoever that is, it is someone from Earth. Well maybe we could flip the script just a bit and say that the dungeons have many designers. Maybe they somehow access Earthlings'—specifically explorers', I guess—thoughts and knowledge. Like a collective unconscious."

Jung's collective unconscious—a tapestry of common psychologies and symbols woven across the whole of the earth. Of course in this case, maybe it would be more apt to call it a kind of collective *database*—a shared repository of intermingled knowledge and memories for the dungeons. If the dungeons were tapping into *that*, our thoughts really *might* be rewriting the laws of nature in real time.

And in that case, D-Factors really might just be capable of restructuring the world.

"Although how the dungeons access that info is a mystery," I commented.

"I have a feeling Dr. Tylor's involvement might be at the bottom of this," Miyoshi responded.

"Dr. Tylor..."

He'd been in the back of my mind ever since I'd heard Simon's story. Sooner or later, we'd probably have to think about having a look through his private studies. But before that...

"Ah!"

"Kei? What is it?"

I'd been struck by sudden inspiration.

"I was just thinking—if this works the way we've figured, then even if it looks like an ordinary chemical reaction is happening, the slimes are *only* weak against benzethonium chloride."

When we came out with our patented slime-killing methods, scientists were going to bend over backward to try to replicate the results with other chemical solutions. Why rely on a brand name when a generic alternative would do?

Of course it would all be for naught. But that didn't rule out that someone could accidentally imagine a new weak point onto the slimes while they were at it.

"I suppose," Miyoshi responded.

"Man, this is all so insane."

"When you kill one monster, the D-Factors in all the others could restructure themselves accordingly, so it's not out of the question. Now a particle that can dynamically form any substance—that's the real insanity."

"Yeah..." I sighed.

It was almost like the idea of using nanomachines—no, more like attomachines (7)—to restructure genetic code. *Being able to restructure genetic code—just what the hell are those things made of, anyway?*

"Seems like dungeon-based research is ultimately going to become research into ways to manipulate D-Factors to become various substances," I mused.

"Are you saying everyone's barking up the wrong tree by focusing on preexisting dungeon materials?"

"No, that's important too. But we can probably hold off on expecting any truly earth-shattering discoveries until more teams reevaluate their approach."

I didn't think the kind of R & D we'd done back when we worked at Hokkoku Materials had been wrong. That kind of research had led to Powder and other important dungeon-based goods.

But truly disruptive innovation? It seemed a long way off to me.

"You know how there's research into trying to extract energy from magic crystals?" I asked.

"Yeah."

The research up till now had been a bust. Teams had been unable to control the speed of the extraction, with the energy bursting out all at once. However, the escaping energy didn't dissipate as light, or heat, but apparently...something else. Most likely D-Factors, I figured.

"Rather than trying to extract the energy from magic crystals," I pointed out, "they should be looking into manipulating the D-Factors themselves."

"I get what you're saying, but what, pray tell, does that look like?" Miyoshi gave a sardonic grin, perching cross-legged on top of a boulder.

Yeah, that's the catch. "Look into manipulating D-Factors." Easy to say, hard to do.

"Well, right now, their experiments mostly involve getting some kind of energy out of magic crystals, then trying to combust it to rotate generator turbines, right?"

"Right..." Miyoshi responded.

"Well, they shouldn't be bothering with the turbines. What they should be doing is coaxing the D-Factors making up the crystal themselves to become energy."

"Now you're making even less sense. How exactly are they supposed to 'coax' them?"

"I don't know!" I responded. "That's what we need more research for!"

"Energy" was a fuzzy concept anyway. For how often we used it, who could clearly describe what it was? Put simply, it was the ability to do work, but outside of the formula identifying it as an object's mass times the speed of light squared, I doubt anyone had a very concrete image of it.

So maybe the quest to get energy out of dungeons was really just the quest to better use D-Factors.

"You're so far up the creek without a paddle I can't even see you from the shore. Why not just try wiring a light bulb to a magic crystal and seeing if it lights up?"

"Very funny. But that actually would be the basic idea. And hey, we're already experimenting with manipulating D-Factors. Look at dungeonizing."

"I'd thought of it more as manipulating dungeon systems...but either way, it is weird that we're witnessing something akin to pair production in seemingly ordinary environments."

Any way you looked at it, D-Factors were sure to flip the scientific world on its head.

"They do say any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," I commented.

"They also say any sufficiently advanced troll is indistinguishable from a kook," Miyoshi shot back. [\(8\)](#)

Right. Can't tell a crackpot from a true believer.

"Yeah... If we try making all these claims about D-Factors and the collective unconscious now, they'll lock us up in a padded cell, huh?"

"Plus, we don't know that Making doesn't have something to do with it. Remember, Kei, the phenomenon with the slimes might still be all your fault."

"Whoa! Don't pin this on me! Not when I can incriminate you as my accomplice!"

The first one to actually fire the benzethonium at the slimes had been Miyoshi. I had been just a bystander. Sure, I'd been thinking the same thing she'd been, but if that were all it took, anyone within a certain distance of a Making user would regularly be affecting monsters.

"I'm afraid the burden of proof for claims of accomplice liability is higher than that!" Miyoshi smiled.

Maybe it had depended on our thinking the same thing, and any two people could have pulled off the same trick, whether they had Making or not. Who knew?

"Kei, the real problem here is..." Miyoshi began.

"Hm?"

"Whether or not it involved Making, the fact is we effected a new natural rule, and it stuck for everyone else."

"Well, assuming our theory is correct. In which case, yeah."

Mitsurugi and Saito had been able to replicate our slime-killing technique. Most likely our wheat experiments would prove replicable as well.

Maybe it was all like Plato's theory, by which an idea was synonymous with its form.⁽⁹⁾

"You know, all this madness could actually be good for humanity. Here's hoping. Who knows?" Miyoshi called Cavall forth, leaned herself onto his belly, and put her hand to her head. "Ugh... All this feeling like you're being forced to hold the reins of the future of society. It's exhausting."

“Funny, I was just feeling the same way.” I was in a deep squat like one of those cigarette smokers who loiter at gas stations. I looked up and our eyes met. We burst out laughing.

She was exactly right—we weren’t “holding” any reins. We were being “forced” to hold them.

By someone...or something.

“Anyway, I’ll look into other uses for magic crystals for a bit,” she added. “We have plenty stocked up to use as treats for the Arthurs anyway.”

“Thanks, Miyoshi. Always on to the next project.”

“I’m like a shark,” she responded. “If I’m not investigating something, I’ll die. Don’t you just hate that itch you get when you’re on the cusp of discovering something, but can’t quite figure it out?”

“The researcher’s burden. Although I usually regret finding out.”

The deeper we got into our research, the more it felt more like we were becoming the vanguards for some kind of disastrous world dungeon dependency, even if we didn’t intend it. It might not be long before we were being run out of town with pitchforks.

But humanity hadn’t come this far by turning a blind eye toward new knowledge. On the other hand, curiosity killed the cat—even if it had nine lives.

Still, the real test would come when we’d cracked all of the dungeons’ secrets, which I got the sense would happen sooner or later. No matter how convenient a use for D-Factors we found, putting all our eggs in that basket seemed like a worse idea than relying on a foreign power for every last drop of energy.

We had to ensure that other forms of technology didn’t stall. What worried me was that I doubted companies concerned about their bottom lines would feel the same.

“I hope we don’t destroy ourselves before all this is done,” I said glumly.

Miyoshi must have been thinking about the same problems I was, because she answered without missing a beat. “We’ll just have to pray supply and

demand provides some safety rails.”

No matter how convenient the dungeons were, at least there still wouldn’t be enough of them to fully meet demand. After all, medical developments hadn’t halted even after potions had been discovered.

“All we can do, I guess...”

Miyoshi tossed herself off of Cavall, planting her feet on the floor and striking a decisive pose, legs apart and arms akimbo. “Never fear! We might have the fate of the world in our hands, but we can always just ignore it!”

“You struck a triumphant pose for *that*?”

“Kei, obviously you haven’t heard the life mantra ‘Fake it until you make it.’ I’m *faking* that I’m all right. How about you?”

“Way ahead of you...” I stood up and brushed dust off the seat of my pants.

“Doesn’t seem like we really need to test the reactive and macromolecular surfactants,” Miyoshi commented, “but since we went through the trouble of bringing them, let’s give each a spray on the way out.”

“Got it.”

“And tomorrow! We set about saving the world from the crisis at Yokohama!”

“What happened to ‘just ignore it’?”

“Kei, humans are capricious creatures. And contradictory ones. You need to study up.”

“Enough with the fauxlosophy. What’s got you so worked up?”

“If the market crashes, we’re doomed!”

“There it is!”

Spritzing slimes with our remaining samples on the way to the exit, I thought about strategy for Yokohama.

I had one thing in mind, tentatively. Although whether it panned out was all in God’s hands.

If those hands existed, that was.

Aboard the Tokyu Toyoko Line

“Anyway, at the cost of much precious sleep, I was able to submit our patent application to the WDA.”

“Good work. I owe you. Thanks. You seriously look like you were up all night cramming for a test.”

“I take it you have some experience.”

“When it comes to one-night cram sessions, my skill level’s seventy-two.”

Given how busy I had been with part-time jobs as a student, my studying style could generously have been called the “comes through when it matters” type. Or less charitably “frantic all-night cramming.”

“Way to pick a half-assed number. I can’t tell if that’s supposed to be high or low,” Miyoshi grumbled. As if to punctuate her exasperation, the train shook a little. “Speaking of tests, it came down to the wire, but we got all the D-Card verifiers done in time for tomorrow’s National Center exams.”

“All two thousand?”

“Yep. Just yesterday.”

“That Nakajima guy’s crazy. He must have not taken a day off since New Year’s.”

“According to Midori, he was so loopy he was dancing around the laboratory belting out ’90s pop songs. ‘Yonsenman!’” she mimicked energetically, belting out the lyrics of a particular tune.

“Sounds about right” I couldn’t help but laugh, picturing it.

“Apparently the assembly was more time-consuming than preparing the circuit boards, but... Kei, did you do something?”

Apparently Midori’s email had seemed half thankful, half exasperated.

“Ah, right. I sent over Cathy on a day she didn’t have boot camp prep, and Mishiro on a day when she wasn’t diving, to help put the devices together.” I was pretty sure I’d told Miyoshi about it.

“You sent Cathy and Mishiro over there? Seriously?”

“Yeah?”

“I bet they were pretty surprised.”

They’d been hired as a drill sergeant and explorer, respectively, and wound up being asked to do fill-in electronics manufacturing using plastic food containers. It’d be like showing up for your first day of work as an IT firm engineer only to be led to the cafeteria and find out you’d be cooking soba.

“Something tells me Cathy got into it, at least.”

Miyoshi squinted. “Kei, did you do something to rile her up?”

Miyoshi seemed to sense that, ordinarily, there was no way Cathy would get gung-ho about dull piecework like this.

“‘Rile her up’? Come on, that’s unfair. Although I might have *somewhat* implied she’d be helping save the world.”

“What?!”

“A side project?” Mishiro furrowed her brow.

A few days back, I’d called for Mishiro and Cathy to meet me, explaining I had some extra work.

Right. Telling our first contracted explorer she had to help out with a side project that had nothing to do with exploring so soon after joining *would* draw some looks.

Cathy tilted her head at the Japanese word I’d used for “side project.”

“Kei, what is ‘nai-sho-ku’?”

“Uh, ‘extra job,’” I explained, switching to English momentarily before going back to Japanese. “Usually piecework,” I said, using the English phonetic phrase in Japanese.

“Piecework” referred to jobs that paid based on the number of items made.

Our regular boot camp opened in February, so right now Cathy didn’t have much on her schedule. There had been Team Simon’s boot camp on the twelfth, and then our preopening session for our civilian boot camp course was

scheduled for the twenty-sixth. True to form, Cathy and Miyoshi had selected a few relatively famous explorers for the preopening session. “A upfront investment,” Miyoshi had called it, smiling.

“Investment? We’re not trying to get money off this thing.”

“Kei, branding is branding!” She’d shot me a look of mixed pity and disappointment—her poor, fledgling business disciple.

Either way, that left Cathy relatively free through January. She was managing to stay busy spending her days diving with Team Simon in Yoyogi, tuning machinery, screening boot camp applicants with Miyoshi, training, and still somehow finding time for sightseeing. Still, I managed to squeeze my request in.

“The pay’s not bad, and you’d really be helping us out. Just here and there whenever you’re free. See, the world’s kind of in dire straits...”

“The world?” Cathy hadn’t seemed interested at first, but her eyes flared with excitement as soon as I said “piecework.” *Yep, this girl’s Saber to the core.*

“I mean, yeah. You could say this is going to help the whole world,” I responded.

“I’ll do it!” Cathy shouted, straightening up. “Point the way! Your orders, sir!”

Mishiro kept eyeing me skeptically.

However, Cathy *probably* wasn’t imagining at the time that the world-saving work would involve packing electronics boards into plastic containers like one of Santa’s little helpers.

“Kei, that was false advertising.”

“What are you talking about? It *is* necessary work to keep the world from descending into chaos as a result of the dungeons’ dark designs!”

Looking back on it, it was possible Cathy had misunderstood “piecework” as “peace work.” The two did sound alike after all.

“Anyway, I’ve been wondering—even if the verifiers let testing sites scan for

D-Cards, how exactly do they plan to prevent cheating?"

"They can just require that any test takers proven to have D-Cards leave them face up on the desk," Miyoshi said.

The back of D-Cards displayed party information, which meant students in parties could be barred from the exam venue.

"I don't think that'll be enough," I cautioned.

"How so?"

"For starters, a student could just borrow a card from a non-test taker and put that out on the desk. Then they could just keep their original somewhere else, telepathically communicating with their party members the whole time."

"You really think a college entrance examinee is going to go around asking other people for their D-Cards and risk outing themselves? Exam season is cutthroat; someone would report them right away. Plus, you'd need as many non-test takers willing to give up D-Cards as there are students taking the test."

"That's not impossible," I responded. "If prep schools have their test dates on different days, the students could trade off by loaning their cards out to students from other schools on those specific dates."

Sure, trying to borrow a card individually might be risky, but a school-based system would give you a network of accomplices, plus mutually assured destruction. Even if one student got cold feet, peer pressure and their own complicitness would quickly cure them of any pangs of conscience.

"So basically you're saying they'd have to recheck all the D-Card names."

"Yeah. And that only helps as long as the test taker hasn't borrowed it from someone who has the same first and last name. But I guess you can't prepare for every eventuality."

D-Cards didn't have addresses or ages or examinee numbers written on them. There was only so much to go on.

"Isn't that a little ridiculous? Going through all the trouble of tracking down someone with the same name and begging for their D-Card just to cheat."

"I don't know. If it were me, I might consider tracking down someone with my

same name and shoving a wad of cash at them in exchange for letting me use their card.”

Of course, it would be harder with a rare name, but most people would have plenty of matches.

“Glad to see your recent brainstorming sessions have been put to such productive use.”

“I’m just saying, if *I* can reach these conclusions, some desperate college hopeful could too.”

“And the odds of them actually going through with it?”

“I think by the point you’re thinking of ideas like these, it’s less likely you *wouldn’t* follow through.”

“Hrrmm...”

“But anyway, not our problem. The request we received was just for the verifiers. We aren’t obligated to solve the cheating issue as a whole.”

“Good point,” Miyoshi agreed. “And anyway, I have a feeling we’ll be able to come up with a solution for that soon, too, if we’re asked.”

“Huh?”

“That big shindig in New York, remember? Once we get all the party-formation experiment data from that, we might be able to cook something up to tamp down on cheating.”

“You mean a way to determine whether someone’s in a party even without seeing their D-Card?”

“Yep. Forming a party might produce some other observable change, like with the way we read stats.”

Oh yeah! Forming a party allowed you to access info on other members, and even share thoughts with them. Some kind of observable change in the explorer was totally possible.

“All we need to do is find some observable parameter tied to it,” Miyoshi commented.

“Pretty clever.”

There was probably some kind of observable energy transfer or output when one used telepathy. And if there was a perceptible phenomenon similar to what we found with stats, then we currently cornered the market on the technology needed to detect it.

“But there are so many variations of party formation, it’d be hard to gather the necessary sample data on our own,” Miyoshi explained. “That’s where the New York event comes in. I can’t wait to finally be able to comb through a whole bunch of different party status data at once.”

“Sure hope it goes well...”

“Me too...” She yawned again and rubbed her eyes. Then, supporting her weight with the train car strap, she leaned toward me and scanned my face. “Now then, Kei. What’s up?”

“What do you mean, ‘What’s up?’”

“Don’t play dumb. I thought for sure, given you’re Mr. Prudence, that we’d be catching the earliest train to give us the maximum time. Don’t tell me—you’ve worked up the nerve to go ahead and just torch the whole place as soon as we arrive?”

“What?! No way! Come on. I can’t just torch the place with magic while all these eyes are on it! I might as well waltz into the JDA and proclaim that I’m the Phantom!”

For starters, the direct entryway to the second floor was blocked by the JDA gate, and we were the only ones who could use the entrance from the first floor. If anything crazy happened in the dungeon right now, people would know it was us.

“That’s why I’m asking if you worked up the nerve.”

“Fat chance. I’m not ready to give up all my privacy just yet.”

“I don’t know. Seems inevitable at this point...”

“No defeatists here! Anyway, I just figured that even with the earliest train, we wouldn’t actually arrive at Sakuragicho until 6:20. That’d only give us forty

minutes until the cleaners' next division. It doesn't really matter if there are 450 or 900 at this point; that's still too many to handle. I figured a little extra sleep would be better."

"So you did look up the first train, then."

"I...! I might have..."

"So then what's the big idea? At work you were always 'never let something you could do today sit until tomorrow' and 'if you look before you leap, you'll never take the plunge.' What's up with the leisurely act this time?"

"I was always all *what*?"

Getting work done early was one thing, but not looking before you leap? Who said anything about taking plunges?

"So," Miyoshi said, ignoring my question, "what's the big secret plan?"

"It's not really a secre—"

"So there is a plan! Spill the beans!"

"All right. But it's really not much of a plan right now, so to speak. More of a vague idea..."

"Oho?"

"I'm thinking...we may not need to *defeat* all the monsters this time."

"*Excusez-moi?*"

I knew it sounded crazy. If we left even one multiheaded cleaner, it would just start dividing again. So how could we get out of this situation without killing all the monsters?

"Right now in Yokohama there are around nine hundred cleaners and eight times as many slimes, yeah?"

"According to our calculations, 896 cleaners and 7,168 slimes, of multiple varieties."

"Right."

"And?"

"Well, with those numbers, it shouldn't be hard to pick off 373 of a given species."

Miyoshi's eyes went wide with recognition. "Kei!"

"That's right. The Manor."

Judging from past experiences, spawning the Manor overwrote a large portion of the surrounding dungeon, including the area's native monsters.

It was just a hypothesis, but I figured the manor formed by restructuring the surrounding monsters' D-Factors. On the tenth floor of Yoyogi, for example, the throngs of undead had vanished for as far as the eye could see.

Given the small area of a Yokohama floor, less than one hundred meters squared, every monster in it would probably be sacrificed to the Manor's arrival. Even if a handful of stragglers remained, we could easily pick them off.

"If it's too hard with the cleaners, we could just target one of the slime varieties. You said yourself there should be more than seven thousand. We ought to be able to find 373 of something besides the standard variety."

Standard slimes had already been used to summon the Manor once. They probably couldn't do it again.

"Boss spawns are random. But even on the off chance the next one to spawn after the Manor leaves is a multiheaded cleaner again, equipped with our knowledge now, we should be able to kill it without letting it multiply."

"It might work..." mumbled Miyoshi. "It might just work!"

"It's definitely possible!"

It was an easier plan than defeating all of them. Instead we'd only have to pick off 373. No sweat...hopefully?

"And, the best thing about this plan," I continued, "is that we can pull it off without drawing any attention to ourselves."

"What do you mean? I hate to break it to you, but I'm pretty sure summoning the Manor in the middle of Yokohama is going to draw a few eyes."

"But not necessarily eyes on us!"

If anything, I was counting on the arrival of the Manor drawing everyone's focus. That would allow our role in facilitating its arrival to go unnoticed.

"If the Manor appears in the middle of a frenzy involving the JSDF and DSF, everyone's going to recall the rules for spawning it and wonder if *they* got 373 kills." It wasn't like anyone would be able to keep count. Especially with multiple types of slimes. "Given what we know about the cleaners, the DSF and JSDF will probably be using incendiaries, right?"

"I'd think so."

"Then it's not like they're going to be picking off one monster at a time."

Explosives and armor-piercing rounds were out of the question, which would restrict them to options like flamethrowers and Fire Magic—area attacks. Not only was it going to be impossible to keep count of individual kills, no one would even know for sure which kills had been theirs.

Plus, in the shock of all the monsters vanishing and the Manor appearing in the same instant, no one would even think to sweat the small stuff.

Probably.

"Regardless of divided attention, 373 kills is still a *pretty* high number," Miyoshi observed.

With that many monsters crammed into such a small space, focusing on a particular species for kills was going to prove difficult.

"If worse comes to worst, I *could* torch the whole place, but..."

I wanted to at least consider other options first. Thinking was what made us human, after all. To quote Blaise Pascal, "*Man may only be a reed...but he is a thinking reed.*"

"At least now I understand why you seem so calm."

With Miyoshi giving a rah-rah speech about how we could get this all over soon and be back to our normal lives, which seemed like the world's most ominous foreshadowing, the train sped into Yokohama Station.

Sakuragicho, Yokohama

The barren branches of roadside trees cast bleak shadows along the ground of the plaza outside of Sakuragicho Station as we made our way toward the Nouveau Mare entrance.

“Hm? ‘Urgent Notice’?” We were greeted by a large piece of paper, combining the aforementioned phrase with the declaration “Temporarily Closed,” pasted to the door.

“Hm. Figures. The JSDF should be here today too,” Miyoshi mumbled. “They can’t have customers around.”

“Ah.” There hadn’t been any public announcement, given the suddenness of the incident, so we watched several other people walk from the station to the doors, see the paper, then disappointedly turn away. “I guess it’s for the best. If anything goes wrong—*poof*—one less luxury shopping center.”

I shielded my eyes from the sun rays pouring down from the surprisingly bright winter sky, squinting as I gazed up at the building. A helicopter flew overhead, looking for all the world like a small fly crawling along blue wallpaper.

Miyoshi yawned, then slapped both hands to her cheeks. “Okay! Let’s head in and bag us one of those multiheaded cleaners for now!”

We’d decided our main mission for today should be to capture one of the multiheaded cleaners and run tests on it.

“Hold on a second,” I responded. “We can’t enter the dungeon until Naruse arrives.”

Ever since transferring ownership of the first floor of the Nouveau Mare to us, the JDA had vacated its former post in front of the first-floor dungeon entrance. Although, compared to the more rigorous system of checks at Yoyogi, registration at Yokohama had only ever involved a bit of light paperwork.

Since we’d bought out the floor, we were of course free to head down to the first floor of the dungeon anytime. And then, since Miyoshi was S Rank, she could head straight down from the first floor to the second, if she wanted, albeit at her own risk.

That was, under normal circumstances.

"I didn't expect that one clause to bite us in the ass so quickly," I commented.

In emergency situations, we needed the JDA's permission to enter the dungeon.

"Fair enough, I suppose," Miyoshi admitted. "Imagine the hassle that would come from someone unexpectedly getting caught in the frenzy today."

We couldn't directly enter the second floor from the outside gate. Even if we somehow could, we couldn't come up from the staircase without fighting our way through a crowd of slimes and cleaners.

Today of all days, we had to wait for a JDA member—Naruse—to come and sign us in.

According to talks with her yesterday, she would be coming to Yokohama anyway to escort the JSDF, and could sign us in at the same time.

"At the same time.' Can you believe her phrasing?" Miyoshi grumbled. "Like she wouldn't be able to come out at all if not for them. *We're* supposed to be her main work."

"Yeah. She is our dedicated supervisor and all," I agreed. If anything, it should have been the JSDF she was meeting "at the same time." The JDA should have been interested in what we had to say about the situation too. "Plus, tomorrow's the National Center exam."

With preparation for distributing and managing the D-Card verifiers on top of everything else causing the JDA to be short-staffed, it really was being the JSDF liaison that was the extra task for Naruse.

"Plus she's supposed to be spying on us. Obviously we should take precedence." Miyoshi smiled, then removed the security card to the building entrance from her pocket, undoing the lock.

"Although ever since we unveiled Storage, we don't have that much to hide from her, right?"

"Plenty, Kei. There's still Making, and Vault with its time-stopping powers, and the fact that you're Rank 1, and your stats. That's the whole point of trying to hide behind the JSDF response this time. Although I have a feeling we're going

to need those stats of yours anyway.”

“I’m still taking care to not blow my cover.” I followed Miyoshi inside and scanned the room. “Whoa. You’ve really loaded the place up.”

Shinshinan was in the midst of some serious interior decorating.

It had only been a few days since construction had started, but partitions and some complicated-looking equipment I didn’t fully understand were already in place.

“Ugh. We’re going to be out a ton of money if anything happens here,” Miyoshi lamented. “Those orders don’t go through quick either.”

Even paying through the nose, most of the instruments took time to deliver. The bulk had been made to order.

“Worse comes to worst, we could just pack it all up in Storage,” I suggested. It was a viable Plan B, but probably best not to do it too early and make it seem like we were planning for damage. “Hold on, is this all SketchPaint?” I was examining the walls.

SketchPaint was a translucent wall coating that turned any surface into a memo pad—useful for brainstorming meetings or jotting down personal notes.

Miyoshi gave a self-satisfied look, sticking up her pointer finger. “We can’t afford to discover marvelous proof of something that our margins are too narrow to contain. The scientific generations to follow us would be in disarray.”

“Right.” I smiled. “Don’t want to leave them with any three-century mysteries.” She was referencing Fermat’s Last Theorem, a mathematical conjecture Pierre de Fermat was said to have had proof for, but not the page margin space to write it down before his death. The quest to confirm his conjecture had taken more than three hundred years.

However, with a whole wall to use, I was fairly certain we could just about squeeze in his proof, or anything else we wanted to write down.

“What time was Naruse supposed to get here again?”

“After nine, so any minute now.”

We plopped ourselves down on folding chairs beside a plastic table, and

waited there in our beginner explorer gear.

Sitting there staring at it, the dimly lit staircase to the basement floors truly looked like the entryway to another world.

“To reiterate,” I spoke up, “our main goal for right now is just to see what the second floor looks like and ascertain the multiheaded cleaners’ weakness if we can.”

“That’s correct,” Miyoshi responded. “But Kei, I’m asking one more time. Are you *sure* it’s okay to be taking time with leisurely investigations like this? Remember, there’s still Plan Inferno.”

“If it comes to it,” I said. “But for many reasons, I’d like to have the JSDF and DSF handle this, or at least make it look like they did. I can’t say I like being at the center of a major incident like this. Maybe we *should* have just filled the whole thing up with cement while we could...”

I set three JDA-branded coffee mugs on the table, extracted a thermal-insulated kettle from Vault, and poured two piping hot cups of Miyoshi’s premium blend.

“Anyway, the multiheaded cleaners here are the first of their kind in the world, right?” I asked.

“As far as we can tell. We’d probably have had a crisis like this already if they were a common spawn. Plus they weren’t in the WDA database.”

“But there’s no guarantee now they won’t show up again,” I pointed out.

“Hopefully not as standard spawns.”

“Hopefully not, but that’s kind of a baseless hope. If these show up any more regularly, we can probably kiss planet Earth goodbye.”

“That’s if they maintain the same properties once they’ve left the dungeon. We can’t say for sure that they will until we’ve run more experiments.”

Their multiplication might have been connected to D-Factors. If that were the case, it might not continue once they were outside a dungeon, in an area with a lower concentration of D-Factors.

Still, magic could be used outside of dungeons, along with the Arthurs’

abilities...

“Speaking of,” I said, “it’s odd that they’ve been able to multiply so much in Yokohama, isn’t it? Supposing they use D-Factors, there shouldn’t be that many in a small dungeon like this compared to Yoyogi. Their initial division time was also the same as the amount of time it took Yokohama bosses to respawn. Maybe that’s how much time it takes to gather enough D-Factors in the dungeon...”

“But then it’d be weird if the number of D-Factors needed to go from 7 to 14 cleaners was the same as it took to go from 896 to 1,792, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah...” That was true.

It was possible it simply took an astronomically low number of D-Factors for each individual to divide, but thinking of the fact that it had taken four hours to gather enough D-Factors to spawn the first multiheaded cleaner, it would be unusual for their subsequent divisions to require so many fewer.

“In that case maybe it’d be easier to think that they’re creating their own D-Factors, and that the shared timing with the first spawn is just a coincidence.”

Miyoshi clapped her hands together as if she’d just thought of something.

“Kei, remember that professor in Chicago who recently published their theory about lowest-floor boss monsters serving as dungeon cores, acting as D-Factor factories? D-Factories?”

The theory had appeared in a column in a popular publication rather than a proper scientific journal article, but it had involved happening across a dungeon mid-formation at an abandoned church in Indiana.

“Assuming we can trust it, we know from inscription AU 10-003 that dungeon monsters are made of D-Factors, and that they release them when they’re killed,” I mused.

“And that would fit the theory that dungeons are made to spread D-Factors,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Right. *But*, if the bottom-floor boss monsters can produce that many D-Factors on their own, what’s the point of making other monsters for explorers

to kill?"

If the number of D-Factors released by a monster upon death was equivalent to the D-Factors used in its respawn, there would be no change in the total number. If the goal of the dungeons were to spread D-Factors, it would be more efficient for the core to just keep spewing them up like a chimney.

"So maybe they're just there to protect the core," Miyoshi offered.

Without other monsters present, the number of captured dungeons, and the speed with which they were captured, would jump up drastically—that was for sure.

"That's probably part of it, but wouldn't it make more sense," I suggested, "if each individual monster is able to produce D-Factors too? That way the number would actually rise proportionately with the number of monsters created."

"So the D-Factors are like a virus and monsters are the...carriers?"

"To get straight to the point, I feel like there are probably certain monsters that can reproduce." If the core monster could create other monsters, there was no reason ordinary ones couldn't do the same. Even if at a lower rate. "Look, we already have one example with the multiheaded cleaner—that's definitely not a lowest-floor core monster."

With its multiplying and dividing, it could slowly be increasing the number of D-Factors present in Yokohama. If it had that capability, there would be no reason to expect its divisions to taper off when it left the dungeon.

But then another mystery remained. If each multiheaded cleaner could produce sufficient D-Factors for multiplication on its own, why waste those D-Factors summoning eight slimes?

"I'm actually more confused by the summons than by the cleaners," I admitted.

"The summons'? You mean the slimes?"

Multiheaded or otherwise, cleaners were dungeon custodians. Their specialty was summoning slimes, but from what I'd heard, ordinary cleaners only summoned one or two at a time. From what we'd seen in the footage, each

multiheaded cleaner summoned eight without exception.

“Maybe they need that number of slimes for division. Maybe it’s the slimes that are operating as the D-Factor generators,” Miyoshi proposed.

“I’m starting to get the same feeling.” I took a sip of coffee, trails of white steam rising from the top of the cup, and stared into the well of inky darkness that was the top of the stairs. “Usually we think of monsters spawning when another has been killed. However, there’s at least one widely known exception.”

“When slimes appear to consume left-behind materials,” Miyoshi answered.

“Correct.”

Slimes would seemingly appear out of nowhere—maybe congregating from elsewhere, maybe spawning when no one was looking—to dissolve any foreign materials left in a dungeon for too long.

“I’ve been wondering this for a while, but what happens to the materials slimes break down? They don’t appear to leave any waste, or grow, or reproduce. Isn’t that too weird?”

“You think they’re converting them into D-Factors.”

Creating something from nothing? Now that would truly be playing god. I was more inclined to look for a rational explanation first.

Setting aside the idea of the core monster, which we could think of as being a super-concentrated cluster of D-Factors dropped into the earth, additional D-Factors being produced by converting a fuel source made the most sense.

And the slimes which appeared for earthen material breakdown made for prime candidates.

“It makes sense,” I asserted.

Yoyogi’s first floor was a slime haven, but it hadn’t necessarily been that way from the start. The common theory was that the number of slimes had grown over time as their population remained unchecked with explorers heading straight to Floor Two. But there were other places where people seldom hunted monsters, and they hadn’t seen the same explosive population growth.

“The first floor of Yoyogi is right by the entrance. There’s plenty of dirt that would get tracked in on explorers’ shoes, dust blown in by the breeze, you name it.” All of that had one thing in common: it was technically earthen material.

“So the slimes on Yoyogi’s first floor might be spawning when people aren’t around to break all that down?”

“Possibly.”

All dungeons had a relatively high concentration of slimes on their first floors. Owing to that, slimes had gained a reputation as being a beginner monster, but if my theory held true, there was something more significant to their first-floor presence than that. They congregated in places where the largest amounts of earthen materials were dragged in.

“I have to admit, that is a tidy explanation for slimes appearing on first floors, where there’s a lot of foot traffic,” Miyoshi admitted, “but allow me to poke two holes in it.”

“Two holes?”

“First of all, the slimes’ numbers.”

“Their numbers?”

“If your theory is correct, the number of slimes would just keep increasing without end as long as more foreign objects were dragged in.”

That was true. Even if they were defeated or removed, as long as they respawned each time, their numbers would never go down. Their numbers would just keep increasing, until—

“You’re saying that would inevitably lead to a stampede.”

“Although that would also mean that just about the only monster that could cause a stampede would be slimes,” she added.

“Well, the inscription only said stampedes *could* happen. They didn’t say what kind of monsters they could happen with.”

According to the dungeon inscriptions, monsters left alone in a dungeon whose numbers increased past a certain point would eventually overflow from

their native floor, no longer respecting floor boundaries.

But there were other mysteries left. Ordinarily monsters would respawn when killed or removed from the dungeon. If they began flowing out, another monster should appear in the dungeon to take the previous one's place. If their numbers had already been too high, it would be an endless, self-sustaining stampede scenario.

With a system to raise monster numbers but not to reduce them, each dungeon ecosystem could only be on the fast track toward collapse. They needed some system of, in game terms, despawns.

Of course that was all assuming that monsters respawned at a 1:1 rate in the first place. The size of larger dungeons had made it difficult to ascertain whether that was actually true. There might already have been situations where one monster leaving or dying didn't cause a counterpart to spawn.

"Let's ignore stampedes for a minute," I suggested. "Too many unknowns. If the number of slimes increased to a certain level, maybe at that point the dungeons wouldn't need to spawn new ones to deal with foreign material. They would already have enough to take care of it. Maybe slime spawns hit a cap?"

"Some rather optimistic speculation," Miyoshi responded.

If there was a slime cap, the current slime capital of the world, Yoyogi's first floor, certainly hadn't yet demonstrated it.

"Okay," I conceded. "What was the second hole?"

Miyoshi looked off toward that gloomy staircase in response, as if it were the issue itself.

"The entrances," she responded. "In Yokohama, sand and dust should get into the second floor directly, but normally no slimes spawn there. No smaller monsters spawn at all."

"That's true, huh? I guess boss floors might be an exception?"

"Then shouldn't we be able to set up permanent base camps on boss floors?"

Miyoshi's question took me by surprise. Certainly, there appeared to be no smaller monsters spawning on boss floors. So did that mean no slimes? I

couldn't come up with an answer on the spot, but the world would be in for a shock if that held true.

However, as a trade-off for being able to leave equipment unattended, there was no guarantee you'd live to see morning if you camped out at a place like Batian Peak. I had a feeling those who'd been crushed without warning by the god there might have had something to say about the choice between the inconvenience of slimes and making a respawning dungeon boss a bunkmate.

"And then, for example, the fact that the first floor of Yokohama is the only one that isn't a boss floor—"

"Could be because it needs to clean out foreign objects that come in from the surface, so it needs smaller monsters to do so. Is that what you were about to say? If so, whoa."

"Are we overthinking this?"

It was an interesting track of thinking, but just an idea for now.

"Incidentally," she continued, "there's a gate directly to the second floor from the outside now, which is seemingly against the dungeon's natural order. That entrance directly to the dungeon's second floor means foreign objects can be tracked in, but smaller monsters won't spawn to consume them. Which may mean..."

"The monster that started this whole mess was spawned as a response."

The straw that had broken the camel's back must have been Falcon Industries setting up their porter-testing equipment.

"It's the dungeon's curse! Humanity has trod where it must not!" Miyoshi proclaimed dramatically.

"Okay, now I feel like you might be overthinking things."

"I think it's pretty convincing," she said without a hint of concern, glancing at her watch.

"Naruse's still not here yet, huh?"

"It's still early. Probably hitting rush hour traffic."

Oh, right. Since she's coming on official JDA business, she might be taking one of their employee cars.

"Right. She probably would have told you if it looked like her plans were running late."

"Probably..." she said, distracted.

"What is it?"

"If we say the slimes are converting earthen materials into D-Factors, and the multiheaded cleaners are using slimes to produce the number of D-Factors they need to reproduce...what are they converting? There might have been enough dust and dirt piled up to have sustained the first round of divisions, but now? There can't be that much more foreign material getting in, and Falcon's equipment should have broken down long ago. Think they'll stop reproducing soon?"

"If this is how multiheaded cleaners function, they probably have a way to adapt to any environment."

"But how?"

"I mean even in a place like Yokohama, they probably have a way of ensuring they can convert *something* into the D-Factors they need."

"Something'? But there shouldn't be any more earthen materials there."

"Shouldn't there be? Think about it. A natural resource every dungeon floor so far seems to be brimming with."

"Wait, you don't mean... Air?"

"Bingo."

Air was abundant, and anywhere, and furthermore slimes could convert bits of it without risk of it running out.

"So the slimes are like seaweed in a fish tank."

"Pretty much."

"Man, I really do want a device that can measure D-Factors," Miyoshi uttered longingly.

"It'd be nice if I could check them with Making. Maybe if I level it up. What about Appraisal? Any prospects?"

"With Appraisal? What would I focus on?"

"Uh...the air?"

"Great, and you know what that would get me? 'Air. Used for breathing.' '20.93 percent oxygen, 79.1 percent nitrogen, 0.9325 percent argon' *at best.*"

Right. I guess looking at air, you'd naturally get information about...air.

"For the most part, Appraisal only lets you target things you can see with your own eyes," she clarified.

"I see."

At first, it had only allowed Miyoshi to check targets related to the dungeon, but as she'd become more practiced with it, its list of viable targets had gradually increased. Now Miyoshi could check information on a number of different types of objects, and the breadth of information displayed had apparently expanded as well. We weren't sure exactly how this skill level-up system functioned, but it was convenient.

"Anyway, it's not like we can build a detection device for a substance we don't fully understand," Miyoshi said defeatedly.

"First we'll need to find a way to isolate them."

"Looks like we're back to that 'use an electron microscope to confirm their existence' conversation from last year."

"If they're detectable on the atomic level, we might be in luck, but if it turns out they're subatomic..." I threw my hands up in the air.

"We published a report theorizing the existence of D-Factors already, so hopefully someone more capable will do the rest of that work for us."

The impact of dungeonizing had been so gargantuan that it was more probable efforts would focus solely in that direction, but people who had joined the field of dungeonology from condensed matter physics, materials science and engineering, or physical sciences should find the topic worth investigating. There was no shortage of researchers who were more gifted and well

entrenched in academics than we were.

Just then, Naruse walked in wearing her JDA uniform.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting.”

“Well, well, look who the cat dragged in.” Miyoshi leaned back in her chair and tucked her hands in her pockets.

Naruse frowned. “Me?”

“We were just wondering when you’d show up. Here.” I gestured to a seat at the table and poured coffee into the remaining mug.

“Thank you,” Naruse said, taking a seat.

“Sorry about the temperature. It’s pretty cold out today, but I guess since the whole building is closed down, there’s no one to run the thermostat.”

Indoors was better than the current weather, but having no heating was rough.

“My apologies,” Naruse replied. “Yesterday the Dungeon Agency put in a request with the management company to close the building on the eighteenth and nineteenth.”

“A direct government request?”

That must have been pretty inconvenient for the management company to respond to on such short notice. *So that’s why there was only that hasty sign on the door.*

“The Dungeon Agency’s really throwing its weight around, huh?” Miyoshi remarked, hugging herself and shivering.

Naruse gave a reluctant smile. She could neither confirm nor deny. But hey, people’s lives were on the line. If this wasn’t the time for a government agency to throw its weight around, when would be?

“So when is the JSDF arriving?” I asked.

“We could only ask that they arrive ASAP. They said they’d call when they’d left Camp Narashino.”

“You know in *my* book, Kei, ‘ASAP’ stands for ‘Actually (I) Suck At Planning.’”

“That’s just your time at Hokkoku talking.”

At our previous company, Hokkoku Materials, “ASAP” requests had been an unfortunate norm. Sometimes it felt like an entire canyon existed between the sales and development teams.

Naruse’s smile seemed to indicate a level of sympathy.

“At any rate,” she said, “the eighth division should occur at 1 p.m., so they’ll be trying to arrive before that.”

If they were too late for the eighth division, any time within the window before the next division at 7 p.m. would be about the same.

“So it’s finally time to see the famous Japanese Dungeon Attack Group in action!” Miyoshi cheered.

“Is it Team I?” I asked. “Weren’t they on the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi?”

“What do you mean, Kei? You don’t really need a country’s top team to search for Mining, right?”

When I thought of the Japanese Dungeon Attack Group, or JDAG, which I knew was involved in the Mining Search, I automatically thought of Team I, but Miyoshi had a point. Expedition-style dives required a large number of personnel anyway, and a number of firearms had already been brought into the eighteenth floor—there should be a sufficient number of explorers for the job even without Team I at the lead.

Thinking about it for a second, it almost seemed weirder that so many nations’ top teams would be involved in the search for Mining in the first place. But then they were largely bearing their countries’ national interests on their shoulders.

“So what has Team I been working on? Yoyogi capture progress?”

“Correct,” Naruse responded. “And apparently with great speed after obtaining your Water Magic orbs.”

I guess that explains why it sold for so much more than the first time at our recent auction.

“How far have they gotten?” I asked.

“I hear they broke through to the twenty-ninth floor the other day,” Naruse responded.

Whoa. That's further than I thought.

“When I talked to Simon near the end of last year, they'd only gotten to the twenty-fifth. Isn't that a little too quick?”

“The latest status reports are a little slow to reach the surface compared to the speed they've been progressing. Simon may not have had the latest news.”

“I see.”

So that was why Naruse had told us recently that the JDA Legal Affairs Department was happy we'd pressed the issue of renting dungeon land. It might not be long before Team I reached the safe area.

“Unlike previous expeditions, they aren't taking the time to explore every floor. Team I's main goal is to see how deep into the dungeon they can get relying on their magic, so they're heading down to the next floor as soon as they find the stairs.”

So that's why they're moving so quickly.

Then that might mean bad news if the JSDF got their hands on Mining.

“Naruse, remember our theory about Mining's mineral-drop determination?”

“I do.”

“Has anything come of that?”

“I'm afraid it hasn't. I haven't had time to move the conversation forward,” Naruse responded sheepishly.

There were the National Center exams to deal with this week, and just when preparations for that had seemed to be going smoothly, the current crisis had reared its head. It only made sense that the Mining conversation had been put on hold.

“With the JSDF moving that quickly, it might become a pretty big problem for Japan if regulations on Mining aren't set soon,” I cautioned.

I wanted to avoid a situation where the easily accessible upper floors' drops

were exclusively set to iron at all costs.

“I’ll bring it up with Saiga,” Naruse replied after a moment’s hesitation. Her shoulders slumped. Yet another urgent conversation on her plate.

“Well, Kei. We’ve gotten Naruse to sign off now. Shall we head in?”

“Yeah, let’s get going,” I said.

We stood up, but then it struck me to ask Naruse one other thing I’d been worried about.

“Is the main building going to be all right if things get a little crazy down below?”

Naruse grinned. “Funnily enough, we did ask the management and construction companies about that.”

The response was that the basement and the building from the second floor up were completely separated. There were no connection points.

The building was private property. In the event it was damaged, the owners would of course be entitled to compensatory claims. If a claim were brought against the government, Article 17 of the Japanese Constitution and the State Redress Act would obligate a payout. But if damage were caused by, say, Team I’s heavy weapons, it was unclear whether the claim should be addressed to the national government, the JDA, or the JDAG itself. Things would get even more complicated if the American DSF were involved.

JDA Legal Affairs would have wanted to avoid potential liability too, so it was only natural they’d try to build a line of defense by asking the company for a statement in advance. And now they had a claim on record from the owners that the basement was held to be a completely separate area from the floors above, allowing for a level of protected liability in response.

“Jeez, that must have really been rough,” Miyoshi uttered, frowning sympathetically.

“What must have been?”

“Having a dungeon form under a half-completed building you own.”

“Right. Man, the basement was even partially furnished.”

"Which, speaking of, do you think they could *actually* have sealed off the basement entirely at that stage?"

The building already would already have had several shafts connected to the basement for various uses. They could have done all they could to seal said shafts, which would likely have involved pouring in cement, but any of that cement crossing into the dungeon's boundaries would long ago have been eaten away by slimes, and no one knew exactly *where* the dungeon's boundaries started. It was possible that connection points were open again.

"I have a feeling that the reason they left the first floor of the building out of that statement wasn't *just* because they'd sold it to another party—in this case, us."

"You're saying the construction company wouldn't really know either?"

"Haven't we proved sufficiently how vague dungeon boundaries can be?" Miyoshi countered.

There was the matter of the staircase dungeon "floors" too.

It was obvious that the upper building starting from the second floor wasn't part of the dungeon, and that the first basement floor onward was, but the first floor of the building existed in a dangerous gray zone. About the most we could say was that the first floor from the ground tiles upward was safe. But connection points...

The construction company wouldn't be able to give a clear answer to that if asked. No one could.

"I guess it'd take more 'analysis,' but that would really just involve taking a sledgehammer to every wall and floor tile to see where the unbreakable material starts," I admitted.

When a dungeon supplanted an existing structure, it formed a perfect copy of the original space, ruling out most nondestructive means of pinpointing where the dungeon boundary began. The only way to confirm for sure whether something was part of the dungeon was to try to destroy it. And destroying the infrastructure of the first floor didn't exactly seem like a good way to keep a whole building intact.

"Looks like the 'pour concrete down the staircase' plan might have failed us after all," Miyoshi said.

"Right, since there might be other connection points. It might have all been for nothing."

"Don't tell me...you were *serious* about that?" Naruse, who had been listening silently to our conversation, suddenly spoke up.

Miyoshi struck a devilish pose similar to the one she had yesterday, sticking both hands to the sides of her head and holding up her pointer fingers while letting out a devious cackle. I gave her a light smack on the head.

"Oof!"

"We're kidding of course! There's no way we'd do something like that."

"Are you suuure?" Naruse clutched her tablet to her chest, eyeing us suspiciously.

"Sure as can be."

I had a feeling Miyoshi snickering behind me undercut my attempt at a serious response.

Naruse let out a little sigh, then asked, "So, what's your plan?"

Apparently the JDA had a vested interest in seeing what we'd do to avoid no-fault liability claims.

"First, a little reconnaissance," I responded. Luckily the second floor of the dungeon could be accessed just by taking the stairs. "We'll scope out the scene, then we're planning on capturing one of the cleaners to run tests."

From what I'd read, we only had to look out for the cleaner's creepy lamprey-like mouth. Otherwise it didn't possess any strong means of fighting back. I'd thought it might be able to whip its taillike torso at explorers as an offensive tactic, but apparently it was too fragile for anything like a direct tackle attack.

Although in this case we were dealing with a mutated variant. We couldn't take anything for granted, hence the need for tests. To know one's enemy was to know oneself. Sometimes the best offense was hitting the lab before hitting an enemy.

“Capture?” Naruse asked worriedly, seeming unsure whether that would be possible. “They’ve already divided seven times. According to our calculations, there should be 896 cleaners and 7,168 slimes.”

“Don’t worry. If they’re spread out evenly, there should still only be one per square meter.”

The basement floor was nine thousand square meters. Of course they were probably a little more bunched up than that...

“Yeah. A few slimes aren’t going to stop us. That’s nothing we can’t deal with,” Miyoshi added casually.

Naruse narrowed her eyes. “‘Nothing you can’t deal with?’”

Slimes couldn’t be sliced or destroyed with blunt force, and were infamously difficult to peel off once they’d affixed themselves to a surface. It was hard to see how they *wouldn’t* be an impediment to our goals. Naruse’s skeptical response was perfectly natural.

Miyoshi, are we revealing our slime-killing method right here?

I don’t see how we can avoid it. We did all the prep work to unveil it yesterday anyway.

However, just when we were about to let Naruse into the secret slime-killing club, her phone buzzed.

“Ah, sorry.” She grabbed it and turned her back to us.

From what we heard of her conversation, it seemed like the JSDF had taken off and were making their way over here. Naruse had to make preparations to receive them.

“Looks like the JSDF’s on their way,” Miyoshi commented.

“If Team I is coming from Narashino, then how long to Sakuragicho?”

“By car?”

Narashino was host to the First Airborne Brigade, so it was possible they were taking a helicopter, but it was unlikely they’d be able to secure a ride in one so quickly. Plus, there wasn’t a heliport around other than the one used for

emergency rescues, and there wasn't any place nearby to land a helicopter without attracting undue attention.

"I think we can probably assume they're coming by car. A helicopter seems out of the question," I answered.

"In that case, it'd probably take more than an hour even going along the Bayshore Route and Yokohane Line," Miyoshi answered, referring to major highways into Yokohama. "It could even take two hours, depending on how bad traffic is."

"That'd put them at 11 a.m. for dungeon entry at the earliest." The next division was at 1 p.m. That would still give them time.

"Looks like we've established our time limit," Miyoshi said.

We hadn't properly spoken in two months, but First Lieutenant Kimitsu—Iori—probably still remembered me as an acquaintance of Simon's and a member of D-Powers. I wanted to avoid passing her in the dungeon doorway if possible.

"Understood. I'll get ready." Naruse hung up the phone and turned our way. "I'm sorry, but I have to head to the second floor gate right away. But I'll hear *all about* this slime business later."

She leaned hard into "all about," gave a curt bow, then dashed off.

"Well then," Miyoshi piped up, "shall we get going too?"

She took two flashlights out of Storage, put one of them in my hand, turned hers on, and made her way toward the darkness.

Japanese Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF) Camp Narashino

Master Sergeant Hirohide Hagane sat in the backseat of a Humvee that had just peeled out of Camp Narashino onto the Narita Kaido Highway, midway through explaining the details of their current operation to First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu, who listened next to him with her arms folded and a grim look on her face.

"The goal is to exterminate all of the mutant cleaners. Our main obstacle is slimes."

Staff Sergeant Taito Kaiba cocked his head incredulously upon hearing what their targets would be. Here he'd been wondering what they'd been mobilized for on such short order, and couldn't help but feel as though the wind had been taken out of his sails.

"Something you'd like to say, Kaiba?" Hagane asked.

"It's just...slimes? They're sending us in for that?" If all that was required was getting rid of a few slimes, certainly that seemed like work for another team, or even general explorers. "Surely they don't need to drag *us* out just to wipe away a few snot bubbles."

Hagane sighed, gave a brief summary of the report on Falcon Industries' first encounter, then passed them all tablets displaying the relevant supporting data.

"What the—?" The shock was visible on Staff Sergeant Shinobu Sawatari's face as he watched the footage. The multiheaded cleaner had been blasted into seven pieces by twenty-three-millimeter rounds, but each piece had regenerated into its own copy.

"As you can see," Hagane began, "our target this time has some unprecedented regenerative abilities."

So that was what was making Lieutenant Kimitsu so glum, Sawatari realized—she was famously *not* a fan of cleaners.

"That isn't all," Hagane continued. "At fixed intervals, they multiply."

The cleaners in the footage, who had stopped moving for a moment, suddenly began wriggling again. Then one became two, doubling their total number.

A constantly doubling target within a fixed space. If they failed to contain the situation, and the number of monsters increased unabated—

Each member of Team I was beginning to understand why they'd been mobilized.

"This might become a joint operation with Team Simon too," Hagane announced, concluding the briefing.

"Team Simon? You mean the DSF?"

“Yes. They’ve been summoned up from the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi.”

“Summoned? But they’re under the direct jurisdiction of the president...”

In other words, their orders must have come from the US president himself.

“But why is America getting involved in an incident in Yokohama at this stage?” Kaiba asked.

“Beats me,” Hagane responded. “But the chief of staff, Joint Staff, got called in by the prime minister and director of cabinet intelligence and heard it repeated ad nauseam just how critical the success of this mission was.”

American military bases might not have been too far from Yokohama, but Yokosuka was still a good distance away. No one could quite understand the need for America’s involvement, but in terms of explorer ability, Team Simon was among the best in the world. They would at least be assets with their skills.

“But judging from the data,” Kaiba began, “howitzers and armor-piercing munitions are going to be—”

“Off-limits,” Hagane replied.

“But hold on. That means we can’t use bullets or artillery shells at all?”

Just about all of their current weaponry consisted of artillery shells and small-arms ammunition. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that banning explosives and armor-piercing rounds cut off a majority of their options.

They might as well be fighting with their hands tied. At the same time, it didn’t seem likely they could use hand-to-hand combat in this case. They couldn’t afford to have targets sliced up with combat knives regenerating from the pieces.

“You can use anything you want so long as you don’t leave any pieces of the enemy behind.”

“Oh, like that’ll be easy,” Kaiba commented caustically. According to the materials they’d been given, any scattered piece of a multiheaded cleaner would regrow into its own copy. “But it’s Yokohama. We could set up a heavy machine gun at the entrance, then try blowing them away from a distance. Are these things supposed to regenerate no matter how small the scraps are?”

Hagane shook his head. There was nothing in the data indicating their regenerative limits.

“Come on. There’s being outmatched and there’s not even showing up for the game. What are we even going in for?”

“To protect the peaceful existence of Japan.”

Hagane’s unexpectedly sincere response to Kaiba’s quibbles roused Lori from her silence. She unfolded her arms and opened her mouth to speak.

“Our first tack will be to try burning them.”

The color drained from Kaiba’s face. “Does Japan have the incendiaries for that?”

In terms of incendiaries, the JSDF possessed a nominal number of grenades, and perhaps a few flamethrowers.

“Apparently they’re getting every usable weapon they can and having them sent to Yokohama,” Hagane explained.

The cleaners they knew were weak to fire. If they could burn away their bodies entirely, that would leave nothing to regenerate or divide from. Team Simon’s summons were also likely not unrelated to their possessing a member known as “Guren”—Japanese for deep crimson, the color of roaring flames.

Natalie “Roaring Flame” Stewart, one of the world’s most renowned users of Fire Magic. She hated her English moniker, which seemed to mock her disposition, preferring instead the dignified quality of the Japanese term. She had been raised at the US Army base in Yokosuka until she was twenty-two, and was entitled to the choice.

“But we’re dealing with an area of nine thousand square meters filled with, if my calculations from the data are correct, 896 cleaners and up to 7,168 slimes—at present.”

At Sawatari’s reported statistics, Kaiba’s mouth curled into a deep frown. He pointed to a map of the first floor.

“The JGSDF only has a few dozen portable flamethrowers.”

Each flamethrower’s capacity was extremely limited too—only enough for

about ten shots. Given Yokohama's structure, it might be possible to make runs back to the surface to top off their fuel, but supplies wouldn't be infinite.

"I can't guarantee how effective it'll be, but I can just about guarantee we won't have enough incendiaries," he concluded.

"We can't go using flamethrowers in such a narrow space anyway. If we had some thermobaric grenades..."

Kaiba, a weapons hobbyist, ran through his memories. "Picatinny Arsenal developed a thermobaric grenade in 2012. The XM1060. America's been using it for years, so I hear."

Sawatari looked at Kaiba with a mix of awe and exasperation that he had even been able to pull out a model number. "There's no way the JSDF has those. We'll be lucky to get our hands on an M14."

With its small damage radius, the M14 incendiary grenade was normally only used for damaging equipment. It wasn't meant to be used for lethal attacks. It was too easy to dodge. Owing to its narrow range of uses, the JSDF didn't keep many of them around.

"No good," Hagane said. "We could bring them all in and it wouldn't be enough."

America might have some more to deliver, but the JSDF's arsenal was too paltry to do the job.

In addition, the M14's damage radius was a mere two meters. There was no guarantee they'd be able to take out multiple cleaners with one blast. And any cleaners blown apart but not incinerated would regenerate and add to the total numbers.

"When it comes to combating targets other than people, all the JSDF has is planes, tanks, and armored vehicles. All beyond useless right now." Kaiba threw his hands up in the air. "Heck, all we can get for incendiaries from Nippon Koki is twenty-millimeter grenades." Even as one of Japan's few large-caliber munitions manufacturers, Nippon Koki's options were limited.

"Maybe we should just ask the Americans for what we need," Sawatari suggested.

Hagane grinned bitterly at the comment. All that debate, just to wind up at such a simple conclusion.

“I’m told they’re currently working on scraping together everything they can, and taking requests. But that doesn’t mean we can get everything we ask for.”

The types of weaponry the JSDF could use were severely limited.

Just as exterminating dangerous wildlife was held to be work of hunters, with the JSDF being prohibited from using weapons to do so, so too was exterminating dungeon monsters held to be the work of explorers. There was in fact little legal precedent for the JSDF to use weapons under any circumstance.

The Japan Dungeon Attack Group was an organization formed in conjunction with the JSDF, but they performed their duties in the capacity of explorers, not soldiers.

In fact, the legal framework for them to use JSDF gear as explorers had generated a firestorm of controversy. Some held that it was a relaxation of JSDF firearm laws.

As a result, their ability to request or secure new weaponry at this juncture was severely limited.

“What about just pouring in a bunch of gasoline and sending the place up in smoke?”

It was a primitive suggestion, but gasoline burned at temperatures around 1,500 degrees Celsius. That should be enough to reduce the cleaners inside to ash. Even a simple Molotov cocktail was a viable incendiary.

“But it’s an underground space. We don’t know how well it’ll burn.”

“Then we bring in some oxidizers to act as accelerants.”

“Hold on. It may be a dungeon, but there’s still a building up top. Are you trying to recreate 9/11 in the middle of Yokohama?” Hagane inquired.

If they burned enough gasoline to cleanse nine thousand square meters of basement space, even if the dungeon remained, if there were any transfer of heat between it and the aboveground floors, the building’s steel beams might not be able to support its weight. The entire structure could collapse.

“Dungeons exist in a separate plane. There shouldn’t be any heat transfer, right?” Kaiba argued. Data reception didn’t work in dungeons, so it wouldn’t be odd if heat was similarly sealed off.

“That’s a critical point to leave up to speculation,” Hagane declared. He shook his head. “Three years have passed since the dungeons appeared, and there’s still much we don’t know.”

Owing partly to how difficult monsters made it, dungeon research hadn’t progressed far—especially in areas that didn’t seem likely to return immediate financial dividends. Among such areas was the nature of the damage transfer between dungeons’ indestructible infrastructures and the surrounding areas.

“Water Magic?” Hagane suggested at length.

The users of the Water Magic orbs from D-Powers’ first auction had been Hagane, Kaiba, and Sawatari.

Career military men to the core, they had spent each and every day practicing and inventing new applications for the skill—their dedication was on a completely different level from hobbyists like Yoshimura and company.

“If the monsters breathe, then maybe we could cut off their air. But in combat scenarios, Water Magic’s mostly used for striking, cutting, and piercing...”

If their targets were human, the conversation would be almost upsettingly simple—it didn’t take much water to induce death by drowning. However, figuring monsters might work the same, and be equally susceptible to water infiltrating their respiratory organs, the group had been practicing techniques such as water-bubble encapsulation.

If they could kill the cleaners by forming water bubbles around their heads, or their entire bodies, that would be one way to exterminate them without leaving pieces from which to reform.

“Suffocation?” Hagane responded. “Worth a try.”

Sawatari cocked his head. “But at this point there are 896 of those cleaners to worry about. Even if drowning works, would we go around killing them one at a time?”

"If it works, we could seal off the space and try pouring in twenty-seven thousand cubic meters of water," Hagane suggested.

They were right by the sea, and they didn't need to concern themselves with procuring fresh water or anything difficult like that. In addition, such a plan would leave the upper floors intact. Although that didn't preclude water damage to lower floors.

"Oh, right, it's just a problem of scale" Kaiba responded sardonically. He was a bit concerned by the speed with which Hagane had put forth such an impractical plan. However, if it got their necks out of this particular cleaner-shaped noose, maybe no plan was too costly or impractical. Desperate times, and all.

"What about freezing?" Sawatari asked.

"Can we do that?" Kaiba responded.

Kaiba folded his arms. "Maybe to a range of two meters." He closed his eyes. "So that would only get us a few at a time."

Spreading merely a thin layer of ice over the monsters would simply allow them to shake it off. They could try freezing them solid, but that would require encasing them in thick blocks of ice. The MP consumption would be fierce.

"Then liquid nitrogen bombs?"

As soon as the slimes thawed out, they'd be flinging liquid nitrogen around.

It was cheap, and unexpectedly, it might work.

However, Sawatari pointed out one danger.

"It's an interesting idea, but aren't pressurized explosions likely to break apart the cleaners?"

"The pressure is in the magnitude of 0.3 megapascals. I don't think it would cause that much damage, but..." Kaiba responded.

"That's not all," Hagane pointed out. "These guys can float in the air. If any freeze, fall, and break, they might just wind up regenerating. We can't go with strategies that might exacerbate the situation."

“Dammit,” Kaiba spat. “So we’re hamstrung. Perhaps our best bet is to just play recon for the Americans coming in.”

Kaiba’s words were true. Everyone in the Humvee knew it. But Chief of Staff Noga had informed Hagane that all three of the prime minister, Director of Cabinet Intelligence Murakita, and National Security Advisor Uchitani had for some reason shown reluctance to pass the baton to the States.

This was a monster that could perhaps threaten the whole world, and America and Japan had a pact to respond to dungeon crises together. They had a responsibility to try to nip the problem in the bud while they still could.

However, Iori sensed that something beyond simply saving face was behind the request.

“Lieutenant Kimitsu?” Hagane called out, seeing her brooding.

“Ah, it’s—it’s nothing,” she responded, dropping her morose demeanor.

The rest of the team felt their coils unwind with the visible relaxation of their ace.

“Well, we’ll try everything we can for now,” Hagane concluded.

After a moment, Kaiba punctuated the silence with, “There’s also electricity.”

“Electricity?”

“When living things come into contact with it, if the voltage is high enough, joule heating can disrupt their natural functions.”

Sensing the...rather fantastical, cinematic thrust behind Kaiba’s suggestion of a kind of weaponry that had been used against monsters such as Godzilla and *Patlabor*’s WXIII, Hagane accepted that it was at least better than giving up hope. Still, he couldn’t help but sigh internally.

“Where are we going to get enough electricity to do that, Kaiba?” he asked as if speaking to a child. “An airport ground power unit?”

The JSDF did possess some souped-up high-voltage units used to power fighter planes. However, the amount needed to power those fighters was still at most 115 to 200 volts. It wasn’t enough to use for monster suppression.

“Ah, right. They started out with fifty thousand volts for the first *Godzilla*, then upped it to thirty million volts for *Mothra vs. Godzilla*.”

Letting Kaiba mumble to himself about this and that artificial lightning generator, Sawatari steered the conversation back toward more practical solutions.

“If we’re talking portable generators, I recall IHI Jet Service helping move some thirty-six hundred kilovolt-ampere generators from Tokyo Electric for Fukushima disaster relief.”

“Then they’d be in Fukushima or Kawasaki. We don’t have time to bring them in.”

“The JASDF has mobile electric power plants for charging Patriot missile launchers.”

“Even more out of the question,” Hagane replied.

The EPPs were made for charging Patriot engagement control stations and radars, with an output of 150 kilovolt-amperes. And they only had two. Even if the power were sufficient, borrowing them would mean losing power for their Patriot launch systems, leaving Japan unable to respond to air attacks. They’d be cutting the entire JSDF, and its purpose for existing, off at the knees. Hagane had been told the JSDF would procure any equipment that seemed useful, but they had to be reasonable.

“We’re going to Sakuragicho. There ought to be some high-voltage lines we can use.” Sawatari pointed to a high-voltage power grid he’d been viewing.

“Would we be able to arrange that in time?”

“Maybe. If we can have a cable run from somewhere in the Kita-Kannai or Kannai areas. There should be 154 kilovolt transformer stations around there.”

That was assuming all talks went smoothly with the Tokyo Electric Power Company. It still didn’t seem like a very realistic plan to rely on with only a few hours’ time.

But at this point, they all realized, it was a matter of nothing ventured, nothing gained. They had to exhaust all their options, pursue every avenue at

their very limited disposal. Iori put in a call to Major Terasawa.

Nouveau Mare, B2

“Almost there.” I was speaking as much to Miyoshi as to myself, as we carefully descended the staircase running alongside the basement floors. We could see the doors to the second floor once we were part way down, their glass panes illuminated by small, rectangular bracket lights blinking on and off along the stairwell. Now standing some distance away, we could even see inside.

The second basement level—I guess it would be easier to call it the second floor of the dungeon—was even more dimly lit than the first.

Beyond the doors, we could see something that resembled fluorescent lights flickering on and off. But far from providing illumination, they only served to further accentuate the dark.

“I can almost hear their buzzing,” I commented regarding the lights. “Are those part of the dungeon too? Dungeon fluorescents? The dungeons really don’t overlook anything.”

“The first floor’s emergency lights were indestructible, so these should be part of the same deal.”

“You’d think they’d have switched to LEDs...”

“LEDs flicker too. When there’s a malfunctioning rectifier or something.”

“Malfunctioning rectifier”? Sounds like a fire hazard.”

“Anyway, let’s take a closer look.”

“How close?” I whispered. “Those doors open up into the stairwell, you know.” I didn’t like the thought of a bunch of monsters pouring out as soon as we took one more step.

“Don’t worry. I’m prepared.” Miyoshi pulled out a set of rubber mallets and wedge-shaped doorstops.

“One set of double doors. One stopper under each, huh?” I looked ahead at

the imposing industrial entrance.

We didn't know what would happen if we accidentally banged on the doors. We stayed low and crept along the ground until we were just in front of them, then put the wedges in place.

"Now!"

We both hammered our wedges in simultaneously.

A dull thud reverberated through the doors, followed by the sound of something thwacking into them from inside. The wedges groaned under the strain.

I looked up at the doors. What was waiting for me—

"Gwaah!"

—was like something straight out of a nightmare, clinging to the glass.

"That...is pretty disgusting," Miyoshi mused, walking toward the two circular mouths suction-cupped to the door, each full of sharp teeth and measuring about thirty centimeters in diameter. "Are you *sure* you want to run tests on it?" She eyed me with suspicion where I lay toppled on the floor.

"No choice," I sighed. I pushed myself up and dusted myself off. "It's like I said earlier. Just one of these things appearing as a normal spawn could be a doomsday scenario." I tapped on the glass right in front of those nightmare mouths. "Thankfully they spawned here first."

"Thankfully?"

"All we have to do to reach them is head straight down the stairs. We can even capture one with a little ingenuity...probably. And we can run experiments on them here in the dungeon, using the staircase area." Had the cleaners spawned anywhere else, it would have been almost impossible to take time to run tests on them both in and outside of the dungeon. "Plus, apparently these guys are pretty weak individually. If they ever do spawn in Yokohama again, we can probably devise a system and method for someone stationed here to take them out before they reproduce."

"And you'd be the one devising that system?"

“Someone has to. They’re like an environmental problem—a threat to everyone living on Earth. We all have to do what we can.” I shrugged. “Plus, it seems like the perfect act of altruism to garner favor for our dungeon-support company.”

It’d be on par with developing the treatment for an incurable disease, but much less costly, considering how infrequently cleaners would probably spawn. Plus, it would be worth it just in terms of risk management.

“That’s very generous of you,” Miyoshi commented, “considering you’re just a part-timer.”

“Ah, right!” Actually, I’d technically been unemployed since leaving my job last fall. “What do you think happens with my unemployment, come to think of it?”

Since I’d left of my own accord, it would take three months for me to be able to access unemployment. Still, I should just about have been eligible.

“Did you report your loss of work to the government employment service center?”

“Can’t say I recall doing that.” Things had been so crazy since then—we’d been pulled from one major event to another. It had completely slipped my mind.

“Then I wouldn’t be expecting any checks in the mail.”

“You’re right,” I responded. “Oof. Well, time to channel all my misplaced anger into catching one of these things!”

“Motivation is one thing, but you might want to make sure your anger is pointed in the right direction.” Miyoshi shrugged.

“Easy for you to say.”

“It is! Especially when I have something more useful than anger to point! *Et voila!*” Miyoshi extracted a long stick with a mechanical claw at the end from Storage. “One extra large snake-catcher stick!” she exclaimed. It had a handle on the other end which you could squeeze to cause the claw end to pinch shut—not unlike a Magic Hand toy.

“Are you really going to be able to catch a cleaner with that?”

They were at least thirty centimeters in diameter judging from their mouths. That alone put them on par with giant anacondas, and their bodies seemed even thicker.

“They make ones for pros with hooks on the end too...”

“Well, at any rate, I don’t think you’re nabbing them with a snake-catcher stick. They’re way beefier than we thought.”

Just then, a slamming sound echoed from behind the door, and before we knew it a number of translucent blobs had piled up on the other side of the glass.

“Looks like their hackles are up,” I commented.

Displaying a variety of colors, one slime after another piled up against the door. It was like a Puyo Puyo game, although I didn’t think we could expect these to disappear when a color lined up.

“The red ones are blood, the green ones poison, the black ones dark, and the brown ones mud. The blue ones are...the same ones we’ve been dealing with up to now.” Miyoshi stared at the glass, scanning the different varieties with Appraisal as the slimes continued to accumulate. “Hm?”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Most don’t have asterisks on them, so that’s a relief, but there’s something weird with their names...”

According to Miyoshi, monsters that had been used to summon the Manor before, or special exceptions which couldn’t be used to summon it at all, showed up with asterisks attached to their names. No matter how many of them you killed, the Manor wouldn’t appear.

Since the monsters this time were products of division and summoning, we were a little worried they might all show up with asterisks, but apparently that was an unnecessary fear. However, instead, the slimes piling up against the door displayed names like “Blood Slime 246,” or “Poison Slime 739.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Maybe just the order they were summoned in, or something like an ID?”

“What about the cleaners?”

“Let me check...” Miyoshi stared into one of those circular nightmare mouths. “Same thing. This one is Cleaner 7.”

“Seven?”

“Yep. And, ah, this one’s 6.” She pointed to one clinging to the edge of the glass. “I don’t see any above 7.”

“That seems too low for it to be an individual ID.”

“Maybe it’s a generation indicator,” Miyoshi suggested.

The initial seven cleaners had divided at 12 p.m. on January 16. Calculating based on the observed divisions since, they would have completed their seventh at 7 a.m. this morning.

If the original seven cleaners were Generation 0, the current being Gen 7 would track.

“It’s definitely possible,” I responded.

We would know for sure if cleaners numbered “8” showed up as of the next division at 1 p.m. The issue was—

“If each of those generations counts as a separate monster, we’re going to have a hell of a time killing off 373. If we don’t do it in six hours, we’ll wind up with a whole new generation—half of all the cleaners in the room—mixed in.”

And the only one who could distinguish them was Miyoshi.

There was no way she’d be able to charge into the middle of the chaos and walk around searching out cleaners with the same number. Even if I and the Arthurs tried to help pave the way, we couldn’t leave any half-pummeled cleaners—which prohibited use of teeth or claws or even most magic attacks. We might actually make things worse.

“Are the numbers for sure part of the name?” I asked.

“At least in Appraisal’s display.”

“Do you think they might count as the same monster even with different

numbers attached?"

"I'm not sure."

If they all counted as separate species, the difficulty of summoning the Manor just jumped up drastically.

"When I saved Mishiro from those hellhounds the Hound of Hecate summoned, did you see any numbers attached?"

"I didn't have Appraisal at the time," Miyoshi reminded me. "What about you? Did your experience intake decrease with each one you killed?"

If they each counted as separate monsters, my SP intake for each hellhound kill would have stayed consistent, rather than going down.

"Unfortunately I was only focusing on my count for the orb drop at the time..."

"I guess that's only natural..."

"What about your furry familiars?"

"The Arthurs only show up with names now," she replied.

"Ah, shoot. I guess that makes sense. They're not dungeon mooks anymore."

Needless to say, defeating any of them to check experience intake was out of the question too.

"Looks like we'll just have to give 'er a try." Miyoshi took out something that looked like a futuristic water gun.

Its top portion was adorned with two seven-segmented lines made of LED lights—an ammo display.

"What is that?"

"This 'ere is known to mere mortals as the MakiroGun."

"Mere mortals..." Aren't you one of them?"

"Ahem. This 'ere MakiroGun is like an automatic Benzetho Blast shooter. Pretty cool, right?"

Cool? Uh, it sounds more like a novelty drugstore item...

“And it fires up to eight meters,” Miyoshi added proudly.

Miyoshi handed me the gun and I tried pointing it this way and that, checking its handfeel. I pointed it down the stairs and pulled the trigger. A stream of liquid traced a line through the dark. The LED counter depleted by one.

“It seems like it’ll do the trick,” I assessed, “but since it only takes the smallest drop to kill each slime, wouldn’t something simple with more of a burst-spray have been better?”

“Kei. We’re saving the world! We have to look the part!”

“Look the part’? No one’s watching!”

“So? If no one were watching, would you just do everything naked?”

“I don’t know. It sounds pretty liberating.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“I’m kidding. But don’t tell me you’re just planning on charging in there with this.” I pointed to the doors, which slimes were still throwing themselves against like there was a rush on a fifty percent-off sale. The second we opened the doors, we were going to be swept away in a gelatinous avalanche.

“I mean, if you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

“If I do, I’m dragging you in with me.”

“I’ll pass. But no, I was actually planning on opening the doors just a crack and spraying some Makiron in first. That way we can make sure it’s still effective.”

Benzethonium chloride had been our weapon of mass destruction on the first floor of Yoyogi, but we had no idea whether it would work on the other variations of slimes.

“Okay. Better to play it safe.”

“Although there’s a lot I want to try out before the JSDF busts in, we don’t have all that much time.”

“We can bank on around ninety more minutes, and that’s it,” I replied. The next division happened around 1 p.m., but we weren’t sure when exactly between then and 11 a.m. they’d arrive. “Although...” I pointed a finger toward

the collection of nightmare mouths and multicolored slimes steadily collecting against the windows. “Do you really think the JSDF can do anything against that?”

Ordinarily in dungeon-capture missions, they weren’t really thinking about dealing with monster crowds.

Stampedes had never occurred. Even if a team was experienced dealing with one or two strong monsters, dealing with large crowds of mooks was another skill set entirely. There was a reason the tenth floor of Yoyogi was still held to be untouchable unless you had the assimilation drug.

“They won’t be able to use guns or explosives, huh?” Miyoshi looked upward, as if thinking back over the material we’d seen. That alone would cut off most modern weapons. “I don’t remember the JDAG having a Fire Magic user either.”

We knew they had Water Magic users since we’d provided the orbs. But Water Magic didn’t seem very useful given the circumstances.

“Maybe they’ll bring in flamethrowers. I feel like that’s probably their best option,” she added.

JSDF flamethrowers were mostly used for burning away bacterially contaminated substances, such as cholera-contaminated fruit. I could only think of a certain memetic, flamethrower-wielding character from *Fist of the North Star*: “Filth must be cleansed!” indeed.

“Even still, there’s nine thousand square meters to cover...” Miyoshi continued. Flamethrowers held infamously low amounts of fuel. Only enough for about ten bursts before reloading. “Maybe they wouldn’t be so useful after all. Unless they have a ton sitting around.”

“Ah well. It’s not our place to worry about that.”

The JSDF might have some options we didn’t know about. And either way, when it came to dungeon exploration, Team I was one of the most experienced units in the world.

I hit one of the doorstops on the side with my mallet, just enough to wiggle it loose so we could crack the doors for the benzethonium test. However, it didn’t budge.

“Shit. I can’t get the doorstop out. Any ideas?”

“How about using those big stats of yours?”

“Brute force?”

It was hard to control my strength with my STR stat on full blast, so I usually kept my numbers down for daily life. Lately, I rarely set it to over 100 even while exploring. As a result, I’d gotten into a vicious cycle of never practicing with it because it was hard to use, and never getting better at controlling it because I never practiced. It was maybe the one downside of Making allowing you to adjust your stats in huge bursts.

“Ah well,” I said, rolling up my metaphorical sleeves. “Here goes nothin’.”

I activated Making and set all my stats on max. If it still wasn’t enough, I had some undistributed SP left over.

“Here I go!”

“Get it, Kei!”

“Alley-oop!”

I gave the wedge a tug. I pulled it out from the door and—

“Uh...”

“Wh-Wh-Whaaa?!”

—it crumbled to dust in my hands. I guess I’d leaned a little *too* hard into brute force. The door began to swing open under the pressure of the monster crowd.

“Aaaaah!”

I pushed against the door with all my might to keep it from swinging open. Miyoshi grabbed a new stopper without a moment’s hesitation and inserted it under the door. There was no time to hammer it in, so the door remained cracked just a bit.

“Phew! Everything worked out fine!”

“Everything did *not* work out fine! Kei, learn to control your strength a little!”

“I didn’t expect it to just crumble...”

It looked like about the only times I could set my STR up to max were situations in which I fully intended to obliterate something with a punch. Asking me to rein it in at this point was asking a little too much.

“Kei!”

I followed Miyoshi’s outstretched finger to a spot at the top of the doors. Slimes were oozing out this way.

“Yikes. Looks like when you add too much glue to a model and it oozes out from between the joints.”

“Not the time for your dumbass comments, Kei!”

I heard a small popping noise behind me and saw that Miyoshi had gotten out her own MakiroGun, aiming it at the crack between the doors and pulling the trigger.

“Wh-Whoa!”

Every slime hit by the resulting stream of benzethonium burst on contact. The name “Alien Drool” wasn’t for nothing. However, their bursting didn’t cause a chain reaction. The stream could only take out the slimes in front.

“Damn. I kind of had my hopes up,” I commented.

I’d been hoping the stream would cut a huge path through the wall of monsters.

“I guess we never had much cause to notice until now, but it looks like the resulting splash from a Benzetho-Blasted slime has minimal effect on others, if any.”

“So no chain reaction. Maybe the effect is weakened by whatever substance they’re made of?”

“Whatever substance they’re made out of? That’d be D-Factors, wouldn’t it? It’d be weird if those had an effect.”

Whatever the cause, the lack of effect was undeniable. As we watched, more slimes from the wall poured down to fill the spots where their comrades had

fallen, like an avalanche.

“It’s like an MPS simulation [\(10\)](#),” Miyoshi observed.

“But with kind of big particles,” I responded. At the very least, we knew the benzethonium worked on slimes of various colors. “Anyway, good we know it works, but I’m not sure what colors we just burst.”

If we couldn’t separate out the colors, we couldn’t ascertain whether the different numbers meant the slimes were registered as different species. We would need to kill two of the same variety with different numbers and then observe our SP. I squinted at a handful of orbs that had dropped in front of the doors.

“Don’t worry,” Miyoshi responded. “I can use Appraisal on the cores. The monster names still show up.”

“Ah, that’s right!”

We hadn’t actually killed the slimes until we’d crushed the cores. As far as Appraisal was concerned, the subjects would still be active monsters.

“Okay, so which two of these babies are the—”

But before I could even say “same,” I was cut off by Miyoshi, who practically had yen signs in her eyes.

“Kei! With all these different slimes here, this is the chance for some new orbs, don’t you think?”

“Seriously?”

I was curious about what the new slimes would drop too, but there was one big problem with that.

“How are we supposed to crush hundreds of cores with *that* going on?” I pointed toward the undulating wall of slimes on the other side of the door.

The MakiroGun had rendered the slimes temporarily inert, but it didn’t kill them. If we walked around trying to crush each core with a hammer, we’d be sucked into the sea of slimes and cleaners, never to resurface.

“We can keep the door cracked and let them ooze out one at a time.”

“Within ninety minutes?!”

“If we keep pushing everything back until we have the perfect solution, we’ll — I’ve got it!” Miyoshi shouted.

“What is it?”

“Kei, as long as we make it out with a cleaner, we’ll have an endless multicolored slime factory!”

“Keeping it around long-term just to farm orbs? Who’s going to keep its divisions under control? You?”

It’d be like having a nuclear bomb on our hands. If it were stolen, or its divisions got out of hand, we’d be directly responsible for a Hollywood-style end-of-the-world scenario.

“Tch. Well, we can— Sh-Shit, Kei!”

I turned around toward the doors, which Miyoshi was staring at.

Swirling vortexes of goo were forming around the cores that had tumbled through the doors. The slimes were reforming. “Why the hell are they so fast?!”

Judging from the fact that we’d never seen a slime reform in Yoyogi, it seemed like the process took quite a bit of time there. Here, it hadn’t even been thirty seconds.

“I thought Yokohama was supposed to have a *lower* concentration of D-Factors,” I said.

“I’m starting to sense more and more that your theory about the D-Factor factories might be right.”

The summoned monsters might have possessed some ability that allowed them to draw D-Factors to themselves more efficiently, but that didn’t change the fact that a high amount of D-Factors would need to be present for the slimes to regenerate as quickly as they were.

“Either way, no way to prove that now,” I said. “All we can do is focus on the tasks at hand.”

“The slimes are already back...”

Miyoshi fired another shot from the MakiroGun at the door, where slimes were still trying to push through the cracks like too much glue applied between model kit joints. She took a look at the cores that tumbled out, then quickly snatched up two.

“These are both blood slimes: 331 and 739,” she said.

I put all my strength into shoving the doors closed and kicked the stoppers back in. “Got it.”

The bloodslimes would reform in an instant, so I quickly activated Making, checked my current SP, then smashed one with a hammer.

Just as I was about to see how much SP I’d gained, I heard a heavy clunk, as if something had fallen from overhead.

“Wha?!”

“Aaah...”

In my haste I’d forgotten that we were technically on a floor lower than twenty. As a Mining user, that meant mineral drops.

“Iron?” I asked fearfully.

“Iron,” Miyoshi confirmed.

“Ah, damn it.”

While I looked up at the ceiling, despondent, Miyoshi took out a tape measurer and examined the ingot.

“Twenty-one by five centimeters. Thickness two centimeters and some change. Feels like about one kilogram.”

“What does one kilo of iron go for?”

“It’s pure iron, but such a small amount I doubt you’d even find a buyer. It’d only be good for scrap iron. I tried looking it up recently. H2 scrap [\(11\)](#) goes for about twenty-five thousand yen per ton.”

“Aaargh...”

“Though plating goes for double that.”

"So still only fifty yen per kilo. It's worthless."

You could load yourself up with twenty whole kilos and lug them back up to the surface, and still only wind up with a thousand yen to show for it. It wasn't worthwhile even as a side mission.

"Well, case in point on needing restrictions on Mining," Miyoshi pointed out.

"I'll...say."

I'd just realized something that had stopped me in my tracks. And it wasn't that Blood Slime 739 was starting reform from its core, although that was happening too.

"What is it, Kei?" Miyoshi asked, noticing my odd demeanor.

"Miyoshi. If floor one of Yokohama is actually more than twenty floors deep according to the dungeon structure, how deep do you think the 'second' floor is?"

"Hm. It's hard to compare to Yoyogi. After all, no generic monsters spawn from the second floor down." In terms of monster strength, the first floor of Yokohama was said to be about equivalent to floor eight of Yoyogi. That direct comparison method dropped off starting from the second floor, however, where nothing but boss monsters lurked. "I guess there's no way to say for sure."

"If...if...it increased by twenty floors for every floor of the parking garage..."

Of course there weren't as many steps between the first and second basement floors as there were between the surface and the first basement level, but still... Hypothetically...

A light bulb went off over Miyoshi's head. She gulped. "Yokohama is a nine-floor dungeon..."

The parking garage used for the dungeon's structure had been intended to be seven floors. Add onto that the one basement floor above the parking garage, and an equipment room at the bottom of the whole structure, and you got a total of nine floors.

"If each floor was equal to twenty, the bottom floor would be the 180th." And

if we believed what the dungeon inscriptions had told us about massive-depth dungeons... “It might connect to the other side.”

It was cold down here, but we could feel beads of sweat forming on our brows. We looked down the staircase from the second floor.

Boss doors blocked the car route, but this staircase would lead straight to the bottom. Maybe the whole structure was the result of a glitch in the dungeon’s system, a fluke of each floor on the staircase side already coming with a door.

At the very least, you could go down to the eighth floor with nothing standing in your way. All you had to do was follow the concrete-step road.

“Although you’d have to defeat the eighth-floor boss to get down to the ninth,” I pointed out.

An estimated 180th floor boss. I didn’t have faith we could defeat something like that anytime soon. It was sure to be even more dangerous than the forbidden mountain area of Yoyogi’s eighteenth floor.

“If monster strength in Yokohama scales linearly per floors like Yoyogi, it might only be equivalent to a boss monster appearing on Yoyogi’s...sixty-eighth.”

That was assuming each floor stayed consistent to the roughly eightfold difficulty factor observed on Yokohama’s first floor.

“The JSDF had to turn back at Yokohama’s third floor, right?”

What they’d encountered there, in that case, would have been equivalent to a boss monster on Yoyogi’s twenty-fourth.

The final boss monster Team Simon had fought in Evans Dungeon had been on floor thirty-one. If the difficulty there were roughly equivalent to that of Yoyogi, then—ignoring that this was more than a few months back—the JSDF had been tangling with a boss monster not too much lower in strength than what the DSF had fought.

“I guess I could go give it a look...” Miyoshi said.

“What?! H-Hey! Hold on!”

I grabbed Miyoshi’s jacket collar from behind, yanking her back. She’d been

about to step casually down to the next floor.

“Gweh!” She let out a sound like a frog, then whirled around and started shouting at me. “What’s the big idea, Kei?!”

“What’s the big idea’?! Tossing your life away for adventure died out with the samurai! Anyway, we have more important things to worry about now. Exploring the eighth floor can wait.”

Forever, as far as I care!

“Ah, right. Sorry, we got off track because of your shitty drop.”

“Gh!” Her jab struck me like a knife through the heart. Still angry from having her collar pulled, I guessed.

What was done was done. Thankfully the whole floor was a boss room. I couldn’t imagine anyone getting too mad about only getting an iron ingot as a bonus for defeating a once-every-four-hours boss already accompanied by a chest.

It would also take continued dives from a Mining user, or forty-nine or more Mining users visiting Yokohama in the future and seeing that everyone got the same drop, to even notice anything was strange. We could cross that bridge when it came.

“Hey, we may be products of our past, but we don’t have to be prisoners to it,” I intoned.

“Okay, Pastor...” Miyoshi rolled her eyes. [\(12\)](#)

Regaining my composure, I reduced the mid-regeneration Blood Slime 739 back to its core and quickly crushed it with the mallet. The light thwack followed by the clink of iron was an almost charming one-two punch.

“How’s it look?” Miyoshi asked.

“I’m afraid I have bad news.”

My shoulders slumped as I checked my stats.

Blood Slime 331 had netted me 0.02 SP. Blood Slime 739 had once again netted me 0.02 SP.

“They’re treated as separate monsters then,” Miyoshi said glumly.

“There go our dreams of killing 373 of anything.”

If the slimes didn’t respawn on their own, we’d have to get a single cleaner to summon the same variant of slime 373 times. And even if the slimes we killed did respawn, forget a haystack—trying to find their identically numbered counterparts in this crowd would be like searching for a needle in a hayfield.

“Do we even know if they respawn right away?” I asked.

The hellhounds summoned by the Hound of Hecate had acted as a set. No more respawned until all of the first batch were taken out.

“If they only respawn as a set, we could eliminate the number of D-Factors needed for division by wiping out all the slimes on the floor,” Miyoshi suggested.

“I suppose.”

I’d been hoping we could make things easier for ourselves by reducing all the slimes to cores, but they reformed far more quickly than I’d expected. However, if they only respawned once the whole set was wiped out, eliminating the bulk of the slimes could still be useful.

“Then let’s try to take out as many slimes as we can,” Miyoshi resolved.

“I suppose we can get some skill orbs while we’re at it.”

“There you go! Two birds with one stone! But Kei, in that case the target we’ll have to use for your plan...”

I gestured to the circular nightmare mouths still suckered to the door. “Will have to be those guys,” I concluded.

“If each generation counts as a separate monster, will we be able to defeat enough?” Miyoshi wore a worried expression.

If we took them out randomly, the instant the next division happened, half the cleaners in the room would belong to the wrong set. We’d probably have to go through twice as many just to get through enough to happen to hit 373 of a single generation.

“Hmm... Maybe if one is split in half and regenerates, it’ll still count as being in the same generation.” That would sure make things a lot easier. “Definitely worth investigating.”

“No caught cleaner, no investigation.” Miyoshi tossed her gaze coldly toward the door.

I looked up with a sense of trepidation. “Right...” From weaknesses to how they acted outside the dungeon, there was a ton I wanted to look into, but it all started with catching one. “But I’ll say it again, I don’t think there’s any way that’s happening with that snake catcher from earlier.”

This wasn’t a snake after all. If anything it was more like an ocean-floor creature.

Even a butterfly net would be better...if there were one big enough to catch it. Maybe a fishing gaff, though the cleaners were past the size of anything you’d want to dredge up from the depths.

“There are ways of catching large fish with your bare hands,” Miyoshi commented. “At least per Takao Yaguchi’s fishing manga. If you cover their eyes when you grab them, apparently it helps them calm down.”

“How do you plan to stay safe while pulling off an insane stunt like that?”

Looking at the razor teeth glommed onto the door, it seemed like throwing a poor sheep into a cage with a wolf. There was no way—

“Ta-da! I had one more trick up my sleeve!”

—that would work, I was about to say, when Miyoshi pulled out a mysterious sheet of white fabric.

“What is *that*?”

“It’s protective gear for killer hornet exterminators!”

“You do realize we’re not dealing with killer hornets, right?”

Faced with cleaners, there was no guarantee the outfit was going to provide as much protection against a row of razor-sharp teeth as it would against insect stingers.

“Quit bellyaching and put it on, champ!”

“Hu-wha?”

Still, this was Miyoshi we were talking about. If she’d gone through the trouble of procuring it, she probably had something in mind.

I put on the suit as instructed, while watching Miyoshi lay down a line of something resembling caulk to form a big semicircle on the floor in front of the doors.

“Where did you buy this?” I asked.

“They sell it online. Major retailers. No big deal.”

“Are there really that many hornet exterminators looking to order off Amazon?”

“The Japanese Pest Control Association has over nine hundred member companies.”

“Pest?”

“It was originally an organization for businesses that dealt with dangerous animals of all kinds, mostly in terms of farming risks. But I guess hornets fit within that.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I looked it up when I was buying the suit.”

Miyoshi appeared to be done caulking and stood back up. She placed her hands on her hips, leaning back. “Okay, all ready,” she said.

“I’ve got the suit on too,” I responded, “but, uh, what’s the plan?”

A thin layer of caulking now spread out in front of the door, with slightly raised edges, like a basin.

“We do this.” Grinning, Miyoshi took another gun-like object out of Storage, aimed at me, and—

“Hey!”

—pulled the trigger.

I was soaking wet where the contents of the blast had hit me.

“What the hell are you doing?!” I asked.

“Kei. You’re supposed to say, ‘You got me!’”

Exasperated, I threw my hands up in the air, spun around, and intoned, “You got me.”

“Have a little more enthusiasm. Ugh, fine. Whatever.”

“Wait. What the hell’s going on? Am I in some absurdist comedy?”

“Kei, the protective gear is nylon, but I’ve sewn on cotton patches here and there. It should be absorbent, to an extent.”

“Absorbent? Then...?”

“Heh, heh, heh. A new anti-slime suit, the very finest modern science has to offer! Every slime that touches you is going to burst on the spot!”

So by attaching absorptive cotton patches and slathering the suit in the benzethonium chloride solution, the suit could maintain its effect for some time.

“It’s pretty DIY for being ‘scientific finest.’ So I just wear this and rush in?”

“Look, as soon as any slime touches you, it should probably burst into goo! That’ll make it way easier to move around.” The slimes took up twenty to thirty centimeters of floor space, but the cores were only several centimeters across. Bursting them as I moved should free up a considerable amount of space. “It probably ought to be better than just charging in with a MakiroGun.”

“That’s a few too many instances of ‘probably’ and ‘should’ for my liking.” I uttered my response with a smile, but Miyoshi replied immediately with something that really took the wind out of my sails.

“It’d be way too embarrassing to wear something like that in a crowded place like Yoyogi, so I haven’t tested it yet.”

Too embarrassing, but you’re making me wear it?! Untested?!

“What happened to ‘looking the part’?”

“What are you talking about? With such a fabulous invention in front of you,

who has time to worry about looking the part? Really, Kei.” She put her right hand to her chest and stretched out her left arm, striking a dramatic stage-show pose in the style of the Takarazuka Revue musical theater troupe.

I don't exactly see a Pansy Award⁽¹³⁾ *in your future. Nice try though.*

“So what's the plan?”

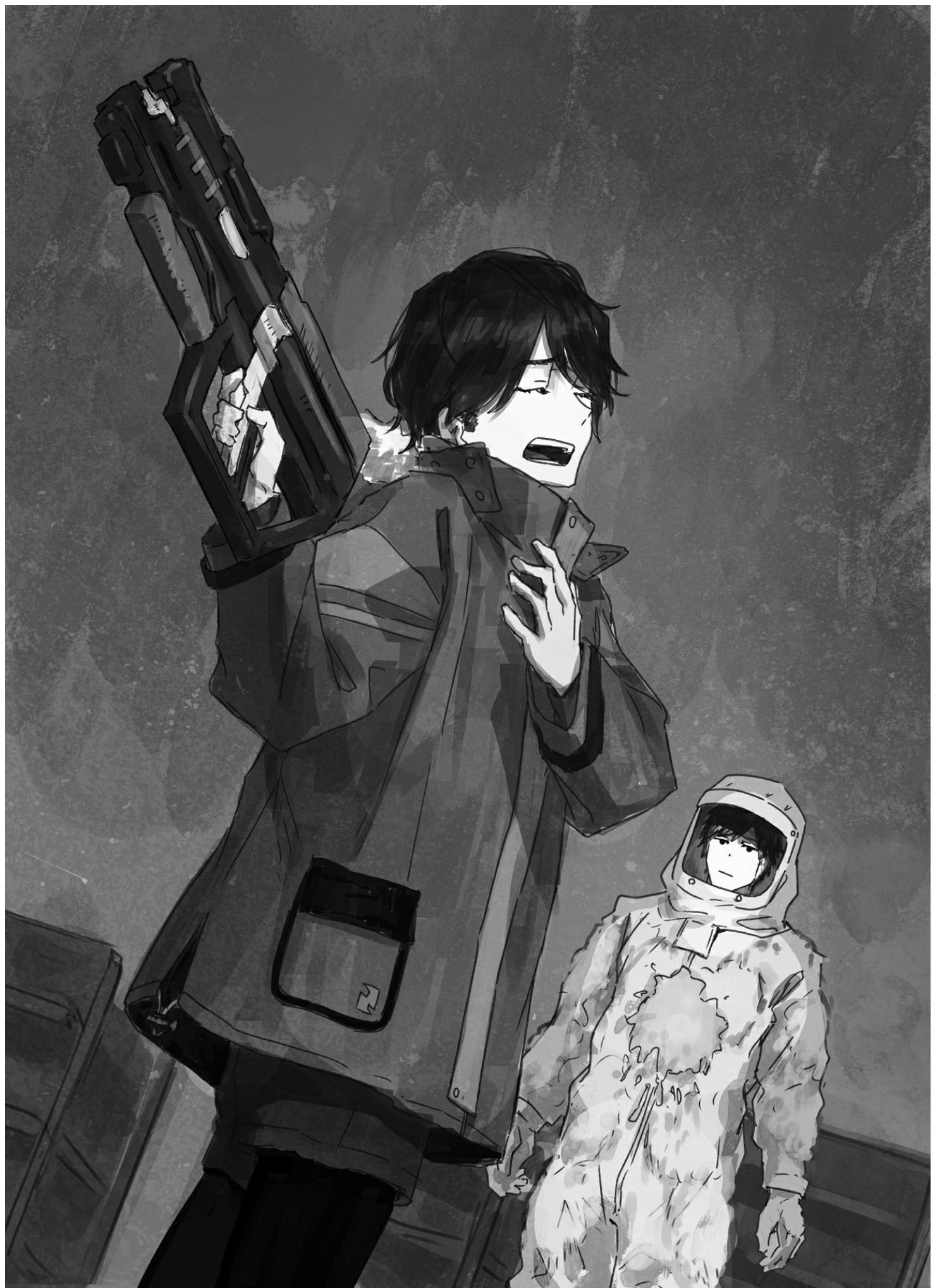
“He ignored me!”

“Happy?”

“Heh. First comes the benzethonium chloride.”

She started pouring the benzethonium chloride solution in the ring of caulking she'd created earlier, so that it formed a small pond in front of the door. The second the slimes came tumbling out, they'd be done in by the puddle, and if a cleaner tumbled out, all the more lucky for us. If they didn't, I'd go charging in with the suit and peel one off of the door.

“You call that a plan?”



It was basically just telling me to dash in and grab one.

“Brute force is also a kind of strategy.”

“I hear cleaners are pretty fragile. Will I be able to pull it off?”

If I accidentally tore it apart, we’d wind up with two cleaners on our hands. Actually, maybe that was better. I could just take one of the scraps.

“How about this?”

Now Miyoshi pulled out two thick fiberglass poles connected at the bottom, with netting running between the poles—a triangular fishing net, like a small version of the ones used for net fishing at Lake Biwa.

“You ought to be able to lug this around even if a slime or two get in it.”

Using the net would allow me to grab a cleaner without breaking it. And even if it might have been too heavy for a normal person to run with, I should be able to manage with my STR stat raised. At any rate, it was vastly preferable to the thought of capturing a cleaner by hand.

“Will it be sturdy enough?”

“I got the sturdiest one I could, but we won’t know until we try.”

We couldn’t be exactly sure how much the monster weighed or how much it might thrash around. It was all a guessing game for now.

“Oh well. At least my task is simple.”

“I don’t think I could carry it, so I leave it up to you and our friend 100 STR!”

An ordinary person would also have to be extremely careful to not simply be crushed by the slimes while opening the doors. Flinging them open and running in would be out of the question.

“All right. Just going to have to give it a try. What do I do when I catch it?”

“You can put it in here.”

Miyoshi had taken out another very DIY item—a long acrylic case.

Most commercial fish tanks capped out at 120 centimeters in length, and the only larger tublike objects she could find available for order were pet pools that

went up to 160 centimeters but seemed too fragile, so she'd made something herself.

"Got it. Okay, here goes nothing."

"Kei..."

"What?"

"If you don't make it back alive..."

"Stop trying to jinx me!"

Cutting off Miyoshi, who was grinning like an idiot, before she could drop another bit of ominous foreshadowing, I reached out toward the doorstop.

Nagatacho, Chiyoda City

Prime Minister's Office

Ibe arrived at the Prime Minister's Office at 9:13 a.m. There were fifteen minutes until the cabinet meeting. He'd taken the opportunity to convene an emergency session of the National Security Council.

"Nuclear weaponry?!" Foreign Minister Kawano was dumbfounded.

Kawano had wondered what had led to the sudden meeting. Now, sitting at a table along with Minister of Defense Okuiwa, National Public Safety Commission Chairman Motoyama, and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, all he could do was blankly repeat the prime minister's words.

They were talking about a *nuclear bomb in Yokohama*, after all. This was no ordinary agenda item.

Ibe nodded a deep, tired nod.

"Th-Then hold on!" Kawano stood up and placed both hands on the table. "Why are we talking about evacuations as if we've already accepted America's plan?"

"Accept it or not, America's already making arrangements," Ibe answered.

“But Japan is a sovereign nation! Using a nuclear weapon on our soil without our permission i-is...!”

“Is what, Kawano?”

“Is tantamount to an act of war!”

War. More than seventy years had passed since that word had, with any seriousness, passed a Japanese policymaker’s lips. Few developed nations had enjoyed the long peace Japan had, disconnected from the tumult of armed conflict. It now counted itself among the most peaceful nations on earth.

“We cannot allow for this...this tyranny!” Kawano whinged.

Of course America couldn’t do this. Of course not. But who was going to stand up and say that?

The world might literally end tomorrow. The ones to determine how to prevent it would be the ones with the power to do so. Even if it meant sacrificing the powerless.

“Kawano. We’re past the time for debate.”

“Well this is the first I’ve heard about it!”

“Then what? Any ideas?”

“We have to use all our diplomatic channels! I’m sure we can rally international allies, or turn America’s course, or...”

Ibe held up one hand, and slid Kawano a stack of materials.

“I suggest getting yourself abreast of the situation,” Ibe urged, “to understand just how little time we have.”

Conferring with allies was all well and good, and healthy debate was the cornerstone of diplomacy—how one navigated the world. It was also, unfortunately, a luxury of time—a resource they no longer possessed.

“Yesterday, an unusual monster spawned in Yokohama,” Ibe began.

The explanation was short, but alarming, and contained the Americans’ predictions on responses from other countries.

“This can’t be happening.” The more Kawano reflected on the situation, the

more he realized that the world might indeed allow for America's use of a nuclear weapon.

Plus, if they failed to stop the problem now, the next location on the chopping block might be the whole of Yokohama. Damage could even extend into Tokyo.

"We have until tomorrow at 6 p.m.," Ibe concluded.

"So that's what all this dud business was all about..." Shortly before arriving at the prime minister's office, news had reached Okuiwa about an urgent dud removal. A rather scathing report had arrived on his desk, criticizing the national government's decision to move straight into response without building in time for an investigation or working with the local government.

"The JDAG and JDA are currently doing everything they can to contain the situation. The nuclear weapon is still the worst-case scenario. Using it may not be necessary." Ibe unfolded his hands, which had been set in front of him on the table, and reclined in his chair. "But hope for the best, plan for the worst, as they say."

Whether or not America followed through with its plan, the Japanese government would have to begin working on the evacuation scheme. If it proved unnecessary, they could all laugh about it later.

"Gentlemen"—Ibe looked the men in the room in the eyes—"I look forward to your cooperation."

Nouveau Mare, B2

"I can't believe there are seriously 895 more of these things on the other side of the doors."

I had my back pressed to the double doors to the second dungeon floor, straining to push them shut. In front of me, the 896th cleaner was currently glommed onto both sides of the acrylic tank in front of me with its faces, each showing off concentric rows of razor-sharp teeth.

The retrieval, which was supposed to have been a milk run, had been a disaster.

First, as soon as we opened the doors, an avalanche of slimes came tumbling out and hit the pool of benzethonium chloride. That much we'd expected. One by one they started popping, reduced to their cores.

What we hadn't counted on was how quickly each of them would start to reform.

Soon there was a frothy mess of slimes bursting, reforming, and bursting again in the puddle, trapped in an infinite loop. More and more kept tumbling out the doors and adding themselves to the mix. The benzethonium was boiling like a stew.

We started to destroy as many cores as we could to help stem the tide, but we'd forgotten about the iron drops. Soon the ingots had almost covered the pool.

That was when I decided to leave the doors to Miyoshi and just barge in.

I flailed my arms wildly, a whirling windmill of death for all nearby slimes thanks to my patented Miyoshi anti-slime suit. After a bit, though, the efficacy of the suit wore off. But by pinching the cotton here and there, I was able to bring more surfactant to the surface and get it in working order once again.

I ignored the slimes and grabbed one of the multiheaded cleaners on the door, yanking with all my might. The cleaner—“Argh!”

—broke. A second later, both halves had reformed.

In retrospect I should have bolted with one of the fragments. Instead, I dropped the cleaner in my hands that was trying to chomp at me, while being jostled by slimes. With each step I took, the slimes in front of me burst, causing more to pour in from the sides to fill in the empty space. At the same time, the slimes that had just burst would start to regenerate, so the concentration would double. I kept looking for spots here and there with fewer slimes, running this way and that to reach them. If I'd only had Miyoshi's STR, I probably would have been crushed.

There were currently 7,198 slimes. If they'd been spread out evenly over all 9,000 square meters, there would be an average of fewer than one slime per square meter. If they were this concentrated around here, then there had to be

other sections of the floor where they weren't so packed together. That knowledge was my rock as I maneuvered, shuddering to think what the floor would look like only a scant few hours from now.

In the end I used the net Miyoshi had prepared to nab a nearby cleaner and bolt. It struggled, flopping and squirming, but still I was able to carry it forward, body-slamming through the slimes, until I'd reached the doors.

I threw myself against the doors, flinging them open, and at last made my escape.

"I thought I was a goner," I huffed.

"If that had been me, I probably would have drowned," Miyoshi responded with Zen-like certainty.

Don't think I didn't see you bursting into laughter while I was hightailing it out of there.

I took off my gloves and removed the slime suit, then shared my findings on its efficacy.

"This suit becomes rapidly less potent over time. If I'd stopped in a crowded area, I probably wouldn't be here right now."

I also explained how more slimes had poured into each open area as soon as I'd burst the previous ones, and how, when the burst slimes reformed, it suddenly became twice as hard to move.

"So there are some kinks to work out," Miyoshi admitted.

At any rate, we'd captured our target. Now it was time for the real tests to begin.

"So what's first?" I asked.

Miyoshi prodded the cleaner in the acrylic tank with the pole from the butterfly net. "First, we need to see if it can regenerate and multiply even once it's outside the dungeon. That takes priority."

"Okay. But we need to be careful we don't accidentally set any slimes loose on the surface."

“Right. It might summon a new batch of eight, huh?”

If the slimes all spawned near their cleaner, it wouldn’t be too much of a hassle. However, if they spawned some distance away, especially inside of a covered drain or pipe somewhere, we’d be looking at a crisis just as...okay, maybe not quite as big as our main one, but still pretty bad. Even if we could track down errant slimes with Life Detection, we couldn’t guarantee being able to actually get to them.

“The regeneration we can check right away, but the division is going to be a pain.” Miyoshi assessed the problem succinctly.

The next division might still be utilizing residual D-Factors the cleaner had stored up while inside the dungeon. To be certain, we’d have to leave it topside through two division cycles. *Is the acrylic tank going to hold that long? This may not be a dungeon, but can the slimes still dissolve it?*

“At the same time,” she continued, “we can use the opportunity to check one other thing I’ve been wondering about.”

“What’s that?”

“Kei, it’s common knowledge that slimes get triggered for dungeon cleanup when no one is observing, right?”

“Ah, right. There was research done on that right when the dungeons first spawned. Slimes never attack or dissolve objects that are being observed.”

“Exactly.”

It was exactly that research—showing that slimes would not attack or dissolve objects when watched—which had allowed for the advent of expedition-style parties. As long as someone stayed on lookout, it was possible to maintain temporary base camps.

“They won’t even drop down from ceilings if you’re looking up at them. That kind of attack is probably more problematic than ones from ground level, where they’re right in your line of sight. But come to think of it, the speed with which they’re able to dissolve things is odd. You don’t have to leave something unobserved for very long for it to vanish.”

In any case, slimes' behaviors being deeply tied to observation was a fact.

"Well observed. Pun intended. But at this point I'm less interested in *how* the slimes do what they do than in what '*observation*' is."

"Are we getting philosophical or talking about quantum physics here?"

"Let's say, for the sake of discussion, that 'observation' is the taking in and recognizing of specific visual input."

"Sounds good to me."

"So what about cameras?"

I was beginning to catch Miyoshi's drift. If the slimes' behavior was tied to some dungeon definition of "observation," she wanted to know where the cutoff point was.

I was curious as well. Especially about what would happen with an unmanned camera feed and recorded footage.

If a simple running camera feed was recognized by the dungeons as "watching," then... *Hold on, even setting up permanent buildings in dungeons might be possible!*

"We'll never have a better opportunity," Miyoshi said. "I'd like to test it out."

"Okay. But don't forget this is just a side experiment," I cautioned. "First let's at least get this cleaner up to the first floor and get a camera feed on it."

"Agreed. By the way, Kei, would you do me the favor of carrying the tank?"

"What?! Why? Can't you just put it in Storage?"

"Unfortunately not."

I carried the tank on my back all the way up the stairs, like Jesus bearing the cross. The second we stepped onto the first building floor— "Uh... Uuuuuh?!"

—the cleaner summoned eight fresh slimes.

It was probably because as soon as we'd crossed the threshold, the link it'd had to those inside the dungeon had been severed.

"Shit! Miyoshi, we gotta get those slimes back ASAP!"

If any got outside and ate away at any pipelines or powerlines, facing liability claims would get a whole lot less hypothetical.

I put the tank on the floor and got busy searching. Each time we found a slime, we spritzed it with a Benzetho-Blast, then placed the core in the tank. We were able to find seven in short order, thanks in no small part to Life Detection.

“Just one more, right?” Miyoshi asked.

“Should be. If it works the same as in the dungeon,” I answered.

“Then this should be the last...one!” Miyoshi blasted a slime wiggling under the table with surfactant, then tossed the core in the tank.

“Phew. But do you think the tank’s walls will hold once the slimes reform?”

“As usual, you underestimate my preparation!”

“Just tell me.” I was too exhausted for games at this point. I eyed the flimsy lid on the tank suspiciously.

“No enthusiasm from you today, huh? I meeeeant... I built a larger tank too. We can double layer.”

“Good. Then that gives us time to run up here if any more slimes spawn?”

“Bingo.”

“In that case, why don’t we douse the outer tank with benzethonium chloride too? That should help buy us extra time.”

“Nice idea, Kei! You’re really cooking today!”

Miyoshi extracted the larger tank and started pouring benzethonium in.

Just how much of that stuff did she bring?

“Okay! Ready!”

“Got it.” I glanced at the clock. “It’s 10:20. The next division is...”

“Not until 1 p.m.”

We still had plenty of time.

“Where are we going to observe it from?”

“In front of the B2 doors. I’ll run an HDMI cable down.”

“Wait. We don’t know if slimes spawn on the stairs. It’s probably safer to stop at the first landing. We don’t want any chewing on the cords while we’re not looking.”

We’d heard that story from Tenko about seeing something that looked like a slime on the staircase landing, after all.

“I thought of that. I’ll have a camera feed from the landing too.”

Miyoshi set up the cable, taking care that everything from around the ground-floor landing on down was covered by a camera feed, stopping in front of the second-floor doors. Ultimately we wound up with two cameras on the landing and one by the entrance to the first dungeon floor. Another two were set up by the cleaner tank for a total of five feeds. Then she returned to the ground floor where I was waiting.

“All right! While we’re waiting, we can also investigate some cleaner weaknesses downstairs.”

“Miyoshi! Don’t tell me you’re planning on catching another one of those things!”

“No need. We can just bifurcate that one and move the second half into a new tank. It’ll regenerate.”

“I wish you’d told me that before we brought it up...”

If we created a new cleaner here, it would probably spawn eight new slimes again. On the other hand, if we’d split them while we were still in the dungeon bounds, we could have left one in a tank on the landing and only dealt with the wild-slime hunt once.

“Uh, well...we did want to see if they could regenerate above ground too!”

“You just thought of that...”

“Never mind! Kei, let’s get to it! There’s experimenting to do! Chop chop!”

Miyoshi produced what looked like a monstrously huge knife from Storage.

“What the hell is that?!”

“An unagisaki hocho! An eel fillet knife. You know, since the cleaners look kind of eellike...”

“Their mouths look more like lampreys’, but...sure, I guess. Actually they’re a little like long gobies.”

“Anyway, this particular eel knife is known as an ‘edosaki,’ the kind of unagisaki hocho used in the Kanto region.”

It looked like a katana blade edge running alongside a hatchet. Almost like a superdeformed samurai sword.

According to Miyoshi, chefs in the Kanto region sliced eel meat from the back, while in the western Kansai region they cut from the stomach; this had led to different knife designs. The reason for the difference was that in the capital city of Edo—the former name of Tokyo—where samurai used to roam, seeing eels sliced from the stomach reminded them of seppuku. On the other hand, in the merchant city of Osaka, it was associated with colloquial phrases like “spilling your guts” in frank business, and had a less negative connotation. Different knife strokes for different folks.

“So, what? Samurai were okay with being cut down from behind?”

“Don’t ask me. But at any rate, this knife comes with a seal of approval.”

“Whose?”

Not deigning to grace my question with an answer, Miyoshi handed me the knife. I held it hesitantly over the cleaner.

“This feels kind of unethical, doesn’t it? It’s kind of like animal testing...” Of course I knew it was more unethical to risk humanity over sympathy for one dungeon monster, but... I turned my heart to stone, and plunged the knife into its body. “Wait, what the hell is this?”

There was hardly any resistance to the knife. It was like I wasn’t so much cutting through a body as through a statue made of dried mud. Like I was cutting into a cake.

The cleaner had been cut evenly in two. Or, no, it didn’t seem like this process had even required a cutting edge at all. It might have been more accurate to say

“split” in two.

A few dozen seconds later, rather than the kind of regeneration we’d expected, clumps of light began forming around the seams of the two severed pieces, coalescing into new body parts.

“That isn’t how trolls regenerate,” I commented. Trolls and other monsters known for regenerative abilities did so with a decidedly more physiological bent. Like the way a human recovered from an injury, or like with Super Recovery. “It’s almost like something is molding them.”

To our horror, both of the newly formed cleaners instantly summoned new slimes. We tearfully collected them, then carried one of the cleaners down to the second floor.

Miyoshi finished connecting the cable to the camera in front of the second-floor entrance and confirmed that the feeds were working. I stood in front of the tank we’d brought with one of the cleaners.

“Okay. Begin Cleaner Weakness Hunt!” Miyoshi proclaimed. It was almost 11 a.m. We didn’t have too much longer before the JSDF arrived. “However, before that, I have an unfortunate announcement to make.”

“Quit jerkin’ me around. What is it?”

“Splitting Multiheaded Cleaner 7 into two has unfortunately *not* resulted in two copies of Multiheaded Cleaner 7.”

“Then what’s the second one?”

“According to my expert Appraiser’s eye, we have Multiheaded Cleaner 7 and Multiheaded Cleaner Shadow.”

“Shadow?” *What the heck?* Were the two different somehow? “So which is the one we brought down?”

“That one is Shaddy.”

Which made the one currently squirming around above ground Multiheaded Cleaner 7.

“What do you think happens if we cut a ‘shadow’ in two?”

“A shadow shadow, maybe?”

“Welp. Only one way to find out. Miyoshi, how many tanks do you have left in Storage?”

“Six.”

That’d leave us one tank short when they all divided, but we could surely find a way to defeat one cleaner before then.

“Okay. I’m going to try cutting him into four pieces.”

I quickly chopped the cleaner in the tank into four bits. I was a little messy with it, knowing that if I took too long, pieces would start regenerating before I was done.

Perhaps because of my haste, I wound up with four pretty messy, unevenly sized pieces. Still, we took each of them, put them into their own tanks, stepped back, and waited.

“Anything?” I asked Miyoshi, who was scanning the chunks with Appraisal.

“They’re all still ‘shadow,’” she responded.

“Wait, then...if we defeat enough of these...!”

“Unfortunately that’s ‘shadow’ with an asterisk.”

“Damn. I guess that would have been too much to hope for, huh?”

“The largest piece of the cleaner, or the one that retains most of its vital organs, is probably the one that keeps the original naming, while the rest become shadows.”

“Hmm...”

Still, there hadn’t been any cleaners labeled “shadow” when Miyoshi was observing the crowd with Appraisal before. Of the original seven, six of them should have been shadows. If a shadow’s natural division process also produced more shadows, they should have accounted for six-sevenths of the total cleaners in the room.

“It looks like if a shadow divides naturally, its offspring still become part of the next, numbered generation,” I said.

“Seems that way,” Miyoshi agreed. “Unless all the numbered ones just happened to be clumped up by the door earlier, although that’s unlikely.”

Either way, we’d know for sure the next time they divided, at 1 p.m.

“Do you think they regenerate no matter where or how the piece gets cut off?” I asked. I’d cut the cleaner just now into pretty misshapen chunks, and each one had still regenerated properly. “It’s kind of weird that they’d know to grow back correctly no matter what pieces are left.”

“About that. Riken and Tokushima University did a joint study showing that planarians use substances to trigger signal gradients moving from the head to the tail, and they use that activity gradient to determine what part to form from blastomas.[\(14\)](#) A blastoma in a higher activity section becomes a head, and a lower one becomes a tail.”

“Whoa.”

Using signal differentiation to determine body regionality... It was surprisingly simple.

“Granted, cleaners are more complex than planarians, so they probably have substances that help track signal gradients from the center to the sides instead of just from head to tail.”

“Makes sense, but not easy to test right now.”

Not easy, and no time.

“Still,” Miyoshi said, seeming to be turning over an idea, “if the regeneration does depend on a certain substance determining body regionality, they probably rely on being able to track that gradient from the center to the edge of each fragment.”

“So if the fragment was too small for there to be a meaningful signal gradient, it wouldn’t know how to regenerate?”

“And what do you think would happen then?”

“Good question. Either the regeneration would go haywire, or it wouldn’t occur at all?”

Miyoshi nodded. “In Falcon Industries’ report, was there any information on

regenerations going haywire? Any weird regenerations in the footage?"

There hadn't been—which probably meant there weren't any. The cleaners had all regenerated normally.

"So then...pieces that are too small really don't regenerate."

"Falcon was too afraid of creating more to keep shooting, but if they had, they might have avoided this whole thing."

"Should we give it a try?" I asked.

Testing our theory wasn't hard. All it took was chopping the cleaner into progressively larger pieces and seeing at what size regeneration first occurred.

Although, again, it didn't feel very humane.

"I'm glad they don't bleed or scream or anything, or I might not have the guts."

"Careful. If you say something like that, they might just start bleeding and screaming."

"Blech. Like those chameleons on the sixth floor."

"Oooh, they were the worst!"

Anyway, the results for which I'd sacrificed my humanity (for real):

"Looks like they regenerate from pieces bigger than around seven cubic centimeters."

"So all we need to do to kill one is to reduce it into sub-seven-cubic-centimeter chunks!"

"Yeah..." I smiled. "Easy..."

About the only way of instantaneously reducing anything to even sub-cubic-decimeter chunks that I could think of was to have a fantasy martial arts swordsman walk in.

Of course, if there *were* an attack that reliably did that, we might be able to work something out, but...

"A shame," Miyoshi lamented. "If only Falcon had kept up with the twenty

millimeter rounds, that really might have done the trick.”

According to the report, Falcon had been using an improved M197 machine cannon. If it had the same capabilities as the previous models, it should have fired at least thirty rounds per burst. Considering the cleaners’ spongy, fragile bodies, being so much as grazed by a bullet should have been enough to tear one to shreds. Only seven cleaners emerging as a result of that barrage was far too few...unless the other fragments had all been too small to regenerate. By failing to keep firing at the larger pieces, the Falcon folks might indeed have missed their opportunity to wipe out the cleaners.

Still, they regenerated in only a few dozen seconds. They might have started regenerating before the artillery fire could reduce them to small enough chunks. In that case, we might have wound up dealing with the same problem on an even tighter time frame.

“At least we’ve confirmed one method of defeating them,” I commented. “Progress.”

“Cutting them up into pieces smaller than seven cubic centimeters within a few dozen seconds?”

“It isn’t on us to determine its practicality. That’s up to the people actually responsible for resolving this mess.”

“Not like we’re equipped to try it out right now anyway.”

“So, what’s up next?” I asked.

We still had other potential weaknesses to investigate: burning, freezing, electric shocks, suffocation...

“Actually, I have something more important for us to try.”

“Something more important?”

“If a cleaner fragment does use some kind of substance to cause a signal gradient in order to determine body regionality, and if being unable to determine it prevents said regeneration...” Miyoshi had her mad-scientist face on; I was getting a bad feeling. “Then by introducing more of said substance...”

“Hold on. I get that if there’s a possibility of stopping the regeneration, we

should take it, but there's no way we have time to ID whatever substance or enzyme it's using. We're not a biochem lab! And even if we found it, there's no way we'd be able to put that knowledge to use in time."

"Actually, ID'ing the substance is the easy part."

"Huh?" I couldn't imagine what she had in mind.

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate Command Center

Conversations in the Humvee had been buoyed by the blissful hope of possibility, but seeing the equipment that had been gathered as they pulled up to the Nouveau Mare brought Lori crashing down to earth.

Sawatari and Kaiba cast one glance at the equipment and immediately took off toward the gate entrance to get abreast of the situation. Probably hoping it wouldn't be as bad as they'd expected. *Fat chance.*

"What do they expect us to do with this?" Firearms might have been off-limits, but Lori had still expected something...more. "Are they really telling us to charge in there with a handful of old riot shields?"

Ramrod their way through the slimes and cut down the cleaners with flamethrowers?

The last time anyone had charged in anywhere with flamethrowers was probably the Vietnam War. This equipment, much like the JSDF's plan, was more than forty years past its expiration date. Lori felt a headache coming on.

"Chin up. Apparently there's someone from ATLA's Future Capabilities Development Center coming in for support." Hagane, himself wearing a slightly bitter grin, shared with Lori the news he'd just heard while picking up his equipment.

ATLA was the Acquisition, Technology, & Logistics Agency—the Ministry of Defense's R & D agency—and its Future Capabilities Development Center was the division at the forefront of their equipment R & D.

"Future Capabilities? They normally come up with combat information technologies, don't they? What would they be— Wait..."

"That's right. They're coming from D-Cap," he said, referring to the Dungeon Capabilities Research Division.

ATLA had launched its Future Capabilities Research Center in October 2015, just a scant two months before the dungeons' appearance, leading to rumors that the two were connected.

Development of antipersonnel weapons in Japan lay strictly outside the realm of conversation—hardly anyone could engage in such brazen research. However, wrapped up in the guise of dungeon research...now that would be a tempting pretext for those who wanted to push the envelope. Or so it was said. At any rate, D-Cap stood as about the only organization in Japan currently capable of engaging in R & D that could easily be adapted into antipersonnel arms.

"Getting dispatched to Yokohama in the middle of all this chaos? I wonder who drew the short straw." Iori smirked.

"From what I'm told he actually volunteered readily," Hagane responded.

"Readily?"

Eager to see the weapons he'd helped develop actually proving useful?

Or eager for something else? The JSDF currently had no occasion to run practical tests involving antipersonnel weapons. And while the adoption of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology had relaxed the framework for sending weapons abroad, exports for testing were still impossible. Eagerness, then, to put the weapons to a field test in the only way they could? Even still...

"What kind of person would sign up for this?" Iori asked.

"I'm told one Kiyomaro Urushibara."

"Kiyomaro Urushibara? I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before..." From its length alone, it wasn't the kind of name you forgot.

"I've heard a rumor," Hagane responded in a hushed voice. "At the time of ATLA's founding, they were only supposed to have four R & D directors in their secretariat: Joint Systems Development, Ground Systems Development, Naval,

and Aerial. But when dungeon R & D started up, they had to add a fifth.” That member’s job would, naturally, be to oversee Dungeon Systems Development. “But what I’ve heard is”—Hagane further lowered his voice—“there’s actually another, a *sixth* director in D-Cap.”

“But the number of secretariat members is determined by law...” Iori narrowed her eyes. “They can’t just do that.”

“That’s why this is all unofficial. Very under the radar, hush-hush. It’s a nickname. People in ATLA call him the ‘Sixth O.’ The sixth officer.”

“Ugh, why does it have to sound like something out of an anime? Is this guy some kind of...” Iori paused, searching for the right words.

“Total tryhard edgelord?” Hagane smirked.

“Let’s mind our manners now,” she responded.

“Well, that’s what they call him,” he chuckled.

Iori sighed. “Anyway.”

“Still, he’s the R & D head of a major branch of the country’s foremost defense research institution. He should be able to help.”

“See, you’re slightly off about that!” A voice called out to Iori and Hagane. They quickly turned around.

The voice belonged to a gaunt man with sunken cheeks and a small frame, who looked like he hadn’t had a haircut in about four months—locks jutting wildly off of his brow and the sides of his head.

“Urushibara from the Dungeon Capabilities Research Division at the Acquisition, Technology, & Logistics Agency. Pleased to meet ya.” He turned to Iori and gave a curt bow.

She bowed back and gave her textbook response. “An honor to meet you. My name is Iori Kimitsu, captain of Team I.”

“Your reputation precedes you, of course.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Iori began, “what exactly were we ‘off’ about?”

“About the Sixth O business,” Urushibara responded.

“Ah?”

“It actually started with my coworkers asking if I was *sick*... You know, in the head.”

“Erm?”

Apparently Urushibara’s penchant for getting caught up in his work and general obsessive behavior had led to some rather...unencouraging nicknames.

“Don’t tell me,” Iori said. “The ‘Sixth O’ is really...”

The sicko?!

“Just a misunderstanding.” Urushibara smiled bashfully. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Iori and Hagane looked at one another. This wasn’t by chance going to be their last day on earth, was it?

Nouveau Mare, B2

“Ta-da!” Miyoshi had pulled out something that looked like an oversized food processor. “Paparapapapapaa! Behold, a real-life Blade Cuisinart!”

The Blade Cuisinart was one of the most powerful swords in the computer game series *Wizardry*. Though it had gone over the heads of many Japanese gamers at the time, now it was well-known that the makers had intended it to be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the famous kitchen appliance brand.

“Wh-Whoa,” I protested, “don’t tell me you’re planning on using that thing on...”

Miyoshi grumbled about how a proper hand mixer might have been a bit better for the joke, but nevertheless plugged the food processor into the extension cord reel we’d run down from the first floor. We couldn’t be sure if it was the result of our surveillance cameras or not, but no slimes had spawned on the stairs.

“The cleaners don’t regenerate if the pieces are small enough, so what better way to ensure they don’t regenerate than making them into puree?”

“Wait,” I cut in, “so you’re willing to risk all those little cleaner granules each forming a new monster?”

If they all regenerated at once, it would be like having a phreatomagmatic eruption on our hands. When magma met water, the water would expand up to 1,700 times its original volume, causing a pressure eruption. If our pureed cleaner cells suddenly burst forth new bodies en masse, we’d be dealing with an even greater force.

“You worry too much.” Miyoshi cut a large chunk off of the first cleaner’s tail, and tossed it into the mixer. “Oops! There it goes!”

“Oops!” my ass!”

My protestations were drowned out by the groan of Miyoshi’s “real-life Blade Cuisinart.” Instinctively, I picked up Miyoshi and started dashing up the stairs.

“Kei! What the heck?!”

But what I saw when I looked fearfully behind me was thankfully not a rush of a thousand cleaners flooding up their stairs, but a cloud of dispersing black light hovering above the food processor.

“Damn it, we missed it! And here we knew the cleaners didn’t regenerate from pieces that were small enough,” Miyoshi added, puffing out her cheeks.

“Miyoshi,” I said, “we still don’t know exactly how the dungeon processes monster regeneration, right? Meaning we don’t know the specific rules?”

“Right...”

“If our theory about them using some kind of substance to determine body regionality is correct, then when the body part is reduced to a single cell, it might just decide growing in *any* direction is okay.”

When the fragment was reduced to one cell, it wouldn’t really matter what direction a leg or an arm grew from, as long as it regenerated into the original shape.

“Ah, now that you mention it...” Miyoshi responded.

That was one risk to Miyoshi’s hasty experiment. Another risk was the possibility that our theory was *wrong*—that the dungeons instead determined

directions for regeneration similarly to those of respawns, going off of some kind of dungeon map, and using the size of the remaining body part to determine which direction the regenerating pieces should grow in... Since doing so would take a tremendous amount of dungeon resources, far more than simply respawning, it might mean ignoring smaller pieces too resource-intensive to bother determining regionality for, explaining the lack of regeneration of the seven-cubic-centimeter chunks. However, pieces even smaller than *that* might actually be subject to regeneration again, since the system could skip the resource-intensive regionality check. In that case regeneration would be no more resource-intensive than a respawn.

“Wow, uh,” Miyoshi stammered. “Thank goodness it didn’t work like that!”

“Yeah. Thank goodness. Thank goodness you didn’t just blow us to kingdom come!” I put my hands around Miyoshi’s head and shook it.

“Keee, you’re going to pop my head!”

I let my shoulders slump, then looked her in the eyes. “So what were you even trying to do with a stunt like that?”

“Well, we theorized there might be a substance controlling body regionality for regeneration, and that if we could isolate and apply it, we could get the regeneration to stop. Now we don’t know exactly *what* that substance might be, but we do know *where* it is.”

“Where it is?” *Don’t tell me...* “You’re not just going to say ‘inside the cleaners’ bodies’ are you? So if we blended one up, we’d definitely have a substance we could spray on the others?”

“Erm...yeah!”

“Miyoshi...this isn’t an elementary school cooking class!”

“Oh, don’t give me that. If we’d been able to keep the mixture, we could have used it to isolate the regeneration substance too. I didn’t expect to turn back into D-Factors though. That was a major oversight...”

Just in case, since now we knew we wouldn’t die, we tried running the same experiment again. Same as last time, nothing regenerated from the puree—thankfully—but the cleaner whose tail we’d cut didn’t regenerate until its

former tail had dispersed into D-Factors. Whether that was due to the experiment, however, or simply a coincidence of timing, we couldn't be sure.

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate Command Center

“Preparing to open gate!”

“Open gate!”

A heavy clang echoed. Through the cracked door to the dungeon, Sergeant Kaiba could see a great number of slimes squirming in the darkness. Still, it wasn't as many as he'd expected.

“There's supposed to be an average of 0.8 slimes per square meter. They must be bunched up somewhere...” Of course he might have been surprised to learn that the slimes he'd anticipated were currently congregated near the opposite side of the room, by the inner staircase entrance. “So we just have to take out...all of those...”

“That's right,” Hagane responded, “but don't forget the real problem is the monster that summoned them. There's the possibility that as soon as we take out a handful of slimes, they'll just summon more.”

“But we can't get to the cleaners with all the slimes in the way. Seems like it's just time to get slime-killing.”

Kaiba wasn't wrong, but Hagane reminded him there was something more pressing. “Our first order is to bring a cleaner to the surface and determine if it still divides.”

Ordinarily their mission would start and end with an attempt to kill all the cleaners as quickly as possible, exactly as Kaiba had suggested. For whatever reason, this particular mission had come with a number of granular orders.

“Confirm whether it still divides... So we just catch one, bring it up here, and wait?”

“That's the gist. We have a 3.5 ton shelter truck. We'll park it right up at the gate, and contain the cleaner inside.”

The 3.5 ton was a cab-over used for transporting equipment and personnel.

The shelter variant was equipped with a proper storage unit. It was meant to keep people and goods safe from outside threats—an ironic choice for containing what currently constituted the world's most dangerous monster.

"It might try to eat its way through the shelter. Your job will be to keep your eyes on it," Hagane added.

"Yes sir!"

"In addition, it's likely to summon eight slimes. Don't let a single one escape."

Kaiba went off to ready his equipment, muttering some choice words about the monsters they were being forced to deal with. Hagane understood Kaiba's feelings. Slimes were weak, but surprisingly tough to kill. It took Herculean effort to peel them off once they were stuck to something, and they'd been known to leave burns with their digestive juices. Sometimes killing them involved the rough handiwork of plunging one's hand in and trying to forcibly yank out their cores.

Still, other problems remained. Supposing they got a cleaner into the truck—after they'd confirmed whether it divided, how would they dispose of it?

"Sergeant Hagane, preparations proceeding smoothly?"

"First Lieutenant Kimitsu. Without a hitch... I'd like to say. I guess we start out by just taking those flamethrowers by the entrance, plunging in, and seeing what effect they have."

"And Urushibara?"

"He's been unloading a bunch of crates just past the entrance. Wonder if we can count on him..."

"Whatever he's brought has to be better than just rushing in with riot shields." Iori smirked.

"You can say that again..."

But the developments that unfolded after that, in their attempts to capture a cleaner, were too rich to even be a joke.

Slimes were notoriously slow. Everyone knew that. Someone should have been able to rush in, scoop up a cleaner, and rush out—a milk run. However,

when Sergeant Kaiba went in carrying a portable net they'd prepared for capturing their prey, he was surprised by the slimes' speed. They quickly encircled him and prevented him from even reaching a cleaner.

"Damn. I-I never knew those sticky suckers had moves like that..."

Indeed, slimes' *regular* movement was slow, but their lunges at prey could be surprisingly quick. There was a reason reports of attacks from above continued on Yoyogi's first floor unabated.

Next was the burlier Sergeant Sawatari's turn. Forming the head of a team, he bulldozed through slimes with a shield, on the backside of which he'd affixed the portable net, until the group succeeded and at least got close to a cleaner.

He scooped the monster up. It looked like around half its body was sticking out of the netting, but was still decidedly contained.

"Cleaner obtained! Move out!"

"Sawatari! The cleaner!"

"Wh-What?!"

Despite the monster not having put up much of a fight, it had somehow split itself in two against the net's edge while Sawatari carried it overhead.

"Sh-Shit!"

What are these things made out of, clay? Sawatari thought. *How could it split itself in two just from making contact with the edge of a net?*

Had Sawatari kept his cool and not tried to collect the dropped tail, he could have made it out with the top half of the cleaner, which would have quickly regenerated. Instead, he frantically tried to collect its missing lower portion. Perhaps in testament to his own skills, he succeeded. However— Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Before he could breathe a sigh of relief, he suddenly found himself carrying two new cleaners overhead.

"Wh-Wh-Whoooa!"

The nets the JSDF had provided were capable of carrying a safe margin beyond the cleaners' expected weight, but not *double* that amount. The stem of the net started to bow, and the two cleaners were once again at risk of splitting

themselves on its edges. Before long he might be carrying four. It was like holding a basket that doubled its contents every time it got jostled.

And that wasn't all. Both of the newly regenerated cleaners were preparing to spawn in eight more slimes.

Two small but complex magic sigils appeared on the ground behind the rear guard, who had been trying to keep slimes at bay with their shields. The mission had quickly gone fubar.

And so Sawatari's team turned tail, abandoning the net in the dungeon and beating a hasty retreat to the surface.

"We're running out of time." Iori pressed her hand to her head. The cleaners' next division at 1 p.m. was closing in.

The slimes were already preventing them from making their way to the cleaners. What were they going to do once the number of slimes *doubled*? This *had* to be a bad dream.

And what were they going to do if they had to wait another six hours to confirm whether cleaners on the surface divided? It would throw off their entire mission schedule. Never mind that—getting a cleaner by the 1 p.m. deadline had been a strict order.

But that too pricked the edges of Iori's growing, subconscious unease. Her superiors seemed to be in an unusual rush to obtain specific pieces of information—gone was the usual adaptability. In addition, while dispatching Urushibara might have indicated a certain level of planning, the threadbare equipment prepared had indicated anything but.

"This isn't like Major Terasawa," Iori mumbled.

It was as if a great shadow had spread out over the mission, and it wasn't cast by the cleaners.

Nouveau Mare, B2

"Hm?"

A loud clanging sound echoed from the other side of the second floor.

“That’ll be the JSDF opening the gate,” Miyoshi answered. “Raid time.”

“Then it’s time for us to go”

“Hold on. We still have a little time. I don’t know what kind of gear they’re bringing, but it’s not like they’re going to start firing missiles.”

“I don’t know. If I were in charge, I might just try that and hope it worked.” Was a situation like this time for military command to play it cool?

“And it’d be your head on the chopping block when it didn’t and you just wound up with more cleaners.”

Right, the improbability of responsibility in an all-or-nothing plan. Rather, the people with responsibility wouldn’t adopt such plans in the first place. All-or-nothing risks with no mitigation were the province of gambling addicts, those with self-destructive tendencies, and people who just plain didn’t think things through, not JSDF COs. I guess that made me...

“Someone who doesn’t think things through?” I mumbled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind.”

“Anyway, up next is the resistance test you were so gung-ho for earlier!”

“Gung-ho?”

“Anyway, we can’t go slicing them all into seven-cubic-centimeter chunks here in Yokohama.”

Even if one used explosives, cleaners at the blast’s edges would simply regenerate. In addition, the second floor was a parking garage. Pillars here and there, rendered indestructible along with the rest of the dungeon, would shield some monsters from the blasts.

As long as each blast destroyed more cleaners than regenerated, maybe their numbers would still go down over time. But with mistakes carrying such a high cost, it didn’t seem like a tack anyone in the JSDF was likely to approve.

“We’re still expecting that they’re weak to fire, right?”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like they’re weak to drowning.” Miyoshi pointed to a

cleaner sitting leisurely in a tank of water.

“Even though they don’t have gills.”

“Weird. I guess they don’t need oxygen to produce energy? What a strange living organism.”

“Monsters don’t eat or reproduce. Is it even correct to call them ‘living organisms’?”

“These reproduce,” Miyoshi responded, pointing to the cleaner again.

“Okay, but then do they metaboliz— Oh.” Converting other substances into D-Factors was definitely a form of metabolism. “Okay, then just these guys are living creatures.”

The definition of a living organism was simple. It had to be an individual life-form, had to possess metabolic functions, and had to be able to reproduce. That was everything. Although, to be fair, the exact definition was still a subject of debate.

“I couldn’t put any monsters into Storage, remember?”

“If Storability determines living-organism status, there are a few indisputable animals we might have to count out.”

If that was how we drew the line, then call the biology textbook publishers, because crickets and fish weren’t organisms.

“Whatever,” Miyoshi retorted. “Burn time.” She began pouring something that looked like lighter fuel over a cleaner in another tank.

“Hold on, isn’t that going to melt the plastic?” I asked.

Miyoshi lowered her shoulders, a pained expression on her face. “You’re telling me. See, I wanted to use an oil drum, but...”

The cleaners were too large. Standard two-hundred-liter oil drums had diameters of around fifty centimeters, and heights of ninety centimeters. Try as we might, there’d be no way to cram an entire cleaner safely in.

“More than half would still be sticking out, huh?”

“Yeah...” We could have used a blowtorch or something if it wouldn’t start

thrashing. But as soon as the flame touched its body, it was sure to at least start whipping its tail around. “So, Kei...” Miyoshi began.

“Uh?” I had a bad feeling coming on.

“Could you please do the honors and toss this guy down the stairs?”

“Wha—?!”

She was planning on burning the cleaner on the third-floor landing?

“Look, nothing’s going to catch fire,” she said. “We’re still in the dungeon.”

“Not that! What are you going to do if a flaming cleaner comes charging at us?!”

“Ah, but it won’t! That’s the genius. It’ll be on a different floor. Monsters don’t cross floor boundaries, remember?”

“In theory... Isn’t monster agitation supposed to be one of the factors that can start a stampede?”

“Well, we’ll cross that bridge *if* it comes. Kei, do the honors!”

“Why do I feel like your hired mob goon?”

Shaking her head, Miyoshi extracted what appeared to be...a titanium riot shield?

“Where did you get *that*?” I asked.

“The Dungeon Association. Mail order.”

“Ah,” I responded. “That makes sense. Dungeon gear.”

Since it wasn’t technically a weapon, there was no issue with selling or carrying it in Japan.

I took the shield and thrust it forward in the air. It pushed forward an audible burst of air.

“And now I just keep this ready and toss him down the stairs?”

“Yup.”

“I really feel like *we* might be the baddies here.”

Even in a gamelike, otherworldly setting, this almost felt like too much.

“There’s no room for feelings on the battlefield, soldier. This is war.”

“Then are you ready to sacrifice yourself in the line of duty if need be?”

“Only if you go first!”

“A death pact,” I smirked. “Great.”

I lifted the tank overhead, heaved it back, and chucked its contents down the stairs.

Miyoshi gently launched one oiled, flaming iron ball out of Storage with just enough momentum to reach the tossed cleaner. The ball tapped it dead center, lighting it aflame.

“Whoa. That’s one way of doing it.”

“Yup. Incidentally, since time still passes in Storage, flaming objects will eventually burn themselves out. I ran some tests earlier. But as far as I can tell, no damage to anything else being Stored.”

“Fascinating.”

The potential applications for firefighting were unprecedented. You could store a whole burning building and let it extinguish itself. I wasn’t sure what would happen if there were anything in the building that couldn’t be put into Storage, but that could be tested later.

In fact, if the skill simply left un-Storable objects on the scene, that would make it the ideal fire rescue tool—at least as long as no one was on the upper floor of a highrise building...

Still turning over potential Storage applications, I took a peep down the stairs toward the cleaner, now fully engulfed in flames. However, it continued to hover without a care in the world.

“Does it not...get hot?” I asked Miyoshi.

“Hot? Kei, it’s literally burning up.”

Burning though its exterior might have been, perhaps as a result of its regeneration keeping pace, a minute later after the lighter fluid had burned

itself out, one cleaner, good as new, was still calmly hovering.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. "Are you kidding me?"

"Well, that rules out just lighting it on fire," Miyoshi concluded. "Now maybe we try the gasoline approach."

The liquefied petroleum gas available in Tokyo would burn at temperatures between 1,500 and 2,000 degrees Celsius. Getting the cleaners' bodies to burn would require an even heat. It would be much more effective to try to get them into an existing fire rather than lighting them directly.

"Molotoving them?"

Vaporized gasoline sat much heavier than oxygen, so we'd be at relatively low risk tossing a Molotov-cocktail-like incendiary down to a lower floor. In addition, since we were in the dungeon, there was, as Miyoshi had mentioned, no risk of a building fire. Our greatest concerns would be a bottle fragment splitting the cleaners or suffering carbon monoxide poisoning. Since carbon monoxide had the same weight as oxygen, just being a floor up wouldn't necessarily keep us safe.

"Okay," I said. "But keep the accelerants to a minimum."

"Moderation is my middle name."

Miyoshi splashed a jug of gasoline down the stairs, and before we knew it a tremendous flame had erupted below.

"Whoa!"

"Yikes. Don't mess around with gasoline."

"No kidding!"

The lower landing had become a sea of fire. The writhing cleaner hovering above the flames looked like some kind of alien.

"Is the air going to be okay?" I asked hesitantly.

"It should be. We're not trapped in the main dungeon floor. The door up top is open."

I looked up toward the top of the stairs. The sprinkler system embedded in

the ceiling caught my eye.

“What about those? Think the sprinkler system’s still active?”

“The sensor line and water lines should be cut off. I can’t imagine it still works. Although...if the dungeon recreated them...”

“Whoa!”

Just then a popping sound echoed from the landing, followed by a cloud of black light and plumes of smoke.

“Did we get it?”

“Kei, don’t jinx us,” Miyoshi hissed. “That’s definitely the kind of thing you say just before it leaps back up, still on fire!”

However, thankfully the universe spared us this time. The cleaner had been fully burned.

“So the heat approach *does* work,” I commented.

“Not very quickly though.”

“So if we apply what we’ve just learned here...”

“All we have to do is spread gasoline evenly throughout all nine thousand square meters.”

My heart sank. “Is that even possible?”

Even if we could get all the gasoline spread out, with the limited oxygen in an enclosed space, we couldn’t be sure how long the fire would burn.

In addition, the cleaner we’d tossed down the landing hadn’t been surrounded by slimes. We had no way of knowing what kind of impact a wall of those gooey goons would have.

A Certain Tokyo Newspaper

The reporters gathered at headquarters tilted their heads at the announcement.

“Dud disposal?” One of the paper’s veteran reporters, square-jawed,

furrowed his brow.

“That’s what it says.” The fresh-faced, younger reporter next to him checked his notes.

“But had you heard anything before now?”

“Before now? N-No, but...”

“So no one had heard anything about a disposal prior to today, but they’re still moving forward with an evacuation at 5 p.m. tomorrow.”

Dud disposal typically didn’t make for major news. Not unless something went wrong. As long as nothing was out of the ordinary during the initial JGSDF inspection, duds could be excavated right away. About the only time they made news was when they required detonation, which would be performed only after exhaustive discussions with local authorities to hash out a schedule and establish danger zones.

“So...?”

“There’s a protocol to all of this. Discovery, debate. Prior to evacuation, we should have at least heard about it.”

“Then...uh?”

After that, they would proceed with the disposal as planned, but not without several more joint meetings, each on the public record. Yet this time there hadn’t been even a single meeting.

“Isn’t a prompt response for the best? I mean, it’s better than leaving a dangerous explosive sitting there...”

“Perhaps.” The older reporter paused. Another thought struck him. “The epicenter would be the Nouveau Mare. With a fifty kilo bomb, they’d only need to clear the perimeter. Even with five hundred kilos, the evacuation radius should only be 394 meters. Just to the Ooka River.”

“This time the evacuation radius is...” the younger reporter glanced back down at his notes, “1.2 kilometers?”

Naval mine disposal established restricted areas of a three-kilometer radius, and no-entry zones of three hundred meters from the site. However, this was

beyond the pale for a land operation, let alone one conducted in the middle of a bustling metropolis.

Usually liner-plates would be used to restrict the area of the danger zone, but...

“This includes most of Minatomirai and all of Kannai...”

This time the area included Isezakicho and Bashamichi, coming just up to the prefectural government building and Yokohama Stadium. Coordinating such an enormous evacuation in the middle of Yokohama would take unprecedented safety and guidance teams—an undertaking without modern parallel. And with only one day to spare... No time to even prepare necessary communication or transport networks.

“Even then,” the veteran reporter said cautiously, “if we go out on a limb and say they unearthed a one-ton dud, the damage radius would still only be around five hundred meters. So what the hell’s going on?”

“Gas lines,” the rookie responded. “They’re concerned about a secondary explosion.”

“Hmph... ‘Concerned’?” It didn’t take years in the field to realize something was amiss. “What’s the coverage like at the scene?”

“They say it’s too dangerous. They’re not letting anyone in.”

“Don’t tell me even the big shots at Kyodo aren’t getting in.”

“Everyone. They say it’s completely off-limits.”

“‘Off-limits’?! What about the public’s right to know?! What are they trying to hide?!”

“Maybe a routine but dangerous disposal?”

“‘Dangerous.’ Humph. You don’t make war correspondents by being worried about whether a story is dangerous.”

The rookie just stared. There was a reason he didn’t like working with the older generation—the ones who had entered the field when workplace regulations were still sparse. Their romanticized values caused more trouble than they were worth.

Here newspaper readership was plummeting, perhaps partly because of the old guard and their old ways of doing things, taking staff wages down with them.

And here I thought I'd been one of the lucky ones, landing this job, the younger reporter thought, plopping himself down in front of his computer and opening his browser. This was the quickest, and easiest, way to conduct modern reporting. Even if it meant taking flak for lagging behind the web.

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Message Board [New Year!] Yokohama Now! [New Yokohama!]

1 Journanonalist: 1/3/19 (Wed.) 9:15:54 p.m.

Happy New Year! What's happening in Yokohama...now?

Next thread at 950 posts.

271 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Something's going down on Twitter. A dud excavation? 1.2 km evacuation? Tell me I read that right.

272 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

>271 Whoa, a real journanonalist. they haven't even broadcast that yet

273 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Uh, actually I saw a news report a little bit ago

274 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

rip. consider me nonplussed

275 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

“nonplussed” means “confused”

276 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Not according to newer dictionary entries. Descriptive not prescriptive. Get with the era, old man! crack open a secondary definition and weep

277 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Okay, so it says Sakuragicho's the main location, but it isn't very specific

278 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The Nouveau Mare announced a sudden closure today. And for tomorrow. Some people went shopping and there was just a piece of paper on the door...

279 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

But the broadcast *just* aired. Somehow Nouveau Mare knew to close almost a full day earlier? You'd think the closure and news would be announced at the same time

280 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

So it was found at the Nouveau Mare

281 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

I live right by Sakuragicho. Were they doing construction over there or something?

282 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

They're constructing a secret base! That they want concealed from the public!

283 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Serious response: they wouldn't necessarily have notified anyone if they were building a tunnel or something

There was that incident last year--I guess the year

before last now--with the Fukui shinkansen tunnel, and one with the sinkhole by Hakata Station before that. And those are just ones that have caused accidents

284 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

But in that case they're working like dozens of meters underground. If they found a dud building a tunnel, they wouldn't need to evacuate 1.2 km from the blast. Even if it went off, it would take out the tunnel, but the ground would absorb most of the impact

285 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

From how wide the evacuation area is, you'd think they found it, like, somewhere up on a hill instead of under a street

286 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The rooftop of the Nouveau Mare!

287 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

A New Otani penthouse suite!

288 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

That wouldn't be a dud, that'd be a terrorist attack lol
>286

289 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

It's like The Man Who Stole the Sun!

290 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Now if the dud were a nuke, I could understand the 1.2 km evacuation!

291 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

In that case it'd actually be too small

292: 271: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

So, what, we think there's a nuclear bomb in the Nouveau Mare?

293 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Hold on. I went by there recently. There were some military types coming in. Also some people who looked like normal civilians walking into the first floor entrance.

294 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Maybe the people going into the first floor were with the JDA. That's a JDA office.

295 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

But it's been closed recently. the only way into Yokohama Dungeon has been through the parking garage gate

296 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Oh right, they were remodeling that too, right? There have been a lot of different service companies moving in and out

297 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Even though the JDA's a nonprofit? Remodeling in front of the dungeon entrance? I don't know...

298 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

I know! A mad scientist moved in, and was using the first floor for his evil lab! Now some experiment's gotten loose!

299 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The mad scientist leaves a mad bomb! The 102nd heads in!

Mad Doctor vs. the JSDF 102nd! Coming to a theater near you!

300 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

What's "102nd"?

301 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The 102nd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Team, out of Camp Asaka. They're the ones who respond to all the greater Tokyo area duds

302 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Huh.

303 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Okay! Time to send in a mole

304 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Go urself >303

305: 303 1/18/19 (Fri.)

No see, I'm uh... a little far away

306 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

weaksauce lol >305

307 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Time for me to shine! Not in education, employment, or training! I've got nothing but free time on my hands to keep up on the situation for all of you!

308 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

A hero emerges!

309 NEET Super Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

I'll report back here.

Join me, NEET brothers! Nay, join me, valiant warriors! I ask for but a few brave men, and maybe a little spending money.

310 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Godspeed >309

311 NEET Super Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

What? That's all I get?

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate Command Center

Miharu Naruse was in the midst of receiving a report from a JSDF courier that really sounded more like complaints.

“The slimes?” Miharu repeated.

“That’s right. There are so many, the teams can’t even reach the cleaners.”

Miharu thought back to something Miyoshi had said this morning. “*A few slimes aren’t going to stop us. That’s nothing we can’t deal with.*”

Did D-Powers have some kind of plan?

They probably did. Naruse sighed. It looked like it was time for another talk with her two favorite dungeon corporation owners.

“The fate of the world is at stake...” she mumbled to herself.

“I’m sorry?” asked the JSDF messenger.

“Nothing. Ask Lieutenant Kimitsu if I could schedule her for an appointment. It’s to help solve the slime problem.”

“Help solve the slime problem’?”

“If you could.”

“I’m on it.” The aide bowed, then turned on his heel and ran back to the commander center tent.

“Please let those two play ball...” Naruse hoped that the invisible hands of whatever gods existed were working in rare form today.

“A meeting with civilian explorers? A waste of time...” Kaiba frowned. His experiences with the cleaners had put him in a poor mood. Listening to amateurs’ armchair opinions sounded like the last thing he wanted to do. “Civilian teams in Tokyo... Let me guess—Shibu T? Kagero? What are they going to tell us at this point?”

“It’s a meeting with D-Powers.”

“D-Powers?!” They were the unbelievable party who had appeared out of the blue around Yoyogi and begun operating preposterous skill orb auctions. Kaiba himself had been the recipient of one of their Water Magic orbs. “Ma’am, this is war. And aren’t they rank amateurs?”

Following the press conference, Azusa Miyoshi’s background had become common knowledge. She’d obtained her WDA card in college, shortly after the dungeons had formed, but in the following three years had hardly gone diving at all. That was, until applying for a commercial license last October.

“‘Amateur’ is generous,” Iori responded. “Her male party member has only been a registered explorer for three months.”

“Seriously?!” Kaiba moaned. Even if Miyoshi had hardly gone diving, at least she technically had a long explorer record. But her partner might as well have had his picture in the dictionary next to “novice.” Even if he’d gone diving every day since getting his card, he wouldn’t be worth his salt. “How are these two operating? They’ve got to have some secret backing.”

Iori decided on a bit of good-natured teasing. “All right, so we don’t meet with them. And here you were having trouble with our current batch of slimes.

What are you going to do when they double?"

"Point taken, but..."

"According to our JDA liaison, they may have some kind of secret technique."

"Secret technique?"

Hagane uncrossed his arms. "The thing is, after they held their first orb auction..."

"After their first orb auction?"

"Listen. After they held their auction, the rumor is that Cabinet Intelligence enlisted multiple Special Operations Group members for a reconnaissance mission."

"What? There are former Defense Intelligence Headquarters members in CIRO, so they might be able to pull those strings, but...recon on D-Powers? What for?"

"Exactly what you were thinking. To see if they had any shady international backing."

"But they should be able to handle that through their own Directorate for Assessment or Directorate for Joint Intelligence. Why send in Special Operations? Seems fishy."

"Not even Special Ops was enough. The second day of the investigation, D-Powers directly contacted one of the Cabinet Intelligence agents."

D-Powers with a direct pipeline to Cabinet Intelligence? Do they have that kind of clout?

"They reported they'd captured one of the operatives. They wanted Cabinet Intelligence to come pick him up."

"They what!?"

"And not just him. All the undercover operatives involved were sent packing later that day."

The JDAG had ties to Special Operations in that both were subdivisions of the First Airborne Brigade. Of course, the latter group worked in secrecy. About the

only time the two interacted was at Ground Component Command ceremonies, and even then, members of Special Operations wore combat masks to conceal their identities. Kaiba didn't like to admit it, but their counterparts undoubtedly had the upper hand when it came to traditional combat.

And yet against D-Powers, they hadn't even lasted a day.

It was too insane to think about. Kaiba shook his head. "Hagane, someone's been feeding you a tall tale."

"You think so? I heard it directly from Major Terasawa, who heard it from the director of Cabinet Intelligence himself."

"What?!"

D-Powers had hardly spent any time as explorers, that much was certain. About the only groups that practiced violence in modern-day Japan—outside of police and the JSDF, as arms of the state—were those with deep ties to criminal agencies or international espionage.

"So what do we think? They're foreign mercenaries? Spies?"

They'd have to be storied ones at that. In that case, Kaiba couldn't figure out why they'd have made the switch to their full-time exploration racket.

"Actually both of them graduated from domestic colleges and became ordinary office workers."

"I..."

Then they had to have been possessed by parasites from some other world, or were mutants, or had been bitten by radioactive spiders! Those were the only things that made sense!

"Also," Hagane added, cutting Kaiba off, "it looks like you're confused, but we're not going to them for advice."

"Huh?"

"Didn't you hear the lieutenant earlier? We're going to them for a *solution*."

A short time later, an energetic-looking woman and slightly dour young man

entered the tent. Lori recognized the latter from a chance encounter at Yoyogi. He was one of Simon's "friends."

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting! Azusa Miyoshi, of D-Powers, at your service!"

"I'm Yoshimura. Pleased to meet you."

Kaiba cocked his head. *This* was Azusa Miyoshi? Funny, she didn't look anything like the Japanese doll of a woman he'd seen on TV.

Sawatari whispered to Kaiba, noticing his confusion. "This is her in her civvies. Haven't you seen her profile?"

"I'll never understand women..." Kaiba sighed.

"Thank you for making the time." Lori stepped forward, then introduced her team members one by one.

"No need to thank us. We are a dungeon support company after all! Getting to work with the fabled Dungeon Attack Group... Trust me, we're giddy with excitement!"

Miyoshi had gone full Queen of the Merchants, greedily rubbing her palms.

Cut that out. I contacted her telepathically. You're laying it on way too thick.

Who cares? she shot back. *They're going to think we're frauds until they see our demo anyway.*

"Well, time is money! And more than that in this case. Let's get the formalities out of the way and introduce today's special catalog. We've got *this* baby for you!"

Still riding the fumes of adrenaline from her online-shopping all-nighter, Miyoshi pointed to a plastic box I had gripped with both hands.

Cringing a little inside, I put the container on the table. Not one second later, Miyoshi had pulled out two of the items we'd decided to offer the DAG.

"Introducing secret anti-slime device number one: the MakiroGun!"

"Makiro...Gun?" The man Lori had introduced as Hagane looked back and forth between us. His blank-faced expression said it all. *Have I been sucked into*

an anime? “I’ve never heard of anything call—”

“You wouldn’t have! It’s. Brand. New! A D-Powers exclusive. Original R & D. And you’re here for its grand debut!”

“Can I hold it?”

“Be my guest.”

Meanwhile, Kaiba had unfurled one of the suits which had been placed folded up next to the gun. He looked at it, scrunching his face. “It looks like an ordinary beekeeping suit.”

Whoa, he got it in one. This guy’s good.

“Non, non, non,” Miyoshi interjected. “That’s a D-Powers LLC original. A prototype anti-slime suit.”

“Non, non, non”? *What are you, some kind of weird, mustache-twirling European uncle?*

“I... I see.” Kaiba brushed her off, turning his attention to the MakiroGun. There was no mistaking it for anything other than a toy. Like Hagane before him, his face said it all.

“M-Magnificent!” A voice called out from behind Kaiba, overwhelmed with emotion. A frail-looking man snatched the gun from the soldier’s hands, and looked at it admiringly. After a moment of inspection, he lifted it over his head. “Unbelievable! Un. Be. Lieeetable! The free market does it again!”

“Um?” I think it was safe to say that no one in the tent quite knew how to respond. Myself included.

“With the formation of the dungeons, the government founded ATLA, and we’ve been working on cost-reduced development of defense technologies via international coproduction in accordance with the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology ever since. We’ve reduced production costs, streamlined parts needs, incorporated consumer-grade items, but this—this! We still have a long way to go.”

He was speaking so quickly I could hardly keep up. Funny. I had a feeling I’d heard that cadence somewhere before...

That's right! Nakajima.

"Argh, it only makes sense," he continued. "We're reducing costs as a mandate. These private companies are reducing costs for profits. What a motivator! Of course. Goodness. How instructive. If we were to try to produce this, first we'd waste a bundle on equipment to run prototype strength tests! Necessary of course—eeergh, but it doesn't come cheap."

"And this is?" I asked.

"Ah, sorry," Iori responded, still collecting herself. "An emissary from ATLA—Kiyomaro Urushibara."

"Kiyomaro? Whoa, what a cool name!" Miyoshi piped up.

Says you? I guess it had an antiquated charm though, in an age of increasingly convoluted, "unique" kanji readings and kana names. Maybe his name was so antiquated and lame, it wrapped back around to being cool.

"I'm afraid you're about the only one who thinks so." Urushibara scratched his head shyly. *Yeah, that's more what I expected.*

"But it *is* cool! Who knows! Maybe an emperor will proclaim you a god a thousand years after your death."

"I'm not sure tales from thirteen hundred years ago [\(15\)](#) carry much sway outside of history buffs now..."

"I hate to interrupt a lively conversation," Iori cut in, "but this toy *is* your company's secret weapon, right?" Her eyebrows were upturned, mouth contorted into a frown.

Technical Officer Urushibara fired back. "Not so fast, Lieutenant. You can't judge prototype technology by its casing. One must see its functions and effects in action before issuing a verdict."

"I suppose," Iori responded, disgruntled.

Kei! Miyoshi radioed telepathically. *New sales wingman! Go, Kiyomi!*

"Kiyomi"?

Well, I kind of thought "Maro" felt like teasing.

Fair enough. “Maro” referred to round, cuddly things.

And “Kiyoma” just doesn’t roll off the tongue.

You apologize to Chandler right now.

Kei, that’s “Marlowe”⁽¹⁶⁾! Hey, wait... “Marlowe”? That’s not bad!

Apparently it was settled. His nickname would either be Kiyomi or Marlowe. Unbeknownst to him.

“Miyoshi?”

“Right. Function and effect.”

“Are you all right?”

“Huh? Uh...ah! Primo!”

“Primo”? Miyoshi, it’s almost 2020. No one’s said “primo” in years.

“Kei.” She turned my way. “If you’d do the honors.”

“Huh?” What honors? Hold on, you mean I have to wear that embarrassing suit again?!

“If. You. Would. Do. The. Honors,” she emphasized.

“W-Wait!”

“Keeee, we’re running out of time! The world’s going to end unless you put that suit on!”

“Ugh...”

This was your big idea...

Nouveau Mare, B2 Parking Garage Gate

Ten minutes later...

Kaiba was watching a man he was sure wouldn’t be long for this world plunge into the dungeon in a beekeeping suit—not something anyone would mistake for a piece of bleeding-edge anti-slime tech—heading straight into a wall of slimes, which had doubled in number since they’d last seen them. The man

tossed a casual “Welp, here goes” over his shoulder and dived right in. Kaiba swallowed, then stood up. He knew what came next. The slimes would trap the man, stopping his movement, and the JSDF would be called in to help.

What actually happened floored every member of the group, with the notable exception of the remaining member of D-Powers.

The man in the suit barreled in spouting nonsense like “Slime attack!” and “Slime punch!” Remarkably, rather than getting stuck, he waded through the slimes like he was in the shallow end of a pool.

What was more—

“Are those slimes...dying?”

“It does look that way... The numbers are going down, right?”

One by one, the slimes around the man were disappearing, allowing him to move even more freely.

“What d’you think? Like I said, anti-slime tech. Eliminates even the toughest stuck-on goo.” Miyoshi gave a self-satisfied nod.

“Incredible...” Urushibara, who had been as tongue-tied as the rest of the group, seemed to have regained his senses. “But if I may ask, how does it work?”

“Trade secret.” Miyoshi flashed a wicked grin.

If he’d known the answer was a common household disinfectant, Urushibara might have resigned on the spot.

“I see. Well, it is your own development. A shame.”

“Can I assume this works as well as the suit?” Iori’s eyes shifted back toward the remaining toylike weapon.

“It sprays eight meters. Those two rows of LED lights on top are your remaining ammo count. Be careful,” Miyoshi said.

“Of course.”

Iori readied the gun, set one foot over the dungeon border, and aimed at the wall of slimes inside. She pulled the trigger.

“Wh-Whoa!”

The effect was as dramatic as that of the slime suit had been. All slimes touched by even a drop of liquid burst into so much jelly, cores rolling to the floor.

“What is this stuff? It’s amazing!” Iori turned this way and that, blasting the gun like a child lost in play.

“A word of caution,” Miyoshi responded. “The fluid is essentially nontoxic, but I wouldn’t ingest any or get it in your eyes. Under the UN’s Global Harmonized System standards for the classification and labeling of chemicals, it would be Category 4: harmful to health when swallowed.”

“More specifically?”

“If you have more than two thousand milligrams in you for every kilogram of body weight, there’s a fifty percent mortality rate.” Still, a seventy kilogram person would have to consume 140 grams of the substance, so it might as well have been harmless. “No eye-splashing, no mouth-spraying, and wash your hands after use.”

“Roger.” Iori put the gun back on the table, then turned toward Miyoshi. “Now, about the price.”

“For starters, one hundred thousand yen per suit.”

“Whaaat?!” I’d just returned from the dungeon and was peeling off the suit. I accidentally voiced my shock before any of the JSDF members could do so.

Miyoshi looked upward as if uttering a silent prayer. She turned toward me and launched into an explanation. “Kei, have you seen the JSDF’s public procurement fees? This is cheaper than even just their testing fees for a new piece of equipment.”

“Really?”

“In December of last year, they paid two hundred million yen to Toshiba Infrastructure Systems for an item labeled ‘Procurement and Development of Backup Prototype Evaluation System Equipment, as Necessary for Capability Testing in the Contracting of Trial Manufacture in Accordance with Research

and Development.”

“I have no idea what you just said. Basically development of prototype testing equipment to...test other prototype equipment? And ‘backup’ at that?”

“Yep. Two hundred million yen. And that’s just for one part of testing, without R & D fees. I’m telling you, they won’t even flinch at this price.”

“I’d really prefer you have this conversation out of earshot.” Iori scrunched her lips.

“Don’t worry! I was just explaining the situation to Kei. Since I’m such a softy, I’ll let you have today’s gear for free.”

“Free?!” This time it was Urushibara’s jaw which practically hit the floor.

Given his work, he knew how much R & D cost. What he didn’t know was that this was simply a solution we’d stumbled across testing different surfactants on slimes.

“We certainly appreciate it,” Iori responded. “But is that really all right?”

“Of course, of course. But in return,” Miyoshi replied, “we need you to save the world.”

Also, she added with a smile, she *would* need the gear returned after they were done.

It was that last line which seemed to pierce like an arrow through Urushibara’s heart.

With the new gear they had acquired from D-Powers, Team I was able to make its way through the second floor. But that wasn’t the end of their trouble.

“Yowch-ouch-ouch-ouch!”

Kaiba let off a stream of expletives almost as expansive as the stream of fire which had just roared forth from his flamethrower nozzle toward the nearest cleaner. Compared to before, the operation was smooth sailing, but every once in a while—like just now—a slime would launch itself in from the side and block the flamethrower’s spray, turning into a gelatinous fireball hurtling toward the

staff sergeant.

Soldiers to his side with MakiroGuns were able to douse the burning slime, but that didn't extinguish the flaming globs that broke off from the main body. Fire kept getting near the fabric of the anti-slime suits, which was at risk of turning into Swiss cheese without tactical reassessment.

"I give up!" Back in the tent to have the suit's fluids topped off, Kaiba pointed an accusatory finger at his flamethrower.

Even in the JGSDF, there were few well-versed in the intricacies of the weapon. There weren't many in use in the first place, and about the most practice an ordinary unit might get with them would be against stationary targets. Even if one had trained thoroughly with flamethrowers, trying to burn only the cleaners in as dense a setting as the current tumult of the second floor was a feat reserved for masters.

"They hardly hold any fluid, and you have to get right up to those snaky suckers. There has to be a better way."

The team had procured several incendiary grenades from America as well, but their blast radius was too small to risk their use, at least so long as there was a risk of any remnants of cleaners left by a blast regenerating.

Using multiple grenades at once might work, but their supply was limited, and if used without proper coordination, they might simply exacerbate the problem.

"How about this?" Urushibara produced something that liked like—

"A hand grenade?"

"Not just any. An ATLA incendiary prototype. Probably more useful than what you have on hand."

"You were holding out on us?"

"Not without good reason. The kill radius is four meters. Under these conditions, it could lead to friendly fire."

"Four meters?!"

That was twice the radius of an American AN-M14. Twice the radius of MK3 (17) variants too. However, the smaller radius helped the latter two remain

useful in a wider variety of situations.

“However, D-Powers’ MakiroGun can fire up to eight meters. At this point, they may be worth trying out.”

With the grenades’ radius of four meters, any slimes jumping in the way after a grenade was tossed might have meant the user’s life. Kaiba could understand why Urushibara had been so reluctant to offer them. But now that they could clear out the slimes in the way...

“Hey this might actually work! What are we waiting for? Let’s try ‘em!” Having finished replenishing the liquid in his suit, Kaiba took two MakiroGun users and headed back into the dungeon.

The incendiary grenades proved monstrously effective at rendering monsters ineffective.

Of course that was without any slimes getting in the way, but the grenades’ four-thousand-degree heat burned surrounding cleaners to a crisp. Although some scraps were left, more cleaners were killed by the blasts than were created.

“They work! They actually work! We did it!” Kaiba emerged from the dungeon with a triumphant grin. They finally had a plausible means of wiping out all the cleaners.

Of course time was still of the essence. There were currently 1,792 cleaners. If each blast took out two cleaners, they would need 896 grenades, and tossed at an average of one per minute, they would still only clear 360 per hour. It would remain an uphill battle.

If they could increase their personnel... But that made friendly fire a concern.

“We could divvy up the grenades, eight apiece,” Kaiba said resolutely.

“We don’t have that many,” Urushibara responded.

“Huh?”

“It’s a prototype.”

He'd brought them to see how they fared in combat. It wouldn't make sense to have gone ahead with mass production beforehand.

"We have a total of...twenty."

"Twenty."

And here they'd finally found something that would work... Truth was a cruel mistress. There was a limit to how far courage and wisdom alone could carry a soldier through battle, and Kaiba was bucking up against it.

"If only we had the budget..." Urushibara closed his eyes, lost in flights of fancy. Weapons development required exorbitant amounts of cash. Furthermore, ATLA had been partly founded for the purpose of investigating R & D cost-reduction techniques. Unique weapons development couldn't expect to see a huge budget allocation in the midst of all that, and especially not for a nascent field like dungeon equipment R & D.

"Then why did you even *bring them up*!?"

Kaiba's shouts could be heard throughout the command center.

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate Command Center

"Shame about the grenades. I was hopeful."

"Next up is some kind of guided energy weapon. Tokyo Electric Power just went in with a thick cable."

"I'm starting to feel like I walked into a sci-fi novel."

"Don't. Apparently it works on the same principle as a microwave."

While other members ran through ATLA's prototype arsenal with Urushibara, Iori and Hagane reviewed a document they'd been handed by D-Powers labeled "Yokohama Report." Miyoshi had trumpeted it as "A bonus!"

Iori had been skeptical of what kind of information they'd gain from a bonus equipment pack-in, but her concerns proved groundless. Within the report was a shocking amount of data, including the results of experiments with cleaners' aboveground division, which Team I had failed to accomplish, and various

weaknesses of cleaners.

“How the hell did they manage all this?”

In other words, how had two civilian explorers managed what all of Team I had not?

“So the cleaner they moved to the surface didn’t divide at 1 p.m. as expected, but slightly later on,” Hagane said, scanning over the report. He sighed. If only it hadn’t divided at all, the urgency could be avoided.

D-Powers had captured the cleaner they’d used just before eleven, so it might still have had enough of some kind of energy from the dungeon stored inside its body to facilitate the division, according to the report. They would know for sure with the next division at seven this evening.

“I hate to imagine how much they’re going to charge us for *that* report.” Hagane chuckled, and turned the page.

“A large enough bomb might take care of this,” Iori commented, reading the passage on cleaner regenerative capacity.

“Hm. So they regenerate from any pieces larger than seven cubic centimeters. We could get ones at the center of a blast, but the floor is nine thousand square meters, plus there are slimes in the way. I wouldn’t get your hopes up.” Hagane recalled footage he’d seen of aerial bombing raids. “At least with something like a standard Mk 82, five-hundred-pound bomb.”

Since new cleaners would regenerate from all larger fragments, if anything, a large bomb carried the same risk as all other explosives—exacerbating the problem.

Irori finished reading the report. “So what do we do? Pass this higher up?” She looked Hagane in the eye.

The JSDF was scrambling for information. However, they couldn’t verify the report’s contents, and had next to no info on its authors or their methodology.

Hagane didn’t miss a beat. “It’s nothing new to go outside of standard channels when needed. The 3.5 ton truck was removed from official service, but it still sees plenty of use. Nothing else can do what it does as well.”

The truck, formally known as the Type 73 before being removed from the JSDF roster, had proved its mettle during the Great Hanshin Earthquake even after being decommissioned.

“You believe in them,” Iori stated.

“I believe in my gut,” he responded. “Not like we have much choice.”

“Okay. Then let’s mark this up with some of our own comments and pass it up the chain.”

“Probably the best call.”

Worst-case scenario, if any of the information proved wrong, responsibility would fall on the higher-ups who had made the decision to trust it.

“Why fight it? What’s in this report is probably the truth.” Iori smiled ironically as she sent the ID and password for the data to Major Terasawa. The report had been printed using a convenience store printer. The same service had provided an ID number and password to be used for accessing a cloud upload. “Anyway, trust but verify.”

It wasn’t much longer until, thanks to D-Powers’ support, the JSDF had acquired a cleaner of its own.

Yokota Air Base

Nearly nine hours after they’d departed from the eighteenth floor at 8 a.m., Team Simon headed out the gate at Yoyogi, then straight on to Yokota Air Base to be outfitted with gear.

“Don’t try to resolve the situation?”

“Resolve it if you can. It’d put Japan in our debt. But don’t risk yourselves to resolve it.”

“Are those orders from the president?”

That question, Lieutenant General Martinez couldn’t answer.

“But if we don’t stop the monsters in the dungeon, it’s only a matter of time before they consume Yokohama. And then, they’ll keep doubling every six hours.

After Yokohama will be Tokyo, then the Pacific Ocean... They'll even reach the States. If Yokohama looks like a loss, we're going to use nukes."

"'Nukes'? Did I hear that right?"

"The world's at stake. We can't be choosy. Didn't they teach you priorities in Delta Force?"

Even though that course of action could lead to nuclear war?

"Look, first of all, even if the monsters do leave the dungeon, we aren't certain they'll behave the same way."

"Any proof?"

"Experiments with raising monsters outside dungeons haven't gone very well."

So they'd tried it.

Of course they'd tried it, Martinez's shrug seemed to say.

"Either way, the monsters might need some of those D-Factors or whatever. We don't know what'll happen outside of the dungeon, where D-Factors aren't as dense. Even if there's a risk Yokohama falls, it seems worth finding out."

"What about the risk to our humanity?"

"The ones who did this are Falcon."

"So then it's just happenstance? Japan just drew the short straw?"

Simon's jaw was clenched so tightly veins were popping on his neck. It looked like his eyes might turn red.

However, after filling out his paperwork to receive equipment from the Falcon cargo truck, he left the command center without another word.

"That fucker!" Simon kicked one of the empty metal trash cans lying around the base as soon as he was away from Martinez's office. It flew nearly ten meters in the air, landing with a dent in its side.

"What are you doing?!"

"Leave me alone!"

"You looked like you were about ready to kill General Martinez back there!"

“Maybe I was.”

“If we’re just looking out for the States, he isn’t wrong.”

“He is wrong!”

“Simon, we’re USAF. Orders are—”

“Orders. I know.”

Martinez was probably retiring this year.

Simon understood not wanting to sully his record, but...

He tried focusing his motivation on doing whatever they could to resolve the situation with the gear they’d been given.

“Did I do the right thing? Telling them?” Martinez asked in a nearby room, not even turning around to look at the other man, who had witnessed his and Simon’s conversation.

“Of course. Thank you for your cooperation,” answered the man, who had given his name as John Smith. His voice was even-toned and cold. *“Now we know for certain. They can’t be trusted on this mission.”*

Martinez had spoken of giving up Yokohama, but that hadn’t been his true intent. It had been a way of testing Simon’s mettle.

“The cargo will be here at twenty-two hundred hours. I’ll be back later to pick it up.”

Martinez pursed his lips. He didn’t know what exactly was going to be delivered, but it wasn’t hard to guess. His old unit, the Sixty-Second Airlift Wing, would deliver the cargo. The Sixty-Second was one of the few units entrusted by the Department of Defense with the transport of nuclear weaponry and radioactive materials.

“I love it when a plan comes together,” John Smith uttered, and with that left the room. [\(18\)](#)

Martinez was left to wonder just what the hell kind of mercenary commander he was working with, and noted that ever since the meeting with Simon, he’d

had a bitter taste in his mouth.

Setagaya, Tokyo

JGSDF Camp Mishuku

“I know we’re in a rush, but this...”

As he spoke, the ATLA member was busy disassembling a kitchen mixer.

“No way around it. The Sicko’s out at Yokohama and he wants something that can ‘chop something into seven-cubic-centimeter chunks within thirty seconds, with a diameter of at least fifty centimeters.’ Apparently they’re trying to get something around fifty centimeters thick and, uh...two meters long into it.”

There were a number of options for blades, but none large enough that they could get on such short notice. And smaller blades wouldn’t do the job in thirty seconds.

“The best solution is to have a larger mixer chop whatever it is into big chunks, then have finer blades grind them up.”

Apparently they were going to be chopping something roughly doughlike in texture.

“Thankfully it’s nothing too fibrous, which would slow down the blades over use. Whatever they’re blending is going to disappear right away.”

“Disappear?”

“They’re going to be blending something from inside the dungeon.”

Gazing at the graveyard of consumer kitchen parts before him, the researcher could only sigh.

“It looks like these should meet the size specs, but I don’t know how sturdy they are. And the budget...”

“Don’t worry about that. Apparently they’ll pay us later. And if this works...”

“Hm?”

“We’ll get double the budget next year.”

“Seriously?!”

“Word from the Sicko himself.”

“All right! What are we waiting for?! Let’s pack these up!”

The two members of ATLA started working like never before—like their livelihoods depended on it.

Nouveau Mare, First Floor

We heard what sounded like a small helicopter, and moments later there came a knock on the front door.

“Who’s that?”

It was just after 4 p.m. We’d finished up our tests on the second dungeon floor for now, and had come upstairs to check on our earlier catch, as well as take a break. We turned around, and standing outside was Simon.

“*Yo! This your secret base, Yoshimura?*”

Simon came in and looked around the room with a great deal of interest.

“*Simon? It’s really you, right? You’re really helping out with the mission?*”

“*President’s orders, natch.*”

“*The president? And anyway, how did you get here so fast? Weren’t you on the eighteenth floor?*”

“*Until around 5 a.m. this morning. Think we set a new record?*”

His team had already come all this way and had even found time to stop for gear. They must have averaged thirty minutes per floor. They weren’t human after all.

“*So how’s the pet?*” He cast a glance toward the cleaner in the tank.

“*We’re seeing how it does outside the dungeon.*”

I explained that we’d already observed it divide outside the dungeon once, at 1 p.m., and that we were waiting for its next division at seven.

“Weren’t the JSDF guys back there running experiments too?”

Their specimen’s first division would occur at seven p.m., the same time as our second one.

“I guess so.”

“Then we don’t even need to run our own!”

“You can run down and grab one pretty quick if you want though.”

Simon leaned his body forward, as if he’d just recalled something.

“Oh yeah? Well then, Yoshimura, how about lending us some of the new gear you gave to Lori and company?” There was a hint of amusement in his voice. He cast his eyes to the dungeon entrance. *“I had a look at the entrance just now. It’s a wall of slimes. Doesn’t seem like we’ll be able to get far inside, let alone launch attacks.”*

“The slimes are acting as a shield for the cleaners.”

“I wanted to try firing an M202 in from the gate, but those slimes’d just get in the way.”

“M202?”

“Think of a rocket cannon that fires incendiary rounds.”

Yikes. Remind me not to get on the American military’s bad side.

“Is it a new weapon?”

“Nope. Grandpa gear. Hardly used nowadays.”

“Huh. Pretty impressive the military could still get them.”

“Don’t thank the military. Technically Falcon Industries hooked us up.”

“Technically?”

“The US military can’t freely ship weapons around Japan.”

“Then don’t share that with us!”

Simon laughed. *“Don’t worry. We probably won’t be using them anyway. Under the circumstances, the risks outweigh the benefits. By the way, Natalie headed in earlier. She couldn’t even move.”*

“So you want the suits we gave the JSDF?”

“You could say that...”

Once the cat was out of the bag, there was no getting it back in. That's how it always went with new technology. I figured we should help them, but...

“I don't mind,” I began, “however...”

I looked up at Simon. He was 176 centimeters tall. He had more than five centimeters on me. In fact, except for Natalie, every member of his team towered over me. Mason was nearly two meters. “Miyoshi, what do we do about the size?” I asked in Japanese.

“I used pretty cheap suits with our height as a baseline. They're supposed to be one-size-fits-all, but that 'fits all' only goes up to around 180 centimeters.”

The tallest member of the JSDF team, Sergeant Sawatari, stood at 180 centimeters, so all the main members of Team I were able to wear the suits. On the other hand...

“That leaves Joshua and Mason out.”

“What is it?” Simon asked. “Problem?”

“We're worried we don't have your sizes. We can only fit people no taller than 180 centimeters.”

“What? Come on! Make ones that go up to two meters at least.”

“What do you think we are, the Netherlands?”

Apparently the average male height in the Netherlands was over 180 centimeters.

“Oh well. Natalie and I'll go in. What's that stuff soaked into the suit?”

“Alien Drool.”

“Drool? What? Come on, man. Call it 'Alien Blood' or something.”

Alien Blood... Huh. That is a lot cooler than “drool.”

“Why the long face?” Miyoshi asked.

“‘Alien Drool’ sounds cool, right?”

“At least until you think about what it means.”

Since we weren’t native English speakers, maybe the phrase sounded a little more imposing to us than to Simon.

“*What about the gun?*” Simon asked.

“*Their range is around eight meters, but you’re welcome to them.*”

Using them to open a path to fire long-range weaponry or use large-radius explosives would be difficult. Or rather, impossible.

“*Only eight meters?*”

“*The base is a toy, after all.*”

“*Toy or space weaponry, at this point I don’t care as long as it can get us through.*”

Simon was adaptable—I had to give him that. I couldn’t help but think back to the stink eyes all the members of the JSDF had given us when we first showed them the gun.

“*That’s not just the JSDF,*” Simon said when I told him. “*A lot of explorer teams that come from militaries don’t like relying too much on equipment.*”

“*Is that so?*”

“*Enemies get stronger the further down you go, and you get stronger with experience. But a gun’s strength stays the same. It stops being effective eventually.*”

What he was saying was largely common knowledge, but when he said it, it came with the weight of experience.

“*They’re supposed to be bringing in porters for future missions, with more advanced weaponry, but so far everyone’s just been spinning their wheels.*”

Even if you brought in enough firepower to clear a whole floor, there was hardly any point so long as monsters respawned. And if you just wanted to get through the floor, there were less wasteful ways.

“*Still, it’s not like we can keep going on forever relying on hand-to-hand combat. There are big bruisers that won’t work on either.*”

Right... You could bring in a one-meter sword, but if your opponent was thirty meters tall, you might as well be tickling it with a butter knife. Either weapon would result in you getting stomped.

“Ultimately,” he concluded, “It’s best to rely on powerful skills.”

“Like Lieutenant Lori?”

“Like Lieutenant Lori. She’s a beast.”

Although it didn’t look like she’d have much chance to use her skills on this mission, he added.

“What about you?”

“You think I’d be this high up in the rankings without a skill or two to fall back on?”

Team Simon’s skills weren’t on the record. Except for Natalie’s high-profile Fire Magic and Mason’s Physical Resistance, we had no idea what they were.

I guess they didn’t feel the need to make them public. The military let results speak for themselves.

“Wow. The words of someone directly entrusted with a mission by the US president sure hit different, huh, Kei?”

“Our only interactions with government big shots are getting travel bans...”

*“You want to have *more* interactions with them?”*

I shook my head. “I’ll pass.”

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[Message Board](#) [\[New Year!\] Yokohama Now! \[New Yokohama!\]](#)

1 Journanonalist: 1/3/19 (Wed.) 9:15:54 p.m.

Happy New Year! What’s happening in Yokohama...now?

Next thread at 950 posts.

I'm back. I scoped the scene.

765 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Welcome back, warrior!

766 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Huzzah! Our hero has returned! We kept vigil for you, brother. >764

767 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The moment has arrived!

768 NEET Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

You guys are embarrassing me. lol

769 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

So? What'd you see?

770 NEET Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Surveillance was tight. It was hard to get close. But look! Pictures of the JSDF.

<https://URL/...>

771 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

What the...

772 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

wtf

773 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Wtfffff

774 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Is that the JSDF carrying some big white eel with two heads with a net?

775 NEET Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

They put it in a truck parked up next to the gate. They just kept the truck there after that. It didn't go anywhere. Weird.

776 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

How did you get these pics?

777 NEET Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The current entrance to the parking lot is along Sakuradori, there's a little road off of it that leads to the old gate.

The train tracks and the Mare would make it hard to see, but you can get a view from the roof of the Minato Mirai 21 District Cooling and Heating Co. building. Me and my 300 mm camera lens + teleconverter got shooting.

778 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

What? I thought you were supposed to be unemployed. That's some serious gear!

779 NEET Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

For moments when a phone just won't do.

780 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Grr. Damn. Jealous.

781 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Is that the unexploded bombshell?

782 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

What are you talking about? It's obviously alive. >781

783 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

So what is it? Is the JSDF taking a monster out of the dungeon with them?

784 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Taking it with them? They just parked it in a truck

785 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Maybe there's a manhole under the truck...

786 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

So what about the dud bomb? >764

787 NEET Net: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

I walked around the Sakuragicho station but didn't see anything like that. The only place with JSDF vehicles was in front of the Mare.

788 NEET Net 2: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

I tried, but there's no way to get close to the Mare from Sakuragicho Station. Don't bother, #1.

789 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

A poster so good, they made a sequel!

790 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

And just like all sequels, not as good

791 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Brutal

792 NEET Net 2: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

I'll get something tomorrow!

793 NEET Net 1: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

gl >792

794 NEET Net 2: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Sir, yes sir! >793

795 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Could this be the start of a beautiful friendship?

796 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

The sunset from Yamashita Park hurts to look at

797 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Uh, are you really from here? The waterfront is to the east, or more like northeast, of Yamashita Park. The sun doesn't set that way.

798 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Y-you can see it from the edge of the World Square, over the roof of the Doll Museum

799 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Whatever.

So is our final answer that the “dud” was a monster?

800 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Pretty baseless final answer

801 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Guess this is our limit as journalists

802 Journanonalist: 1/18/19 (Fri.)

Well we can't get close!

Nagatacho, Chiyoda City

Prime Minister's Office

It was 4:21 in the afternoon. During a break between meetings, Ibe received a report from Director of Cabinet Intelligence Murakita.

“They failed?” Ibe scrunched his face. “They didn’t catch a cleaner? So we didn’t learn whether they would divide above ground at one o’clock?”

“Some private explorers did succeed.”

“Private explorers?” Ibe scanned the report Murakita had handed him. It was jam-packed with information from two explorers working in cooperation with the JDA. “So it did divide...”

According to the report, there was still the possibility the cleaner had stored enough of an essential component for division during its time in the dungeon, so the true confirmation would come at 7 p.m. In addition, the report contained a wealth of information on the cleaners’ attributes.

They could be killed by continuous application of heat or by reducing them to pieces smaller than seven cubic centimeters. Regeneration occurred after roughly thirty seconds, and was completed near instantaneously.

“Could we send in a load of troops and dedicate several people to each cleaner to make sure the pieces are small enough?”

“The seven-cubic-centimeter weakness?” Murakita asked.

If even a single piece was left larger than the regeneration size threshold, their efforts would be for naught. That was if they could even muster the

manpower to attempt it.

“How’s the JDAG team fairing?”

“Struggling due to a lack of equipment.”

“Damn...”

According to the report, the JSDF-affiliated team had been unable to even get close to a cleaner. In this particular situation, the team’s skills, so potent in standard exploration, were to no avail.

Both firearms and cold weapons were out. Even hand-to-hand combat was off the table. In the face of this threat, the JSDF and national police possessed little advantage over the average civilian explorer.

“They still have commitment and resolve,” Murakita pointed out sheepishly. Important though those elements might have been, now it was ability that would get results. Mind over matter would only take one so far. “The trial incendiary grenades provided by the ATLA liaison proved effective,” he continued. “However—”

“Promising news?” Ibe piped up.

“Only a dozen were on hand,” Murakita concluded.

Ibe slumped back down. Between cleaners and slimes, there were currently over fifteen thousand monsters in Yokohama, spread out over nine thousand square meters. What good were a dozen grenades going to do?

If only throwing money at the situation would help, Ibe could likely scrape together a billion yen using discretionary funds. However, what would that accomplish? Time, technology, and resources were all in too short supply.

“Is ATLA’s Dungeon Section so underfunded?”

“Given that their technology could be turned to antipersonnel use...”

Their meager budget had been a political concession.

“So what now?” Ibe asked, beleaguered.

“Given our remaining time frame? Hopes and prayers, sir.”

Preparing for unforeseen circumstances was part of a politician’s job, yet here

they were, stuck. They would have to rethink their approaches to possible emergencies, related budget allocations, and legal frameworks if they lived to see another day...

Then again, who could have seen *this* situation coming, except the gods themselves? And preventing reckless use of taxpayer money was part of a politician's job too.

All that was left was to clean up the mess left before them. What they needed now wasn't self-pity. It was actionable plans with practical goals.

"What about the USDSF?"

"They're already on-site."

"Begging for an American bailout...*again*," Ibe muttered. This was a domestic incident, yet the JSDF's role had been reduced to assisting a foreign party. *American-Japanese relations in a nutshell*, he thought bitterly. "America *will* do its best to avoid the nuclear option, right?"

Having approved the possibility of a strike, making costly attempts to circumvent it could be considered a waste of funds. On the other hand, further resources spent at Yokohama could be considered an effort toward avoiding dirtying America's hands. That might change some minds.

If the latter were the case, Ibe was ready to do everything in his power to cooperate with American forces. If not, he'd rather they simply have kept him out of the loop. Not as if he'd ever had a choice.

"Damn," he uttered. *Checkmate*.

According to Secretary Suga, opinions among the party had been divided, but mostly consisted of outrage at America and an emphatic willingness to leave the situation entirely to the JDA. Dungeon problems should be left to the Dungeon Agency.

It was indeed a dungeon problem for now, but soon it would be Japan's problem, then the world's. Leaving the solution up to a single outside agency wasn't the stance of a responsible leader. Ibe wondered if his party would feel the same way about passing the buck if the WDA stood behind America, for example.

“Prime Minister...”

“Let’s just put our faith in the people at the scene for right now...”

But whether that was faith, or just passing the buck in a different way, Ibe himself didn’t know.

The day’s records would show a meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Secretary General of the National Security Secretariat, and the director of the European Affairs Bureau, starting at 2:36 p.m. and continuing with the arrival of the Vice-Minister for International Affairs from the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry and the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs at 3:14. At 4:21, the meeting took a break, before reconvening at 4:45 with announcements from the two members of Foreign Affairs and the press secretary. The reason for Murakita’s unscheduled visit within that twenty-four-minute break would remain a mystery.

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate

DSF Base

With the MakiroGuns they’d received from D-Powers, Team Simon had succeeded in storming the dungeon, cutting their way through swathes of slimes, and emerging with a cleaner to deliver to Falcon as instructed. They chattered excitedly among themselves.

“These babies are pretty wild.”

“We blew all those slimes away so easily, I almost couldn’t keep a straight face.”

The results had been staggering. All that fuss over the slimes and, after a single spray, all the team had to do was stomp their cores with their steel-soled boots to off the gooey goons. Simple.

“That’s one problem down thanks to D-Powers, but the suckers still regenerate too fast to use any long-range weapons. The MakiroGun only shoots eight

meters. Can't fire off any M202s in these conditions. How about using M74 incendiary rockets as bombs?"

"The TPA they use now burns spontaneously when exposed to air. Worth a try." TPA referred to thickened pyrophoric agent, an incendiary used in weapons as an alternative to napalm.

The cleaners were close to their next division, after which they would hit an estimated 3,584—give or take.

"We might still make it." Simon was feeling optimistic.

With their restrictions in equipment, Team I had been relegated to providing support for Team Simon, currently engaged in continued cleaner tests. The JSDF had also agreed to help clear out slimes—a big help to Simon's group with their lower numbers.

All they needed to do was spray some sort of incendiary agent over all the cleaners, then light a flame. There was the risk of being caught in the blaze, but they should be able to find a safe position.

"Simon, correct? May I have a minute?"

A man who introduced himself as Smith, with Falcon, had sauntered over.

He induced an almost visceral negative reaction in Simon, but then again Simon had met other researcher types who stuck in his craw. He decided not to pay the feeling much heed.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but you see, we may have a new weapon that can help."

"That so?" Simon squinted. Something about this felt off, but if such a weapon *did* exist, he wanted it.

"Code name Little Sun."

"Bold name."

"It generates raw heat, one massive fireball, which should incinerate everything arou—"

"Hold on. Like a massive incendiary? Why would a dungeon gear R & D

company like Falcon have something like that?"

If the weapon were thermobaric, that'd be one thing, but simple incendiaries were hardly ever used in modern weaponry. Maybe the SEALs could find use for them, but even then, they'd have trouble distinguishing a use case over ordinary hand grenades.

"Why, just for this sort of occasion."

Simon remained wary. Who in their right mind would have predicted *this* sort of occasion? In addition, weapons development was expensive. They couldn't afford to blow funding on projects inspired by wild hunches. Simon smelled something rotten, but there was no time to sniff out the source now.

"What's the damage radius?"

"Adjustable, but forty feet by default." With further damage from heat radiation, Smith added with a shrug.

"Forty feet?" That made it both too small *and* too large. Too small to wipe out the whole floor, but big enough to risk vaporizing the user.

"With Yokohama Dungeon's indestructible structure, we expect the blast to be condensed by the ceiling, which is only ten feet up, leading to some extra horizontal coverage."

"So what do you expect the effective radius to be in Yokohama?"

"About 69.3 feet," Smith replied.

Twenty-one meters and some change. A forty-meter-diameter blast of raw heat. The dungeon floor was 60 by 150 meters. They would only need a dozen of these devices to clear it.

"So what's our role?" Simon asked.

"You don't have one," Smith answered with a grin. *"I'm just letting you know there's no reason to overexert yourselves."*

"Thanks for the advice," Simon responded. *"When will these things be ready?"*

"A bit after 6 p.m. tomorrow." Smith gave another small shrug. *"There are some politics involved."*

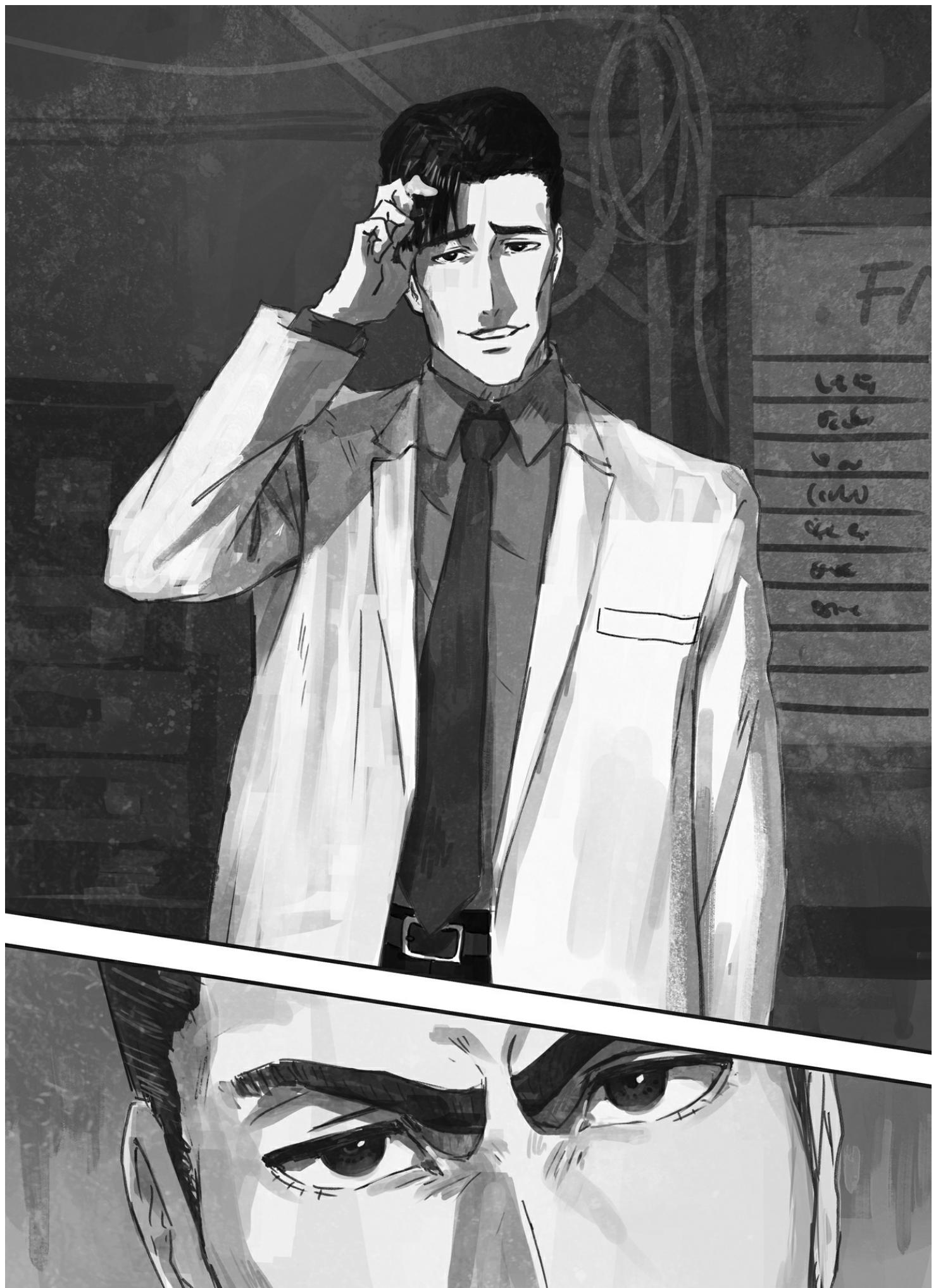
That last comment sent another spark of suspicion coursing up Simon's spine, but it was the remaining time he focused on.

"Tomorrow after 6 p.m.?"

The final division before the stampede was supposed to happen at seven. If anything went wrong with the new weapon, they'd have less than an hour to find another solution.

"Rather thrilling, isn't it?" Smith responded.

Simon decided he had never seen a more punchable face.



Smith returned to his post, and Simon made his way back to the JSDF encampment to share what he'd heard and discuss what to do with their remaining day.

The heavy atmosphere that had settled over the camp broke with news of the new weapon. In particular, it looked as though a great weight had been lifted from Lori's shoulders.

"There. Now they can just sit on their laurels and wait for the equipment tomorrow. No last-minute, desperate plans getting in the way." Smith chuckled to himself, out of earshot.

Had the same incident occurred on US soil, Smith imagined that they would simply send in as many troops as needed—hundreds of thousands—armed with M14 flamethrowers to burn until the burning was done. Any casualties would be a small price to pay.

America might actually have been able to employ the same solution in Japan, though he partially doubted they could gather enough M14s in time.

However, National Security Adviser John R. Dalton had sidestepped the very possibility when suggesting plans to the president, jumping straight to the nuclear option.

Before coming to Yokohama, Smith had received a single order from Dalton: make sure nuclear arms were used.

Dungeons were physical subspaces; no damage would extend to the exterior of their confines. In addition, any earthly items left inside were already subject to deletion at the hands...if they could be called that...of the dungeons' slimes.

The boys in the Department of Defense had been working up a sweat over the thought of some rogue nation making a bid at becoming a nuclear power by tapping into the potential of those spaces to both conceal development and clear waste.

A confined, indestructible subspace. Could the world's seismic, hydroacoustic, infrasound, and radionuclide stations detect nuclear tests conducted in them? If

not, then any country could be conducting nuclear tests under America's nose.

In addition, how the dungeons handled radioactive waste was of the utmost interest to the States. Or rather, to the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, and last but not least the Washington State Environmental Protection Division.

The Hanford Site cleanup.

The Hanford Site, in Washington state, had manufactured the bulk of the plutonium used in America's nuclear bombs. It was also the site of a staggering amount of buried nuclear waste, disposed of before proper regulations were in place. Leakage from the site had become a problem which, along with the exorbitant funds predicted to be required for cleanup, was the source of a major political headache.

But what if they could safely and properly dispose of the waste simply by shoving it into a dungeon?

The world had speculated on the dungeons as a nuclear waste disposal option ever since they'd appeared. After the WDA assumed management of the dungeons, testing had stalled, but the Yokohama situation offered an unprecedented chance—one Smith had been ordered to seize.

Without such an opportunity, they'd never learn how dungeons might interact with radiation. According to Dalton, anyway.

"What? All we're doing is what's necessary to save Japan. No, the world." He smiled.

The radiation could be a danger. The shelter containers he'd brought would keep anyone inside safe, but those within four hundred meters in open air...

He shrugged. *"No one ever made scientific progress without breaking a few plutonium rods."*

A Certain Tokyo Newspaper

"He went back to the official residence?" The reporter cocked his head. He'd just gotten a call from a younger colleague on the prime minister beat.

The prime minister's daily routine saw him head from his private residence in Tomigaya to the Prime Minister's Office in Chiyoda. There were times when he would stay at the neighboring official residence for dinners or breakfast meetings, but it was out of the ordinary, and nothing was on the docket for today. The TPP-11 commemorative ceremony and meeting scheduled for the following day didn't begin until afternoon. He had no reason to stay at the official residence.

"Did something happen?" the reporter asked.

"I don't know. He seemed distracted. Like he'd seen a ghost." The older reporter didn't miss his younger colleague's mocking tone, even over the phone.

"Don't even joke about that," he admonished.

The official residence was a historical building and had formerly been the Prime Minister's Office. People had been killed there in both the May 15 and February 26 attempted coups of the 1930s. Ghost sightings weren't uncommon.

At least one prime minister had considered paying out of pocket to have the residence exorcized, but had given up after being informed that, as a public building, policy required that such an endeavor be conducted using public funds—which certainly wouldn't go over well with taxpayers.

The prime minister's odd behavior had left all the reporters on his beat vexed, but for now there was nothing to do but shrug and pass the information along to the editorial department.

"What's up?" A colleague at a neighboring desk noticed the older reporter's look of confusion.

He explained the situation, but was met with a glib "Well, we all have those days," in return.

"Oh, right," the colleague added. "We got a request from city desk for backup."

"What for?"

"Apparently something's going down with the JSDF at Sakuragicho."

“Where that dud disposal is supposed to be happening?”

Come to think of it, handling of the dud had been, if less inexplicable than the prime minister’s trip to the official residence, still strange. Staff requests for comment had been ignored or rebuffed.

“Yeah. I don’t know one way or the other about that, but...” His colleague readied a picture he’d found on the web. “Check it out.”

In it, the JSDF was carrying some sort of odd-looking monster, seemingly out of the dungeon.

“Could this be an edit?”

As sad as it was to say, the veteran knew a few reporters who had fallen for online image hoaxes. There were even trolls who specialized in dangling particular carrots in front of the mass media’s nose.

“I, well...I can’t say for *sure*, but...”

“Then how about this? I’ll help out *after* we have some stronger evidence than a photo from some message board.”

The JSDF secretly engaging in shady activity? It was tantalizing—*too* tantalizing. The reporter knew better than to get his hopes up.

The difference in media literacy between those who lived on the web and those who didn’t was truly fearsome to behold.

Nagatacho, Chiyoda City

Prime Minister’s Office

Ibe used a carefully selected route to weave his way from the official residence to the Prime Minister’s Office, so as to avoid reporters’ prying eyes. Once inside, he headed straight for the crisis management center in the basement, where he met with the assistant chief cabinet secretary in charge of crisis management.

“Falcon has a new weapon?”

“And they expect it to work.”

“Do we?”

“We have no reason to doubt them.”

Ibe plopped himself down on a chair. He breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Cut it a little closer next time.”

“What shall we do about the evacuation area?”

Managing a 1.2 kilometer evacuation area in the middle of Yokohama was logically and financially unprecedented. If they were going to walk back their decision, now was the time.

“However,” the assistant chief cabinet secretary added.

“Yes?”

“The weapon in question won’t arrive until 6 p.m.”

“Six?”

That was the time the American president had offered as the final threshold. They would be crossing the Rubicon.

That said, he didn’t expect they would go through with their plan without warning the DSF and Falcon staff present. Thus, their final signal would be the call for those groups’ withdrawal.

“I wonder if America will wait to see the results of this new Falcon device,” Ibe mused.

“No one *wants* to use a nuclear weapon in a populated area, sir.”

“Keep up the dud disposal story, and maintain the evacuation area. We’ll sort out the budget issues later.”

That should do for now...as long as there were no other surprises. When it rained it poured, but thankfully lightning never struck the same place twice.

January 19, 2019 (Sunday)

Nouveau Mare, B2

“Miyoshi.”

“Yeah?”

“The dungeon seem kind of quiet to you?”

Early in the morning, the JSDF had gone in with some sort of mysterious cylinder provided courtesy of Urushibara. It looked like a carp streamer used at Japanese children’s festivals, but with the head and tail cut off. It was actually a giant blender that was supposed to chop any cleaner inside to mincemeat within thirty seconds.

However, it took several seconds just to load a single cleaner inside. Practical use: dubious.

After the blender bust, the JSDF and US teams had been sitting on their hands. Hardly anyone had gone inside the dungeon.

“Now that you mention it...” Miyoshi responded. “Think there’s been some new development? Or did everyone just give up?”

“Nah, there’s no way everyone just gave—”

“Up,” I’d been about to say, but it was already after nine o’clock. There were more than eleven thousand cleaners and one hundred thousand slimes squirming around on the other side of the doors, which we’d fixed shut with thick wedges. It was already an ocean of monsters.

“I don’t think you could even move in there at this point without an anti-slime suit,” Miyoshi observed.

We were ten hours out from the stampede.

“There must have been some breakthrough,” I concluded.

“Why don’t we ask Naruse?”

“Yeah. We need to have some idea of what the military is up to.”

“Put this on.” Miyoshi took out a walkie-talkie with an earpiece. “We can’t use telepathy more than twenty meters apart, and obviously phones are a no-go in

the dungeon.”

We couldn’t use the walkie-talkies when one of us was inside and one of us outside either, but they would work from any distance when we were both in the same dimension.

“They’re full-duplex models,” she informed me.

Full-duplex walkie-talkies worked functionally like phones. One side would radio the other and simultaneous two-way conversation would begin. You could end a call by pressing the receiver button again.

“Although I’m almost disappointed,” she added. “I wanted to say ‘over and out.’”

Under older simplex transmission systems, the speaker would mark the end of their message by saying “over,” and, at the end of a conversation, “over and out.”

“You *would* like something that old-fashioned,” I teased her, taking my walkie-talkie.

Miyoshi returned a moment later with Naruse. Apparently, brazenly sharing internal details with private explorers like us didn’t sit well with the rules, so she’d slipped away for a talk. That figured. Outside of Team Simon, with whom we’d had more contact, everyone there only knew us as purveyors of orbs and equipment.

“Prototype Falcon weapons?” I confirmed after Naruse had given us the lay of the land.

“Yes. And apparently they’re supposed to fix all this in one fell swoop. We’re waiting on delivery.”

Team Simon had passed the news to the JSDF last night, and it was as if all the tension had evaporated. Everyone was treating the waiting period like a break, conducting further cleaner research since there was nothing better to do.

“That explains why the floor’s so quiet.”

“When’re the weapons supposed to arrive?” Miyoshi asked.

Obviously not soon, given the lack of clamor on-site.

“About that...” Naruse began.

They’d intended to ask the on-site Falcon lead, but he seemed to have disappeared. After that they’d tried calling Falcon, but the person they’d spoken to just passed the buck back to the on-site staff.

“But they’re being brought in from Falcon, right?”

“Yes, but apparently US troops are handling the transport,” Naruse explained.

“Ah, I see.” Bringing them in from Yokota would avoid lots of troublesome paperwork.

“Anyway, when we finally found...Smith, I think he said his name was...he said they should be here around six.”

“Six?!” I repeated out loud.

“Isn’t that a little tight?” Miyoshi asked.

“If they’re driving here from Yokota, they’ll never make it through traffic,” I pointed out.

“Team Simon flew in by helicopter,” Miyoshi observed. “Maybe that’s how they’ll bring them in?”

“If they fit. They said these things are supposed to clear the whole dungeon. Who knows what we’re dealing with?”

Judging from Falcon’s time frame, you’d almost think the fate of the world wasn’t at stake.

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate Command Center

“Why the long face?” Hagane called out to Iori, who was sitting in a command center chair.

“I passed word on up about the new weapons, let them know we were halfway toward solving this thing, but...”

“I bet that put a spring in their step.”

“Their reaction was...strange.”

“How so?”

“It’s hard to put into words. They were saying that if it seemed like the new weapons would work, we might as well withdraw by six.”

“Why?”

“They’re appointing the whole area an evacuation zone starting from eighteen hundred hours.”

“Expecting a stampede?”

“No. The excuse is a dud warhead disposal.”

“Dud disposal? What?”

“I don’t know, but Sakuragicho’s at the center of the evacuation area.”

“Are you kidding?”

Was there *actually* a dud removal going on at the same time as their operation? Probably not. At the very least, Hagane hadn’t heard word of one before getting marching orders yesterday. Were they going to impose an evacuation area without even a full day’s notice?

“Something seems off, right?” Iori asked.

“It’s not normal, that’s for sure. So what are the orders, Commander?”

“Keep supporting the DSF until Falcon takes over. We see this through as far as we can.” Iori lifted her head and stood up. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I do know our duty.”

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate DSF Base

Base camp was a boiling pot of anticipation as the sun set. Team Simon had just received word of the Falcon Industries shipment arrival.

However, Joshua, who had been sent to retrieve a copy of the weapon, had returned empty-handed.

“We’re not running setup?” Simon asked.

Joshua shook his head. *“Smith’s handling that personally.”*

“We need at least eight—twelve to be safe—set up throughout the floor. Is Lab Coat Larry going to handle all of them?”

“He said he’d just set one to start.”

“What? How much time does this guy think we have?!” Simon cast a grave look toward the clock, which currently read 6:02 p.m.

“Setup should only take five minutes with the anti-slime suits,” Joshua responded.

“And what, we just kick back?”

“Bodyguards.”

Bodyguard, eh? They could easily cut their way through the slimes, and cleaners hardly ever attacked. What exactly were they supposed to be guarding against?

“Piss off. Sounds more like play bannermen for the king,” Simon scoffed.

“Bigger’n I expected,” Simon mumbled, seeing the size of Smith’s backpack.

It would take quite a bit of thermite to produce a twenty-one-meter blast, but it shouldn’t have been *that* large.

“Just hold off the slimes until I can set the delayed detonation,” Smith responded.

The bomb’s outer casing was made from a Styrofoam-like material that was supposed to inhibit slimes’ digestive properties. Despite looking unwieldy, it was surprisingly light. Smith set the bomb down for a moment to put on his anti-slime suit, then picked it up again as if it were an empty backpack.

“Of course if we’d known about this wonder liquid,” he said, spraying his suit, *“we probably could have cut down on the casing even more.”*

“Where’s the setup point?” Simon asked.

“The center of the floor.”

“And detonation?”

“I’ll set it for 6:15.”

“All right.” Simon shrugged. “Let’s roll.”

The JSDF went ahead to help secure a route. Mason led Team Simon’s party as they joined the effort to part the sea of slimes.

Miyoshi watched from the entrance. Once the team had gotten a short distance into the dungeon, she went to let Yoshimura know the weapon was in place.

Nouveau Mare, B2

“Kei, Smith’s back out. The detonation is set for 6:15. Over.” Miyoshi’s muffled voice came in over the transceiver.

So she couldn’t resist adding the “over” after all. I smiled.

That meant the blip on my Life Detection by the dungeon entrance just now had been Smith. And the location of the bomb should be— “The center,” I concluded.

I recalled where that same blip now back by the entrance had stopped moments earlier, when I’d been focusing Life Detection on the dungeon. That was a logical enough spot given the bomb’s purpose. However— “Why are they waiting? Why not use it right away?”

“What?” Miyoshi asked.

“Nothing. It’s just that this new weapon is supposed to be able to wipe out a bunch of the cleaners at once. Why not take out as many as they can right away? Give themselves more leeway.”

“The weapons just arrived. They’re working as fast as they can.”

“I guess so. But even then, they didn’t just finish developing it today, right? They could have brought this in from the start.”

“They probably didn’t want to unveil new R & D.”

“Do sales mean anything if the world doesn’t see tomorrow?”

Something didn't add up. In addition, what did Falcon have to gain from keeping a massive thermite bomb's R & D under wraps? Plus...

"From what we know, isn't this still a little underpowered? They said these weapons are supposed to clear the whole place."

Miyoshi ran the math. "I heard one is supposed to produce a forty-foot-radius blast. Let's see..." That was about eleven meters. However, the dungeon was indestructible. In Yokohama, the blast would hit the ceiling at three meters and fan out. "So let's take the blast volume and double it. It'd be a cylindrical blast with a diameter of a little over forty-two meters. There are currently 28,672 cleaners. That's 3.2 per square meter. The number killed by one blast, assuming an even spread, would be about 4,430. That's...not enough to avoid the stampede by seven, huh?"

"Doesn't seem like it."

Offing more than four thousand in one fell swoop was impressive, but it was only one seventh their total number. They'd make that up and more with their next division. There would still be a stampede at seven.

"This is probably just a test. They've got more loaded up if it works."

"And if it doesn't work? Why not go for broke, or at least bring in enough to avoid the stampede if it works?"

"Maybe..."

"Maybe...?" I prompted her.

"They're thinking the same thing you are."

"The Manor?"

If the weapon could take out a thousand in one blast, odds of getting enough cleaners of the same generation to spawn the Manor were good.

"But how many people know that summoning the Manor makes the monsters around it disappear?"

"Maybe America's conducted its own research," Miyoshi suggested.

"Ah, jeez. It's not impossible, but... Anyway, that Smith guy left the dungeon,

right?"

"Yep," Miyoshi responded. "He's outside."

So he'd left. Was that because he was expecting the Manor to spawn?

"Well, either way, we definitely want Monster Mash Manor to show up," I concluded. "Time to get to it. Over."

"Look who got into the spirit!"

"You have to let yourself have the small things. Over and out."

The parking garage was around 60 by 150 meters. If I could cast Ultimate Flame Magic within around thirty meters of the weapon, I could make everyone think the Manor had spawned from the blast.

I put my arms through the sleeves of the suit, but the headset prevented me from putting on the hood.

"Oh well." We both knew the plan. Heading into the dungeon to cast Ultimate Flame Magic would be a milk run. I could be out of contact with Miyoshi for a bit.

I took the headset off, slipped the hood on, and zipped up.

I figured the several blips on Life Detection ahead of me were the JSDF. They would have been out of the blast radius staying by the opposite wall, but appeared to be moving back closer to the entrance to observe.

"Looks like Team I's sticking around."

Even after being shifted from main role to support, they still had their pride.

I eyed the dungeon doors with a minor feeling of exasperation, swung them open, and started wading through the slimes.

Nouveau Mare, Parking Garage Gate

After seeing Smith out of the dungeon, Team Simon had decided to stick around to confirm the results of the test, hanging out near the gate. The JSDF were going to observe from even closer to the blast.

Or at least that had been their plan. Now a Falcon Industries employee was urging them all to bunker down in shelter containers set up further away.

“What for?!” Simon barked.

The weapon and its slime-proof shielding was set in the middle of the dungeon. The blast radius would only take up two-thirds of the dungeon. They’d be safe this far out.

“It’s almost seven,” Simon continued. *“We’ve got to know if it worked!”*

They were on the threshold of a stampede. There was no reason to take extra time to shelter and then come back.

The Falcon employee seemed to be in a hurry, but wasn’t *he* the one acting like they had time on their hands?

“But what about the...you know?” the employee whispered. *“The radiation?”*

Simon blinked. *“The what now? The weapon uses radiation?”*

It was supposed to use raw heat. Then again, the largest blast using thermite Simon had ever heard of stopped far short of forty feet. He’d assumed that it had been developed using cutting-edge technology. But radiation?

The Falcon employee squinted at Simon.

“There something about that bomb we should know?” Simon squinted back.

“The army brought it in. I-I assumed you had more information than we did.”

“Hold on. Isn’t this some sort of groundbreaking, newfangled Falcon R & D sci-fi shit?”

“We make gear for dungeons! We don’t make nuclear bombs! My god, can you imagine? First of all, our investors—”

“Nuclear bombs?!”

All eyes nearby turned toward Simon and the others.

That was why they’d gone through the trouble of setting up these portable shelters outside the gate.

“We only have four minutes!” the employee pleaded.

“Four minutes?!” Simon shouted. *“That rat.”*

“John Smith.” How had he fallen for a cockamamie alias like that? Smith could never have made this call on his own. Who was he working for?

Miyoshi ran over.

“Nuclear weapons? There’s a nuclear bomb in there?!”

“Apparently,” Simon spat.

“Shit!” She grabbed her headset and ran closer to the dungeon doors. “Kei? Kei!”

No answer. He must not have been wearing his headset. The Arthurs wouldn’t be able to communicate such a complicated message. She’d have to get within twenty meters and use telepathy.

Without hesitation, she dived into the sea of slimes, a MakiroGun in each hand.

“Hey! Azusa? Hey!” Simon called.

Damn it, she hadn’t even been wearing a suit. With one disapproving click of his tongue, Simon began to run after her.

“Simon!” his team called behind him. *“There’s no time!”*

“You guys get to the shelters!”

“That dumb lug!” Natalie moaned. *“Is he really going to try to drag Azusa out and warn the JSDF at the same time?”*

As far as the JSDF knew, Smith’s statements about the blast radius were true, and so they were going to record the results. They never imagined that what awaited them was a *real* man-made sun.

“Damn it, ‘Little Sun,’” Simon cursed. *“Give me a break!”*

And cursing right behind him was the rest of his team.

“We’ve only got three minutes! This is crazy!” Natalie huffed.

“Three minutes? We can go to the moon and back in that time.” Joshua gave Natalie a passing glance, then rushed straight along the path Simon had opened

up.

“Why do all the men on our team have a death wish?!”

The dungeon was indestructible. Even if a nuclear bomb went off inside, the greatest danger would be the radiation expelled from the first-floor entrance and parking garage gate. As long as they were in the shelters, positioned out of the way of either aperture, they'd be fine.

“They just have to get back to the shelters. Even a minute should be fine,” Mason stated. As insurance, though, the least they could do was pave the way through as many slimes as they could to help their comrades on the way back. He picked up a MakiroGun in each hand. *“Natalie, you go on ahead and get to the sh—”*

“Get real! You know I can’t do that.” She tossed a fireball toward one of the monsters inside as if bringing the brunt of her anger to bear on it. *“Those two are going to get an earful from me when we get back! That’s for sure!”*

Nouveau Mare, B2

Kei! K— Kei! Come in! Kei!

The telepathic voice in my head was unmistakable. It sounded like she was working her way through slimes.

Miyoshi? What are you doing here?

Kei! Get out of here!

Huh?

The bomb Falcon brought in! It’s atomic!

It’s a tonic? What kind of tonic?

Don’t be stupid! Run!

A tonic... Wait, “atomic”?! They brought a nuclear bomb into Yokohama?!

Run!

Where to? And what about you?!

Don't worry about that right now! Just get out!

I don't know what's going on, but I'm not going to let a nuclear bomb go off in the middle of the city! You get out! I can't focus if I'm worried about you being here too!

Gwah!

What? Hey! Miyoshi!

K-Kei... The rest is up to you...

Miyoshi?

That dummy! Was she not even wearing her slime suit?

I could duck into Arthur Space if needed. But that would mean leaving Yokohama to the bomb, and Miyoshi and the JSDF team to their fates. I wasn't even sure if Team Simon had made it out.

"Drudwyn, whatever you do, you stay in the shadows, buddy, you hear! And warn the others if you can!"

No time to hold back, I thought. I began focusing all my energy, determined to burn both the monsters in front of me and the bomb components to cinders.

Miyoshi, don't die!

As long as she stayed alive, we could regenerate missing body parts, heal burns, use all our potions and skill orbs. Whatever! *Just please don't die!*

I couldn't fire off an Inferno willy-nilly. I had to focus on removing humans from the target list.

It was magic. Whatever you imagined, it could do. At least in theory...

I was running out of benzethonium chloride. Slimes were starting to cling to the suit's hood.

Still one minute left. Fooocus...

I just needed one moment. One instantaneous, merciless white-blue light to burn away everything *that wasn't human*. I put all my mental energy into it.

A pillar of slimes had formed around me, lifting me off the ground. Placing all

my hopes into one final attack, I began summoning a conflagration that would put my show on the tenth floor of Yoyogi to shame.

“Infer—”

“Sorry,” Smith murmured in the general direction of the USDSF and JSDF teams. *“I’m afraid this was a rather old bomb. Those antiquated timer delays aren’t like the precise systems used now. A difference of a minute or two wouldn’t be out of the ordinary.”*

His lips twisted into a grin.

A flash.

A blinding flash.

The world went white—and then dark.

Chapter 8: Temple of Darkness

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“So. Yokohama’s still standing.”

Despite it being a weekend, most of the Dungeon Management Section’s staff was working today, having been loaned out to help with the National Center Exams. The fervor of the office the previous day now felt like a long-faded dream.

“Yes, sir.” Miharu Naruse sniffled, eyes bleary.

They had found out about the nuclear bomb at the very last moment. Miyoshi, who had charged into the dungeon after discovering the truth, and Team Simon, who had run in after her, and the entirety of Team I, who had already been inside, hadn’t emerged.

Shocked by this turn of events, Miharu had tried to rush out of the shelter unit just before the scheduled detonation, but had been pulled back in by a Falcon employee.

“A nuclear weapon...” Saiga could hardly believe it when he heard.

Even if he humored the idea that America might consider using a nuke, he hadn’t expected Japan to approve it, let alone that either country would go through with such a plan.

“Though you’d hardly know a nuke went off from looking at the scene,” Miharu added, dabbing her eyes.

The time for the scheduled detonation had come and gone, but the team in the shelters had recorded neither shock or sound. Whether that was due to a timer inaccuracy, or because the bomb had failed to detonate, or been consumed by the slimes, they couldn’t be sure. Still, there was no sign of Team Simon or the JSDF.

After ten minutes had passed, some of the Falcon engineers worked up the

nerve to head outside the container and check. Miharu watched from the shelter as they worked their way up to the dungeon entrance with visible trepidation, Geiger-counter-like equipment in hand.

What they found inside was more shocking than any nuclear aftermath. The dungeon was empty—a seemingly ordinary Yokohama floor looking just as it normally did after a boss monster had been felled. However, there was still radiation to worry about. Of which the team registered—

“Zero?” Saiga asked, incredulous. “Not a trace?”

“None, sir.” Everything had seemed perfectly normal. The only notable fact was the absence of the explorers who should have been inside.

“So that’s it,” Saiga finally intoned. “The world’s saved.”

Whether it was due to America’s insane plan or some other factor, Saiga couldn’t be sure, but Yokohama, Japan, and maybe all of humanity had been spared. “So I take it the long face means...” he trailed off, looking up at Miharu.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Still no sign of the missing explorers.

Saiga pulled up a document on his computer. “Well, I think we can at least assume they’re alive.”

“Huh?”

Saiga spun his monitor around to show Miharu.

“The World Dungeon Association Ranking List?”

“Check Rank 3.”

Simon Gershwin.

“And Rank 18.”

Iori Kimitsu’s name, too, occupied its customary spot.

The WDARL was updated based on a mysterious tablet retrieved from inside a dungeon. Whenever an explorer died, their name disappeared from the list.

“I don’t know where D-Powers rank, given their lack of diving, but if the others are alive...”

“They’re alive too?”

“Exactly.”

Saiga picked up his office phone’s receiver, then shot Miharu a telling glance. The kind that ordered “Eavesdrop.”

“Terasawa here.”

“Major Terasawa. What’s the JSDF doing? Two of our explorers are missing.”

Terasawa recognized the voice on the other end of the line as Saiga—a voice he’d heard all too often recently.

“Yokohama? I’ve just received the report. We’re still in the dark.”

“Then you’ve heard about the use of atomic weapons?”

“Where the hell did you hear—” Terasawa froze. The last thing they needed now was a leak. Needless to say, those at the scene had been given strict orders to remain tight-lipped. There shouldn’t be any evidence an atomic weapon had been used. If all went well, the incident would fade away without record.

“That would be thanks to our on-site liaison,” Saiga responded.

“Well, I’ll be honest, it caught us off guard too. Oh, and Saiga, I don’t suppose I need to say this—”

“No need to worry. Our lips are sealed over here.”

Following that promise, Saiga drilled into Terasawa with a litany of complaints. At first Terasawa listened patiently, but before long he, too, lost his temper.

“Now look here! I understand your concerns, but we’re still missing Lori and Hagane and the rest!”

It was rare for the coolheaded Terasawa to blow up.

“Glad to hear you’ve still got a little sentiment left,” Saiga snarked. “But don’t worry, your MIA explorers, and ours, are probably still alive. Have you checked the WDARL recently?”

Terasawa nodded. “For all that it’s worth. How often are those records updated?”

“At least often enough to know if we lost them at Yokohama at 6:15.”

“So then—”

“Your people as well as ours are still out there...somewhere. Probably.”

“Saiga, that’s the best news I’ve had in a while.”

“On that note, let’s make a pact.”

“A pact?”

“Yep. To not withhold any information about our missing parties’ whereabouts.”

Of course this pact would only be between the two of them, Saiga cautioned. No need to bring paperwork in.

“Are you suggesting the JDA might have some sort of communication network we don’t?”

“Of course we do. We’re the Japanese *Dungeon Agency*, after all.”

Terasawa thought silently for a moment, then very quietly offered a response.

“All right.”

“We *do* have one, don’t we?” Saiga asked after putting down the phone. “An extra communication network?” He looked right at Miharu.

“What?!” And here she’d been admiring his cool handling of the situation. He’d meant *her*? “Y-You mean—?!”

Wait... Come to think of it, she *had* successfully swapped memory cards from inside and outside the dungeon. If Miyoshi and Yoshimura were in a position to communicate, they might try to send a message the same way.

“I...might have one!” Miharu perked up.

Saiga breathed an internal sigh of relief. Thankfully he hadn’t wound up lying to Terasawa. He’d been hoping he could count on D-Powers and their dedicated

supervisor to have one more trick up their sleeve.

“I’m heading out! I’ll keep in touch!” Miharu gave a perfunctory goodbye and dashed out of the section chief’s partitioned office.

“Please do!” Saiga called out.

“I will!”

With that, she rushed to D-Powers’ office.

D-Powers

“Ouch...” It felt like I’d been tossed into the air and landed flat on my back.
“Where am I?”

Eyes open or shut—it made no difference. Everything around me was pitch-black. It was like Arthur Space, but somehow this felt more...real?

It felt like I was enveloped in almost physically solid darkness. No light to be found.

“Don’t tell me I’m dead!”

The last thing I remembered was...

“That’s right! Miyoshi!” That dummy had tried running in after me knowing there was a nuclear bomb. I’d been trying to tell her to escape. “Wonder if she made it out...”

A voice popped into my head.

Give me some credit! I can dodge death with the best of them!

“Miyoshi?!” I called out. *Where are you?*

Given our telepathy’s working, I’d say within twenty meters of you. I can’t see a thing. How about you?

Nada.

I don’t know what’s going on, but it looks like we survived. After all that, I’d hate to make one wrong move just to get snapped up by a monster in the dark.

Same. But we can’t just sit here.

Mind if I turn on a light?

As long as nothing comes charging at it. I'm checking with Life Detection... What the heck? Miyoshi, you're practically right next to me!

Life Detection didn't show any other blips.

I'm getting nothing on Danger Sense either, she noted, referring to a recently acquired skill. I'm turning on a light.

A flashlight? Okay. Just in case, keep it pointed at the floor, then raise it up gradually.

A light appeared on the ground to my right, slowly growing in diameter. I took a headlight out of Storage, put it on, and cast it in the direction of the flashlight beam.

“Kei!” Miyoshi came running over, waving.

Whoa, whoa! I thought to myself. *What if there's a hole in the ground?*

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I'm fine. At least if you can call this whole...everything...‘fine.’”

Both Miyoshi's flashlight and my headlamp seemed to be illuminating less distance in front of us than they should have, as if the light were being swallowed up by the dark.

“Reminds me of the greater lophorina,” I commented. The greater lophorina was a bird of paradise whose feathers absorbed 99.7 percent of light, so that it appeared jet black. “But...” Faintly standing out in the darkness were crude carvings along the walls. It looked like some sort of temple.

“Reminds me of the caverns under Batian Peak,” Miyoshi observed.

It wasn't quite as grand as they'd been, but the random jumble of carvings, a mix of cultures, was similar.

“So then...we're in a dungeon?”

“Hard to say, but can you imagine anyone but a dungeon maker or hackneyed game designer coming up with scenery as tasteless as this?”

We appeared to be near the corner of a room large enough that we couldn't

see the opposite wall.

“Incidentally, I’ve got a Night Vision orb,” I commented.

“You use it.”

“Aren’t you usually the one taking on the reconnaissance role?”

“I don’t want to be walking in front. My stats may be higher now, but if anything catches me off guard...”

Either way, one of us would have to use it, and we’d have to stick together. Humans received eighty percent of nonlinguistic information through sight. If we couldn’t see holes in the ground, or were separated by a distance the Arthurs couldn’t travel, our odds of survival plummeted.

“The safest place for me is right behind you!” she said cheerfully. “I know you’ll watch out for us both!” *Way to soft sell the idea of using me as a human shield.*

“But still, where are we? What happened to Yokohama, and the bomb?”

“They say voicing a question can help answer it, but hearing it out loud just makes me more confused,” Miyoshi uttered.

She was right. We didn’t have enough information to go on.

“Though the simplest answer would be that we’re dead,” she added.

“I have to be stuck with you in the afterlife too?!”

“*That’s* your first concern?!” Miyoshi narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms.

“N-No! I mean I’m lucky! To be stuck here with such a good friend!”

“Oho!”

“Plus, hey! This could be our one chance to actually wind up in an isekai!”

“Get real.”

“Well, we’re definitely going somewhere.” I grinned. “Up a creek without a paddle.” As long as I could banter with Miyoshi like this, the situation felt almost normal.

“Do you think the bomb went off?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure. I felt like it had, but my last clear memory was of trying to launch Inferno without targeting any humans, with a minute left until the bomb detonation. I’d asked Drudwyn to tell the Arthurs— The Arthurs?!

“Miyoshi, is Cavall here?” No sooner had I asked than a snout emerged by Miyoshi’s feet. “Looks like that’s a yes.” I’d been wondering if Drudwyn had shielded us from the blast at the last second using Arthur Space, but apparently not. Still... “There’s no chance Arthur Space got, like, warped by the blast and that’s where we are, right?”

“I can’t rule anything out, though you’d think Cavall would have put us back outside by now...” Miyoshi answered.

“Maybe they can’t because of the radiation outside? It’s too dangerous?” I suggested.

“I’ll just ask.” Miyoshi knelt down, stroked Cavall’s head, and inquired. “Cavall, did you make this place?”

Cavall sniffed the air with a grunt, then shook his head back and forth.

“Hm, also...” I began.

“What?” Miyoshi asked, and just then her stomach let out a small growl.

We’d been running around all evening, and hadn’t eaten since lunch.

“I don’t think we’d be getting hungry if we were dead.” I took Dolly out of Vault.

“That’s true!” Miyoshi responded. “Thinking’s not going to do us any good now! How about a short break?”

And so we headed into the camper for a little jet-black glamping, not having a clue where we were.

Dungeon Attack Group, Team I

“Nngh...”

“Awake?”

“Hagane? What the heck happened?” Lori asked.

“Beats me. The last thing I knew, that girl from D-Powers was running into the dungeon like a woman possessed. After that, I remember a bright light, and the next thing I knew I was on the ground here.”

Hagane was using the informal speaking style he reserved for when they were off duty. He was her superior in experience, after all. She’d just happened to land command of the team. She knew that Hagane was the one they’d be relying on now.

“What about Kaiba, Sawatari, and others?”

“Kaiba and Sawatari are exploring and gathering up the others. It looks like everyone survived...” Hagane looked around the area. “Though I’m not sure you can call *this* ‘all right.’”

“What is this place?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Their surroundings were nearly pitch black.

Thankfully they appeared to be near a wall. The team had spread chemical lights in a circle, illuminating a small section of whatever space they were in. However, the chemical lights only went so far. The surrounding darkness was nearly impenetrable.

“We’ve got no idea what’s going on, but I guess that makes things simple to sum up. Something happened in Yokohama. Now we’re here, though no one knows where ‘here’ is.” Hagane sighed. “We’re low on equipment. We only expected to be dealing with slimes on Yokohama’s second floor, so we don’t have much lighting. Running low on batteries for comms too. But the biggest concern is...” Hagane’s face contorted. “We’re underarmed. We don’t have a single 7.62 caliber weapon.”

Firearms and explosives had been off-limits in Yokohama, so hardly any members present had brought them. About all they had to rely on were the handguns strapped to their waists.

Hagane continued. “We’ll have to rely on our three Water Magic users, and...”

Lori met Hagane’s gaze and nodded. She always carried some magnetic

projectiles to use with her skill. But she couldn't replenish them here, so she would have to try to retrieve any she fired.

"How're rations?" she asked.

"Grim. We were only planning for the day out at Yokohama. No one was carrying much."

Starvation could be as deadly a killer as any dungeon monster. Their greatest enemy was time.

Iori checked herself for injuries and stood up.

"Sergeant!" she barked, regaining the tone of a commanding officer. "Gather all team members and run an equipment check. We're going to ascertain our surroundings and then we're finding a way home!"

Hagane gave a salute. "I'll begin the equipment check immediately after gathering all personnel, ma'am!"

"And Hagane," Iori added, cheekily, "I'm counting on you if things get hairy out there."

Hagane met her words with a smile. "Leave it to me. The people I'm charged with protecting include JSDF officers too."

In that moment he very much resembled the trustworthy mentor she'd first met three years ago.

Team Simon

Silence.

And when Simon opened his eyes, he found the world unchanged from when they were closed. Everything was steeped in black. He felt claustrophobic, like a baby pushing his way through the birth canal.

"Am I dead?" he asked out loud.

"*What are you talking about?*" A light flickered in the darkness, a flame dancing in Natalie's hand.

"*Yep. Must be dead. I see the purifying flames of purgatory ahead.*"

“Don’t be dramatic. Plus, if you were dead, you’d be getting buffeted around the second circle (19) right now.”

“What can I say? Ladies are the oases of the soul.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. Both Simon and Joshua were infamously helpless against pretty women. If Natalie weren’t certain they at least knew well enough to stay clear of honey traps, she might have been worried. She sighed.

Simon sat up and scanned the surroundings again. *“So where are we?”*

“I don’t know. But it’s not Yokohama,” she said.

“Mason and Joshua?”

“Sprawled out over there. They’re alive.”

“Good. And our gear?”

They had their uniforms, but what about the other gear they’d brought with them?

“All scattered around the floor here.”

“What there is of it,” Simon observed. *“This wasn’t an ordinary mission, after all.”* They’d been uncharacteristically lightly equipped.

Natalie’s fire ran on MP, so that was one light source they could rely on, as long as she was given time to rest. Their headlights and flashlights, however, would be useless as soon as their batteries drained. Simon checked himself for injuries, then grabbed his combat knife, which had fallen next to him. He stood up and gave Mason a light kick in the ass.

“Morning, baby.”

“Hn... What the heck, Simon...? Wh-What the heck?! Where are we?!”

“You tell me. Not the afterlife, at least.”

“I would hope not,” Joshua spluttered. *“I’d hate to find out I wound up in the same place as Simon.”*

“Didn’t know you were planning on going to hell,” Simon quipped.

“Nice.”

“I’m going to ask this just in case,” Simon called out to the group, *“but does anyone know where the hell we are?”*

Simon remembered returning to the Yokohama gate after that fishy engineer had planted a “prototype weapon” and then disappeared. Simon had heard the US government might use a nuclear weapon if Yokohama seemed beyond saving, but he’d never imagined the decision would come before the monsters had even left the dungeon. There had still been JSDF personnel inside!

Azusa from D-Powers had heard about the weapon and, just as they’d been getting ready to seek shelter, run off into the dungeon on her own. Simon had chased after, planning to warn the JSDF. He’d cut through the slimes with the suit and gun he’d been given, but lost track of Azusa. He’d just found the JSDF and shouted out to them when the whole world went white. The next thing he knew, he was here.

What he hadn’t counted on was the rest of his team being stupid enough to follow him. He didn’t know whether to be exasperated or glad—only that it left a lump in his throat.

“So did we get caught in the blast?” he asked. *“There was a big whiteout, and then I woke up here thinking I was dead. But apparently no such luck.”*

It was *possible* someone had knocked all four of them out at the same time and then dragged them off...just extremely unlikely.

“Although,” he added. *“I think we might be close to solving a major mystery.”*

“What are you talking about?” Natalie asked, seeing the strange grin on Simon’s face.

“Twenty-seven people. Vanishing without a trace. Ring a bell?”

“There he goes again, off about the Ring.”

“See, what you mistake for obsession, I call being focused on the job.”

“Focused enough on the job to go vacationing in Japan?”

Simon took the quip. However, this was the same Japan where dungeon-based discoveries were coming out one after the next, particularly out of Yoyogi.

“Either way,” Simon continued, “we’ve only got emergency rations, and a single water bottle between us. I hate to break it to you guys, but we might have escaped the dungeon and a nuke only to die here in the dark.”

“At least here we’ve got a fighting chance.” Joshua cast a sidelong glance at Mason, who was muttering about the lack of food. Joshua cracked his neck, working out the kinks, and stood up. “Why don’t I have a look around?”

“You got lights?”

“A headlamp. But as it doesn’t seem like there are any enemies nearby, I’ll save the battery and crack a chemical light.”

Seeing his teammate venture into the darkness with a casual wave, Simon was reminded of, and relieved by, the fact that Joshua was, for all his flippancy, one of the most elite dungeon scouts in the world. He returned to checking the gear.

Dungeon Attack Group, Team I

The JSDF members present were twelve in number, including Lori and the other officers. While the others fanned out in two-man teams to scout the area, Hagane and Lori operated the ESS.

“Thank goodness we had this with us,” Lori muttered.

The ESS—Exploratory Support System—was an exploration assistance tool developed for the DAG. Developed ahead of other C4I([20](#)) systems, it could be used to support exploration or combat. The system could display soldiers’ vitals and location, in addition to acting as a two-way communication device. They had tried their comms already, but had been unable to access any JSDF frequencies.

“Unfortunately we can’t connect to any satellites or mobile command databases, but we can still use the location-tracking feature to create a simple map out of nodes and edges.”

“Like a real-time progress tracker.” Red lines spread out on the screen in front of Hagane, denoting the soldiers’ movement. “Field command isn’t what it was

back in my day.”

“You’re still not old enough to make comments like that.” Lori hastily entered their limited available data into the system.

The problem now was battery life. The unit was supposed to hold out for two days, but not while constantly running the ESS. They only had one spare battery.

“We can’t keep waiting around,” Lori concluded. “One direction or another, we’ve got to try to find a way out.”

They might wind up heading in the opposite direction of the exit, but they didn’t have the resources to split up or wait.

“If only we had the *smallest* lead...” Hagane folded his arms.

The scout teams returned. With their report, Lori and Hagane began to comprehend just what a Herculean task lay before them.

“It’s a cavern. Branching off into multiple routes. Easy to lose your way,” one of the scouts reported.

Despite having chemical lights to see by, the teams had been too low on resources to want to risk heading very far down any one path. That meant any of them could still lead to an exit. The ESS was useful for mapping where the team had been, but it didn’t point the way forward. They were in uncharted territory—they didn’t have a shadow of a clue.

Still, Lori had to make a decision. “First Yokohama, now here. It’s nothing but tight time limits and little info lately,” she grumbled under her breath.

What she wanted more than anything was some kernel—the tiniest bit of information to tip the scales between the options that would affect her team’s lives.

The darkness felt like it would swallow them whole. Unfortunately the team’s gear hadn’t included any light amplification or night-vision tools.

Though pitch-black areas in natural caves weren’t uncommon, all charted areas of known dungeons had been found to have at least some ambient light,

leading the team to suspect that their current location might *not* be a dungeon. Cutting through the blackness with their narrow headlight beams, the team gradually increased their field of vision by planting chemical lights along the ground.

Sawatari, walking beside Iori, tried lightening the mood with small talk, but true to form, the subject of conversation inevitably returned to military gear. “If we only had some night-vision goggles with a thermal imaging feature...” America got to use AN/PSQ-20s and -36s, not yet available to the JSDF. “I wouldn’t mind some L3 F-PANOS⁽²¹⁾ either...”

“The prototype? They don’t come out until spring, right?”

“Then again, given the nature of dungeons, maybe the active infrared type would be better.”

“As long as no phototactic monsters are around...”

“If only we could only bring more into the dungeons, we could just do huge lighting rigs.”

“You’d need an infinite battery pack,” Iori pointed out. “Until self-propelled porters hit the market, we’ll have to rely on chemical lights.”

“I hear the Americans even get powered exoskeletons. How about that?”

“The USDD got some prototypes, but they’re far from practical in terms of movement or use time. They’re basically expensive toys.”

“Then porters are our lifelines. Any idea when they’ll be implemented?”

“Who knows,” Iori answered. “Last I heard they were still hashing it out between spider tank and tread models. But they’ll have to pick up the pace once safe zones are discovered.”

“They’ll have to solve the battery life problem too, huh?”

“Seems like it. The inverter generators they use are fairly quiet, but they still get up to forty decibels.”

Emitting so much noise in a dungeon was dangerous. Until quieter generators could be developed, it was likely battery-operated models would remain the norm. But batteries useful for long-term expeditions were both weighty and

costly.

“Either way, it doesn’t seem like it’ll be long before porters are an indispensable part of expedition-style exploring.” Sawatari tossed a chemical light forward. It traced an arc through the air, illuminating something on the ceiling for only the briefest moment. “Did you see that?” Sawatari pointed his headlamp upward. “Whoa!”

A number of finely carved letters, or runes, adorned the ceiling.

Temple of Darkness, D-Powers

“You always feel like you’re two steps closer to solving the problem when you’ve got a full stomach of warm, freshly cooked rice.” Miyoshi stuffed her face with the bentos we’d picked up from the department-store basement supermarket, and some rice, all of which I’d had stored in Vault.

Uh, I’m pretty sure the only problem we’re solving is our hunger pangs, but oh well.

“Can’t stay holed up for too long though,” I commented.

“Hm? I thought we had about a thousand meals in there.”

“It’s not the meals. I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like being stuck in the dark for a year.”

“Me either! Let’s take a look around.” Miyoshi took out a large drone she’d had stored in Dolly and sent it out to investigate.

“So Night Vision doesn’t work on screens,” I commented, observing the footage the drone was sending us.

I’d used the Night Vision skill orb just before dinner.

“I’d be kind of scared if it did,” Miyoshi responded. “After all, how would that work? The screen is just a bunch of pixels.”

I supposed it could somehow influence the electric equipment to produce a clearer image. That’d be a pretty fearsome power. Although I supposed it wasn’t impossible there already were skills out there that would let you tamper

with computer data.

“No good.” Miyoshi called the drone back. The only passage leaving this area was too cramped for the drone to navigate. “But, a report: the ceiling is around five meters up, and we’re in a huge square room, around twenty meters on each side. There’s a path behind some sort of...altar?...toward the back, but it’s too narrow for the drone to go further.”

The drone’s data had been feeding into a 3D map. Based on the data it sent, the decorations around the room reminded me of the temple at Batian Peak.

“The jumble of cultures here... Certainly dungeonesque,” I decided.

“Well, that makes sense. We probably couldn’t have Dolly in the afterlife.”

“I don’t know. People can hallucinate some pretty wild stuff. Though...I guess you can’t hallucinate if you’re dead.”

The more I thought about it, the harder it seemed to explain our current environment as anything *but* a dungeon. We weren’t dead, and if we’d been rescued, under normal circumstances, we would have woken up in a hospital room.

“There’s something I thought might be a door here,” Miyoshi said, looking at the projection mapping, “but it’s just a carving on the wall.” She pointed to a spot on the map on the wall opposite the altar.

A fake door? “Maybe it’s some kind of mystical passage? Like a torii gate?”

“It does just radiate cursed energy, doesn’t it?”

“Should we go check it out?”

“After you.”

We geared up, stepped out, and put Dolly back in Vault.

“All right. What is it going to be this time?” I asked. “Ghosts? Snakes?”

“I’d prefer nothing,” Miyoshi quipped.

“Assuming this is a dungeon,” I responded, “it’d be weirder if monsters *didn’t* show up.”

“Maybe it’s a safe zone.”

“The dungeons would have to have some sense of humor to put a safe zone here.”

If it were a safe zone, that would mean we were at least thirty-two floors down.

“Maybe it’s like Yokohama’s second floor.”

The only places we knew ordinary monsters didn’t spawn—besides as of yet undiscovered safe zones—were boss arenas.

“You think we woke up in a different boss room?”

“Maybe,” Miyoshi responded. “Anyway, don’t let your guard down.”

“Got it.”

We walked toward the door-like decoration we’d seen on the map.

“Kei, is something glowing up ahead?”

To the left side of the door-like carving up ahead was what looked like a stake rising around 1.2 meters from the ground. Its flat, circular top was adorned with a faintly glowing, green character I had the hunch we’d seen somewhere before.

“It looks like the characters from the Manor,” I said.

“Phoenician? I can check what it corresponds to in the Latin alphabet.”

“Please do.”

Miyoshi pulled out a tablet with an ereader, opening to a chart of Phoenician characters. “This looks like a C.”

“A C...”

I put my hand on the letter, and a faint purple glow appeared over the surface of the door-like decoration, rippling like a pool of water in the wind.

“Whoa! What?”

“It’s like a warp gate in a video game.”

“So we go through this and into a boss arena?”

“Probably.”

I poked my flashlight, which was probably around thirty centimeters long, through the glow. It passed through effortlessly. I was just as easily able to pull it back out.

“It’s not wet or anything...”

“Kei, try sticking this in.”

Miyoshi handed me a video camera equipped with a spotlight and affixed to a selfie stick. The camera was wired to her PC.

“If the other side is a separate subspace, like with separate dungeon floors, I was worried it might not work wirelessly,” she explained.

“Okay. Here goes.” The camera passed through easily, just like the flashlight had. “What’s it look like?”

“The light doesn’t go very far, so it’s hard to say, but from the parts I can see, it’s an empty...atrium?”

“Any monsters?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“I’m going to try sticking my hand in.” I held the camera stick where it was and stuck my left hand into the doorway. I felt a light tingling sensation, but my hand passed safely through.

Since the other side didn’t seem to be an airless vacuum, or filled with poison gas, or anything like that, next I tried poking my head and shoulders through.

“All this and it basically acts like a normal door,” I muttered to myself, half disappointed.

I started to take another step forward, but felt a tug on my right hand. Miyoshi pulled me out.

“What’s the deal?” I asked.

“Kei, if it’s a boss room, it’ll probably lock you in for a fight. Don’t leave me!”

“Ah, right.”

I stuck just the upper half of my body through the door one more time. It was as pitch-black as our side, but thanks to Night Vision, I was able to make out

faint shapes. It was like seeing objects by moonlight.

“Huh. Looks like it’s just a huge atrium,” I observed. I pulled my head back into the room with Miyoshi.

“How’s it look?” she asked. “See anything else?”

“Huh? I just said it seemed like a huge atrium. Nothing special.”

“You did? Weird. I couldn’t hear you.”

I put my head back through. “Miyoshi sucks!” I popped back out, leaving my body turned halfway vertically between rooms. “What about that? Could you hear me?”

“Who needs to? You were probably just bad-mouthing me.”

“Whoa! Are you *sure* you couldn’t hear me?”

“I wasn’t *serious*! What’d you say?!”

“Then you actually couldn’t hear?”

“Not at all. Must be a separate subspace,” Miyoshi mused.

“This is sounding more and more like a dungeon every minute,” I observed.

“By the way, Kei.”

“What?”

“If the other side of the door is a subspace and that door happened to close, you might be kissing the right half of your body goodbye.”

I hastily pulled myself back out through the doorway.

“Cut it out. I swear you’re going to jinx me one of these times.” But yeah, maybe I *shouldn’t* have been taking risks like that with cross-dimensional portals. “So, final assessment?”

“Not enough to go on, but it definitely seems like both sides are separate subspaces.”

That was potentially promising. In addition, it seemed like there should be enough space on the other side to dodge an attack even if a boss showed up, and I hadn’t gotten any readings from Life Detection. There would be enough

time to get ready. It might be time to go through.

“Maybe we should finish examining the area around here first, just in case,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Good call. That does seem safer,” I agreed.

We followed along the walls of the large room we’d first found ourselves in, peeking down the narrow tunnel behind the altar.

“You weren’t kidding,” I commented. “A tight fit.”

Too tight for the drone to have flown through. You’d have to duck your head down to progress, though it opened up further ahead.

“Wide, thin, wide... Like the body of a wasp,” Miyoshi observed.

It looked like the wider section of the tunnel up ahead was about five meters in both height and width. Between the two wide areas, which were carved stone, the tunnel switched to rugged cave wall.

“Can’t say I like the look of things down this way.”

“It’s either this or the spooky doorway,” Miyoshi replied. “We should at least check this out.”

About twenty meters through the tunnel, Aethlem suddenly stuck his head out from Miyoshi’s shadow, growling at the area in front of us. Several blips suddenly appeared on Life Detection.

“Miyoshi! Something up ahead!”

“I’m getting a reading too. You don’t think it’s other explorers, do you?”

“I’ve never heard of explorers suddenly popping in on Life Detection? Any reading on Danger Sense?”

“Not particularly...”

Danger Sense might be context-based, and thus would not trigger while the Arthurs and I were around to protect her, I figured. I wondered if that made it more or less impressive as a skill.

One thing was for sure—my Life Detection readings didn’t seem human. There were three large ones and several smaller ones, all in what looked like a

second square room up ahead. Miyoshi strapped on her headlamp, grabbed a flashlight, and took out a polycarbonate shield. Since her main methods of attack were iron balls flung from Storage, Water Magic, and the Arthurs, she could afford to have both hands full.

“Hold on,” Miyoshi called. “Is that...light?”

It was. Suppressing Night Vision a bit, the difference became more obvious. Up ahead was a faint glow. “What is that?”

My answer came into view a moment later. Up ahead were several monsters, all faintly glowing. Three were the size of giant leaftailed geckos or green iguanas, while three were human-sized, resembling uakari monkeys with long, thin, gharial crocodile snouts and bat wings.

“Looks like something out of Yasutaka Tsutsui’s natural history [\(22\)](#).” Miyoshi peered down the tunnel. “The name is...let’s see...lesser evils.”

“So which one am I supposed to fight? Should I pick the lesser evil?”

“Very funny.”

“Don’t worry. I’m already used to it from all the lose-lose choices you force me to make.”

And much like in my battles against Miyoshi’s drive to embarrass me, I wasn’t sure I could win.

Miyoshi’s Danger Sense was still quiet. Maybe it was just a bust of a skill, or maybe the danger these monsters posed really was that low. *Can only hope for the latter.*

“Next up, those little lizard types are...” Miyoshi started to say. Suddenly, one of the lizard types turned its head our way, a starburst-like sparkle glinting in its eyes. It began charging toward us.

“What the?!”

“Kei! Look out! Aethlem!”

Suddenly a hole appeared under the lizard’s feet, into which it gracelessly plummeted. A second later, just after the sound of an explosion, a pillar of fire roared up from the hole.

“What the heck? Suicide bomber lizards?!” I asked.

“I was trying to say,” Miyoshi responded, frazzled, “they’re called suicide leaftails. I had a hunch what might happen when it started charging toward us. That might have hurt a little.”

“A *little*?”

I started tossing water lances at the lesser evils and leaftails up ahead, hoping to get the latter to explode while they were still clustered together.

However, the lesser evils were putting up something like a barrier, through which only a limited amount of water passed. The lances had no effect on the leaftails at all.

“Looks like they’re only vulnerable when their eyes glint,” Miyoshi conjectured.

“That’s cheating!”

The three lesser evils began summoning even more leaftails. In other words, the lesser evils were the main monsters; the leaftails were their shields.

“Damn! We’ll never end them this way!”

I hurtled an eight-centimeter iron ball toward the crocodilian snout of one of the lesser evils. However, it created a shield of light in front of it. The iron ball knocked the shield away, but the monster remained unharmed.

“Damn it, these guys are no joke. They might be ‘lesser,’ but you can’t say their magic resistance isn’t up to snuff. They’re good at dodging, too, and even seem intelligent. Ah well, maybe I can manage something with a double shot.”

Getting closer might have helped, but they were surrounded by a swarm of leaftails. I wanted to finish things from a distance if I could.

Just then, Miyoshi shouted from behind me. “Kei, make a water lance!”

“Huh? Haven’t you been watching? They don’t work.”

“Just do it!”

Pillars of flame continued to erupt one after the other up ahead. The Arthurs were maintaining a line of shadow-pit holes, which the charging leaftails

streamed into. Seeing we at least had time, I readied one water lance just as Miyoshi had instructed.

Miyoshi had Water Magic too, but was out of practice, which meant the fine handiwork was up to me.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now...this!”

Miyoshi took a strange-looking bottle out of Storage and poured its contents onto the lance, slightly changing its color.

“What is that?”

“Just fire!”

“All right.” I chucked the lance at one of the lesser evils, and... “What?!”

“Whaaa?!”

The lance passed right through the shield and pierced the lesser evil. The crocodile-mouthing uakari dispersed into particles of black light.

“Miyoshi, what the hell was that? More importantly, why were you also surprised it worked?!”

“Because, Kei, this is...”

“It is...?”

Miyoshi held up the glass bottle, which I now realized was shaped like a statue of the Virgin Mary. “Remember how you were joking before about holy water maybe working on dungeon monsters...? Well, I did a little online shopping and...”

“Please tell me that’s not the energy drink [\(23\)](#).”

“Of course not. It’s the real deal. Er, well, so it claims.”

The oldest vending machine in the world was supposedly a coin-based holy water dispensary box used in first-century Egypt. People who visited it often took some back as a souvenir too, but...getting it online?

“Maybe it’s really legit...” Miyoshi mused.

“Come on!”

“Right. It’s probably just normal tap water.”

“Then that’s fraud!”

I guessed it really did come down to...blind faith?

“I didn’t want to tell you what it actually was in case that affected your thinking. Faith works in mysterious ways.”

“If all that was important was me trusting whatever liquid you poured in, it didn’t matter if it was holy water in the first place!!!”

Miyoshi’s lack of logic nearly floored me.

But if it worked, it worked! I’d take it. Call it a placebo or whatever you liked, but this holy water had juice. We had a real *solution* on our hands.

“Keep it coming!” I readied another water lance. “Pour it on!”

“One holy lance, coming up!”

One of the lesser evils, seeing us, directed all its leaftails to attack. A sea of glinting eyes spread out across the floor, radiating out from the lesser evil like ocean waves.

“Yikes!” I fired holy water-imbued lances as quickly as I could at the two remaining lessers. Just as before, they penetrated through both the shields and the monsters with ease. Their bodies scattered into black light. Only—

“The lizards don’t disappear?!”

The leaftails were stills charging toward us—too numerous to have all been caught in the Arthurs’ pits. Miyoshi started firing one-inch balls.

“D-Dummy! Cut it out!” I grabbed Miyoshi and started running back in the direction we’d come from, to the temple room with the altar.

Sure enough, once the first few leaftails exploded, the others went off in a chain reaction.

“Whrrraoh!” We were hurled forward by the force of what must have been a hundred exploding evil lizards, blown back into the big room where we’d started. We rolled along the floor, buffeted against the tiles.

Moments later, the fiery explosion that had followed us through the tunnel dispersed into a few fireballs that licked the edges of the opening before dissipating. The room returned to its inky darkness.

“Miyoshi,” I called, still lying on the floor. “You alive?”

“Other than the ringing in my ears, probably fine.”

“Probably,’ eh? How about the Arthurs?”

Five of them popped their heads out of the shadows in response to my question. The sixth, Glas, instead perched triumphantly atop my head.

“I guess it’s too late to point out that instead of running, we could have just jumped into one of the shadow pits.” I clasped Glas with both hands and sat up, leaning against one of the temple walls.

“By the way, as soon as those lizards’ eyes flared, Danger Sense went off like crazy,” Miyoshi called. “Looks like it only works when danger’s coming straight at you. Not very useful.”

Better than nothing, I suppose.

“Isn’t killing a summoner monster supposed to get rid of its summons too?” I asked.

“It did work that way for the ones that weren’t already locked onto us. I saw a bunch of leaftails vanish when you took out the first lesser.”

“I see. So as soon as they locked on, they were treated as projectiles instead of monsters.”

Even with our high stats, I didn’t want to try taking one of those explosions. I might have been fine, but I intended to keep that to the realm of theory.

We’d need a better method of defense against them, if we ran into any again.

“Plus,” Miyoshi added, “it doesn’t matter how high your stats are. Survival instinct is survival instinct.”

“Yeah. Those things were scary.”

“Maybe we should just pop the heads of any monsters we encounter from here on out from a distance. Not take any chances.” With that brutal

suggestion, Miyoshi slowly dragged herself up.

“Offense is the best defense? You’re probably right.”

Although, come to think of it, provoking unknown foes might have been the most dangerous tactic of all.

“By the way, Kei, what do we do about those?” Miyoshi pointed behind me.

The ground was littered with large metal ingots, glinting in Miyoshi’s headlight beam, every last one of them iron. It was Yokohama 2.0.

“Great, I was *trying* to ignore them... Well, at least now we know this place is a dungeon, and we’re at least twenty floors down.”

“Some of those ingots got tossed up by explosions while we were running. That might have been the scariest part.”

If a one-kilo iron ingot knocked you on the head after falling several meters, it’d be lights out. Since items always spawned near explorers, but not necessarily right next to them, the flying ingots had been a real risk.

“Hey, think we can sell these?” I asked.

“Don’t you have bigger things to worry about?!” Sales would require we made it out alive.

“We’re fine on food and water, and we even have a safe place to sleep. If those guys back there were bosses, we don’t even have to worry about the monsters down here. We’ve got all the time in the world to find our way out.”

“You know, I have a funny feeling that as long as I’m with you I’ll be all right, Mr. Optimist.” Miyoshi grimaced and picked up one of the ingots.

“Unfortunately, like I said at Yokohama, these’ll go for about twenty yen apiece.”

Two hundred yen for ten kilos. We could use them as raw materials for iron balls, but since pure iron wasn’t very hard on its own, we’d probably still eat a bundle on processing fees. Hardly worth their weight to pick up. But what would happen if we just left them?

“They’re dungeon drops,” I pointed out. “Think they’ll disappear?”

“Not sure. We’ve never intentionally left drops behind...”

“All the more reason to do it then, so we can see what happens.”

I stood up and brushed myself off.

Miyoshi walked back to the space where the lesser evils had spawned.

“What’s up?”

“I was just thinking, ordinarily after you kill a boss, there’s a treasure chest.”

“Maybe one had spawned, but it was just a *really* small chest,” I joked. “Either way, let’s leave it for now. I don’t want those things to respawn.”

“Bosses have a rule about not respawning until you leave the room,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Do they? Are you sure you didn’t just make up a rule based on games?”

“What do you mean?”

“In Yokohama they respawn in four hours even if you stay in the room,” I pointed out.

“Yikes!” Miyoshi frantically ran back over to me. “Speaking of, if those were bosses, we probably walked past this boss room’s entrance. Which means if we go the opposite way, we should find a path leading up.”

“Good call! Then for right now let’s head through the gateway.”

“Let’s.”

We walked back to the door-like carving on the opposite wall of the main room from the tunnel, but the ripples had disappeared. Instead—

“What the heck?!”

The letter adorning the stake-like protrusion by the door was now glowing red.

“Weird. Nothing happens when you touch it...” Miyoshi commented.

“What are we supposed to do?” I tried slapping my hands all over the letter, but nothing happened. The gateway wouldn’t open again.

Hold on. A door that wouldn’t open. A troupe of lesser evils suddenly showing

up. No ordinary monsters. Finally, the letter glowing red.

“This is a boss room,” I said. “One that locks you in.”

“The letter was green before the fight,” Miyoshi pointed out.

While the letter was green, we were able to leave and enter. Now we couldn’t.

“Once the boss fight starts, the runes must turn red to signal that you’re locked in.”

“But in that case, shouldn’t it open again now that the fight is over?” Miyoshi asked.

“There’s probably still another monster somewhere.” I scanned the room using Life Detection, but—nothing. “Or not.”

“Then Kei, maybe it’s all the...”

“...loot lying over there?”

We looked at each other and wordlessly started gathering up all the ingots. They were the same as the ones in Yokohama—around ten by five centimeters, with a thickness of around twenty-two millimeters—the industry standards for pressed steel and iron plating.

Nice going, imagination. Sigh...

Our only hint as to the ingots’ location were their tiny glints in the darkness—whatever we could pick up with our meager lights. To make matters worse, they were scattered across the entirety of the temple area, flung by the explosion.

It was daunting even with Night Vision. I couldn’t imagine how much harder it was for Miyoshi. Ultimately I had her wait by the red letter to watch if it changed.

One hour later... Having searched every nook and cranny of the temple, I picked up what I was hoping was the last iron piece.

“Miyoshi! Any change?”

“Nope. Still red.”

"Whaaat?! What I wouldn't give for Lori's Magnetic Field Manipulation right now..." Just then, Glas started barking at the ceiling. "What is it, boy? What's...up?!"

I looked up to see one last piece of ingot tumbling down from where it had been caught in the beam-like structures above.

"Whoa!" I dodged it by a hair's breadth. It thunked to the floor.

Thanking Glas, I picked up the iron piece.

Glas puffed up his chest and assumed his triumphant pose again, but after realizing he wasn't getting a reward, turned tail and dashed back to Miyoshi.

"Still no change," she called.

"You mean there's *another* one somewhere?"

I kept combing the area, and eventually checked out the area through the tunnel where the lesser evils had spawned. As soon as I set foot in the space, a sigil started glowing on the floor.

"Aw, crap!"

Miyoshi and the Arthurs came bolting up from behind.

However, what awaited us was...

"A treasure chest?"

A treasure chest straight out of an RPG—exactly like you'd imagine in an old-timey fantasy—had emerged out of the ground, tantalizing, waiting to be opened.

"Wow!" Miyoshi exclaimed. "I'd heard about boss treasure chests, but never seen one up close before!"

Apparently these were how Yokohama had gotten its name as the Loot Box Dungeon. But the second-floor catastrophe had happened before we'd gotten to see one ourselves.

"So this *was* a boss room."

"Pretty rude of it though," Miyoshi huffed, "not spawning the chest until we'd picked up all the drop items. What if we missed it?!"

“Then the door wouldn’t let us leave...”

“Oh, right.”

“So...what do we do?” I pointed noncommittally to the chest.

“What do you mean? We open it. The contents might depend on LUC, so Kei, this is your job.”

“What if it’s a trap?”

“What do you think this is, a game?!” Miyoshi scolded. “No one’s ever found a trap like that!”

“If you say so...”

“No one’s ever found” didn’t necessarily mean “doesn’t exist.”

We might have been able to walk around the floor without triggering any hidden arrows, but that didn’t mean a suspiciously inviting treasure chest was safe to open. Plus, if we were injured here, cut off from the outside world— *Oh, wait.* We had Super Recovery and potions. We’d be fine.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said sternly. “If you don’t open the chest, we don’t get to go home.”

“Okay, okay,” I responded. “Here goes nothing.”

I inched toward the treasure chest, slowly, sloooowly... I reached out toward the lid with a walking stick I’d had in Stora—

“Boo!”

“Whaaah!”

I jumped backward.

“Ha ha ha! Look at you! A portrait of courage.” Miyoshi was doubled over with laughter. She wiped away tears.

Really?! Now?!

“Miyoshi! Could you *please* take things seriously for one minute?”

I opened the lid and checked inside. Nestled in the chest was a red healing potion.

“Oh! Nice!”

“What is it?” Miyoshi asked.

“A healing potion. Rank...five!”

“Rank five? Good find.”

Thankfully I’d learned a bit since the time I gave one to Mishiro. Now I understood exactly how valuable they were.

“But if something you can get as a drop from rare monsters on the fifth floor of Yoyogi is showing up in boss chests here, maybe we aren’t that deep down after all.”

“Kei, fifth-ranked potions hardly ever show up even on the deepest floors of dungeons on the front lines of elite exploration.”

“Just let me hope!” I cried. “I’m not asking for facts right now.”

“Truth can be a cruel mistress.”

I took the potion, a bitter grin on my face, and the chest disappeared.

When we went back to check, we found the letter on the pillar had finally changed. “Looks like the path’s open,” Miyoshi observed upon seeing the green light.

“Took long enough.” I put my hand on the Phoenician character, and the rippling gateway opened up like before. “Nowhere now but forward.”

“Only one entrance or exit, whichever one it is.”

“Yep.”

Barring the possibility of a hidden passage we’d overlooked, this was our only way out. I slipped through the gate.

Waiting on the other side, just as I’d seen before, was a giant atrium. A second stake covered in Phoenician etchings sat near the gateway in symmetry to the one on the other side, bearing a faintly glowing green letter. As soon as Miyoshi stepped into the room, however, the pillar went dark.

“Looks like they only stay lit as long as someone’s on the other side,” she observed.

“Yeah. Speaking of people being around, I’m not getting any reading on Life Detection. Seems like we’re alone.”

“I see the ‘dark and gloomy’ aspect hasn’t changed. Not even our lights’ll do much good here.”

“It’s a huge room, whatever it is. Let’s try setting Dolly up in the middle and mapping it out again.”

“Good call.”

If the previous room was the boss, then this would be the...rest point before?

I set up Dolly in front of the door to what we’d now dubbed “Room C,” based on the Phoenician letter by its gateway, and climbed inside with Miyoshi.

Temple of Darkness, Tower Atrium

Miyoshi put in an order for a drink, which I obliged, and then she sat in Dolly readying a drone for Exploration Round 2. Once it was out, she began scanning the surroundings, keeping the drone at an altitude of four meters. If the drone flew any higher, its light would no longer reach the ground.

“It’s a circular room with a cylindrical, towerlike structure closer to the far wall,” she announced.

“Weird. You’d expect a tower to be in the center.”

“It gets weirder.”

“Oh?”

“After getting the surroundings, I tried flying the drone up the length of the tower. After a certain point, its altitude reading stopped rising.”

“What kind of altimeter does it use? Barometric?”

Miyoshi shook her head. “Radar.”

“I feel like I’ve heard something like this before.”

The earliest expeditions into Yoyogi had left teams shocked by what looked like an open sky on the second floor. However, drones sent out to get readings

had stopped reporting changes in altitude past a certain point.

“The dungeon theory’s looking more plausible than ever,” I concluded.

“Can’t think of another place that would produce these results. The question is which dungeon we’re in, and on what level. You still have some points you haven’t distributed, right?”

“I do. Although I’m not sure they’ll be enough if some crazy boss shows up.”

Based on our last fight, I wasn’t expecting any other bosses to be too powerful, but you couldn’t take anything for granted.

“What are you going to do then?” Miyoshi inquired. “Give up?”

“Nope. Try to prevail through wisdom and courage,” I proclaimed.

Plus, if worse came to worst, I could always jump into Arthur Space, and try to slink around the dungeon that way. And if an enemy could follow me into Arthur Space? I’d cross that bridge when I came to it.

“I’m going to crack up if this is the world’s first tower dungeon,” Miyoshi commented.

“If it is, we can enjoy the view from the top.”

Up to this point, no one had ever found a naturally occurring “tower-style” dungeon, progressing from bottom to top, outside of those using preexisting architecture. But it wasn’t unthinkable we were in one.

As the 3D mapping data came in from the drone, we noticed something unusual about the door we’d entered through—it wasn’t the only one. They started appearing on the perimeter one after the next.

“What the heck? How many are there?” I asked.

“Seven total.”

“If one of these leads to another fight with a god, I might just start crying.”

The bosses we’d faced in Room C weren’t weak, but at least they were no Ngai.

“Those guys earlier were probably pretty strong by normal standards.” Miyoshi leaned back. “They just weren’t much good against ranged attacks.”

That was true. Our skill sets were probably uniquely suited for the fight. If you had to get up close and personal, and risk wading into the horde of suicidal leaftails... That'd be a different story.

And even the lesser evils themselves had deflected one of the eight-centimeter iron balls that had worked on Ngai. Without Miyoshi's holy water gambit, I wasn't sure what we would have done.

In addition to the other doors were other posts like the one that had borne the Phoenician C by ours. In total, the carvings were...

"M, I, C, S, E, I, and E," Miyoshi read.

"Weird to have double letters in your labels."

"Sure, if you assume they're categorical ID's. But plenty of people have the same names. Why not rooms?"

"Also, is it just my imagination, or is that S glowing green?"

It'd be hard to tell without getting close, but from a distance it looked as though the Phoenician S equivalent—which actually looked more like a W—in the distance was lit by a soft neon glow, just barely shimmering through the dark.

"If our assumptions are correct," Miyoshi responded, "that would mean there's someone on the other side."

"But who?"

The possibilities could be broken down into three major categories. One was that it was someone else who, like us, had been in Yokohama. Another was that some other poor soul had been trapped inside this place via unknown means. The third possibility was that we were wrong about what the green letters meant.

"If the fact that we wound up here had something to do with the explosion," Miyoshi offered, "the odds of it being Team Simon or Team I are high."

"Think we should meet up?" Given the circumstances, cooperation seemed like it might be the best approach. However, if we did, we wouldn't be able to use Vault or Storage as freely.

“If it is them, a meetup’s inevitable anyway.”

“How so?”

“Against all odds, you’ve got a red-hot moral streak. You wouldn’t leave them on their own.”

“Against all odds’? Harsh.”

Miyoshi spun around in her chair, facing me. “Let’s break things down. They were doing some simple observation on the second floor of Yokohama. You think they brought food for that?”

Ah, definitely not. They were probably hardly packing any water, let alone food.

“I don’t suppose we can hold out hope there’s any food or water here, huh.”

Potions, if they could get any, might have been able to provide hydration, but potion vials didn’t exactly contain enough to quench thirst. Without a proper source of food and water, they’d be looking at holding out for seventy-two hours tops.

“Team I has Water Magic users, so they might be able to last longer, but as far as I know no one on Simon’s team has that skill.”

“Yeah...”

We could try supporting them from the shadows, surreptitiously leaving bottles of mineral water by their camp. We still had all the water we’d purchased last year waiting in Storage.

But sneaking around delivering water wasn’t going to be easy.

“Huh? Kei, what do you think *this* is?”

While I wavered, the drone had continued to send images of the room’s features. On the floor was a mysterious diagram.

“Seriously, what is this supposed to be? It looks like a camel with six legs and a human face.”

“The right side does sort of look like a human face, huh? Hold on, I feel like I’ve seen this somewhere...”

Miyoshi rummaged around for her tablet and pulled up something on her ereader.

I kept an eye on the map, scanning it for the door we'd come in from. Since I wasn't used to Phoenician letters, it was hard to tell which one it was.

After about ten seconds of searching through whatever material she'd pulled up, Miyoshi let loose a comment that really rocked my world.

"I think what we might be dealing with this time is...a demon."

"A demon?!"

I lifted my head up from the PC. She was holding out her tablet and pointing to some sort of data table on the screen.

"What is this?"

"The part of the *Lemegeton* outlining the demons King Solomon used."

"The *Ars Goetia*?"

The *Ars Goetia*, supposedly the quintessential catalog of Judeo-Christian demonology, was well-known in the game and manga industry for providing the basis for many fantasy bestiaries.

"What are you doing with a copy of the *Ars Goetia* on your tablet?"

"You're the one who said that dungeons seemed to be drawing from human culture, so I thought I'd familiarize myself with likely sources! You never know what might come up."

I couldn't believe she had the time for that on top of all her other work. She was as diligent as ever. On the other hand, she worked so much that I worried.

"Now, check this out." She zoomed in on a sigil—a magic diagram used for summoning—that looked exactly like the design the drone had picked up on the floor. "It's the sigil of Cimeies, a great marquis of hell and lord of twenty legions."

I gulped. That was...a lot to take in.

"Could the design just be for...decoration?"

"Influenced by Earth culture, remember? If his sigil is here, he's sure to be

around too."

Miyoshi crossed her arms, taking another look at the map. Nearly all phenomena in modern culture that couldn't be easily explained with science were attributed to dungeons. Our current predicament could likewise be chalked up to them with nearly one-hundred-percent certainty. Ignoring the possibility that we'd woken up in some madman's elaborate manor, or the world's most convincing theme-park haunted house, or the temple of some out-to-lunch cultists, of course.

In that case...

"So you think Cimeies is hiding out on the other side of one of those doors?" My shoulders slumped. I decided to review the information we had so far. "Hey," I called, looking over a notepad Miyoshi had written the doors' letters on. "Did you notice this?"

I pointed to the letters one by one, starting from "C" and moving right to left.

"C, I, M, E, I, E, S?" Miyoshi read them back in order. "Kei, you know how when you don't have much information, it's best to prepare for the worst?"

"Look before you leap, and all that?"

"Exactly. If this is all leading to forced encounter, Cimeies might have some real-deal strength."

"Real-deal?"

The dungeons hadn't formed simply to pick humanity off. If that had been the goal, there would have been more direct ways to attack us. Not that I exactly thought the dungeons were on *our* side, but...

"You said King Solomon supposedly used these demons. Is there a way we can do the same? Any info in the *Ars Goetia*?"

We couldn't overlook any potential advantage we might have. The fight with Ngai had shown me that.

"There is. But it requires writing the sigil on a piece of 'virgin parchment' using the blood of a black cock 'that never trode hen,' at midnight on Tuesday or Saturday. Planning to gather all that and wait?"

“That is the cringiest, wannabe edgelord nonsense I’ve ever heard.”

There were tabletop RPGs like the *Call of Cthulhu* in which the most powerful enemies couldn’t be vanquished, but instead needed to be sealed by collecting certain items. However, there didn’t seem to be any items like that around here.

“Maybe we should at least get some crosses ready, or something?” I suggested.

After all, the holy water had worked.

“I don’t know,” Miyoshi responded. “I mean, in practical terms, yeah, they’re demons, but technically the language used in the *Goetia* calls them ‘spirits.’ I wonder if the same logic will apply.”

“I figure it runs off practical connections. They’re all pretty much the same, right? In Christianity most demons are former angels. Angels, demons, spirits—the words probably overlap more than we’re thinking.”

Evidently at some point in the past, a certain Greek pope, concerned that worship of angels had grown too popular, used the Council of Rome to remove all but a few archangels from official recognition, leading to the others being portrayed as fallen.

He had also once declared that it was better that “he who had the royal power should be king than he who did not,” in response to a dispute between a usurper with court backing and the legitimate monarch, ruling in favor of the usurper. It seemed politics had been more his arena than faith.

“Still,” Miyoshi said, “that seems a little too convenient. I don’t think we can just hold up a cross and expect it to do anything.”

“That’s true.” My shoulders slumped again. “After all, there are plenty of demons in fiction who laugh off crosses or crush them with their bare hands, especially the stronger ones. Or who just pretend to be scared to lull their opponents into a false sense of security.”

“It’s not that,” Miyoshi explained. “It’s because you don’t have any faith. Any cross you hold up is just going to be an ordinary piece of wood.”

“You speak such words to a pious disciple of science such as myself?”

“God is known by Nature in His works, and by doctrine in His revealed word’?”

“All ancient scientists considered themselves to be working in natural philosophy. But at any rate...we don’t have any crosses on hand. This is a moot conversation.”

We did have that rosary I’d picked up from Yoyogi, but it ended in a bead of benitoite, not a crucifix. If we made it out of this alive, I decided to store some of the latter in Vault. Just in case.

I kept perusing the *Goetia*. It was filled with illustrations and descriptions of demons, one of which was labeled ‘Cimeies.’ I’d been increasingly getting the sense we were going to end up tangling with him. Might as well see what he looked like.

“He’s supposed to be a marquis, so I figured he should be pretty high up, but look at this. He’s all the way down at number sixty-six.” I passed the tablet back to Miyoshi.

“Ngai was supposed to be a sun god in African religions. Cimeies is described as controlling all spirits on the African continent. Now you would think that would still place him below a god, but...”

“But?” That was a pretty worrying “but.”

According to Miyoshi the copy of the *Lemegeton* she was dealing with was rather haphazard with its contents. In Cimeies’s entry alone, he appeared as both a “godly” and “goodly” warrior atop a horse, depending on the spot on the page. There were too many unknowns.

“According to this, he belongs to a group called the ‘Internals’!” Miyoshi lamented. “See, I have no idea what to make of it!”

The Legion of the Internals. It was probably a typo for “Infernals.” And what business did a demon have being “godly”? That was probably a mistake too.

“There’s an original copy in the British Library,” Miyoshi explained, “but unfortunately they’re still in the middle of digitizing their archives. I just had to

go with what I could get online.”

The pride of the MSN Book Search service—the digitization of the British Library, a joint project with Microsoft—was still an ongoing work.

“Speaking of hell, what about Plancy?” I asked.

“Cimeies isn’t in the 1818 edition. The next entry in the table of contents after ‘Chiromancie’ starts with ‘CL.’ He’s in the revised 1863 edition, but it’s just a quote from the *Lemegeton*.”

Cimeies, a grand marquis of hell. Lord of the spirits of Africa, and instructor of grammars, logic, and rhetoric. It seemed like he’d probably be able to suss out hidden objects or treasures, and probably increase his underlings’ AGI.

“There are rumors that he was also the namesake of the Cimmerians, a darkness-loving barbarian people described in certain Greek and Roman myths. Though take that with a grain of salt.”

“Salt or no salt,” I replied, “the dungeons are running off of popular myth and consciousness. And this does seem like *exactly* the kind of place where a tribe of darkness-dwelling warriors would thrive.” I gestured around vaguely, indicating the curtain of blackness outside. In fact, maybe that very myth was what had led to this temple being shrouded in darkness.

“Anyway, there’s a ton written about this guy, but he’s always described as a warrior on a black horse.”

“A horse...”

It was also possible that the darkness stemmed from his jet-black steed.

“So, what’s the plan?” Miyoshi asked.

Our only options were to either examine the tower in this room, or explore the various shrines behind each doorway. I took a look at the 3D map. The drone had made several passes around the room at this point, but it didn’t look like there were any ways in or out besides those seven gateways, unless the tower held a secret passage.

“Assuming there’s someone on the other side of the S portal...” There were still no readings on Life Detection. “Hey, Miyoshi, what do you think happened

to Yokohama?"

"What is this, all of a sudden?"

"I'm just curious. We put in all that work. Plus, knowing what happened over there might help us out over here."

"Well, I can't say I'm looking forward to finding out that they found our corpses in the rubble or anything, but there may be a way to communicate."

Miyoshi pointed to the floor, out of which Cavall had stuck his little—or not so little—black nose.

"Of course! Arthur-Exchange!"

We knew they could change places across different subspaces. In that case, they could probably switch places between the outside world and whatever this place was.

"If they can switch places..." I started.

"That's right," Miyoshi responded. "We might be able to get in touch with Naruse."

If things had calmed down at Yokohama, whatever had become of it, she might have gone back to our office. It might take us some time to get a response, but it was best to send a message before going forward.

"Last time this worked was when she was waiting to get an SD card from us—that time we got those world-class pictures of Drudwyn knocking Naruse off her feet. But the Arthurs should be able to get her attention."

"Okay. Let's try it out!"

We wrote out a document explaining our current situation and requesting info on the aftermath of Yokohama, and put it on a microSD card along with the 3D map of the temple.

"Okay, Cavall. If you see Naruse at the office, give this to her."

"Rrruff!" Cavall barked back in understanding. In the next instant, he had been replaced with a hellhound without the SD card. Glessic, evidently.

"Looks like the swap worked," Miyoshi commented.

“Nice. Chances of this being the afterlife just tanked.”

Now it would just be a matter of time before we got information on the outside world. I had never been more thankful that we’d given our dedicated supervisor a spare key.

Annotation

Lemegeton: short for the *Lemegeton Clavicula Solomonis*, aka *The Lesser Key of Solomon*. A famous grimoire, cobbled together from many previously unrelated folk tales and religious apocrypha. The tome is divided into five books, with the first being the *Ars Goetia*, a demonology guide detailing various spirits (demons) King Solomon supposedly sealed and used.

Call of Cthulhu: Produced by Chaosium Inc. in 1981. “CoC” for short. A tabletop RPG set in the world of the Lovecraft mythos, in which you take the role of a dilettante solving supernatural mysteries. Go up against the game’s enemies armed with only a handgun and you may as well be throwing your life away.

“God is known by Nature in His works, and by doctrine in His revealed word”: Galileo.

Plancy: Collin de Plancy. Author of a French demonology book, the *Dictionnaire Infernal*. Contains a large number of entries on demons and related superstitions, with a sixth edition published in 1863 adding many more entries, including one on “Cimeriès” on page 170. Still, the contents of said entry are simply copied from the *Lemegeton*. Many of its demon illustrations were subsequently reverse imported into S.L. MacGregor Mather’s edition of the *Lemegeton*. A Japanese edition of Plancy was published in 1990, but regrettably was an abridgment containing but one-tenth the entries of the original work.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Miharu Naruse approached the D-Powers office with bated breath, hesitating to go in.

The lights were still off, but from the outside it almost looked as though there were a figure standing in the doorway.

“Miyoshi?” Miharu called.

Miharu undid the outer gate and dashed up to the front door.

“Huh?” the figure ahead murmured, seeing Miharu rush up.

The figure turned around and tilted its head.

“Wait? Saito?” Miharu blinked. “It’s Saito, right?”

“That’s my name—don’t wear it out! Ah, you’re their...their...dedicated supervisor! Naruse? I guess Miyoshi and Coa—er, Yoshimura aren’t here.”

That was too bad, Saito added, since she had big news for them.

Miharu realized Saito had no idea about the incident in Yokohama. She figured it might be best to bring her up to speed—Saito and D-Powers seemed close. Miharu unlocked the door.

“They aren’t. Or rather...a lot’s happened. Let’s talk inside.”

“You have a spare key? Why, *how scandalous!*” Saito feigned indignation. The two entered the building.

They turned on the lights and sat down on dining room chairs.

“I’m cutting right to the chase. The two members of D-Powers are missing.”

“What?!”

Saito was blank-faced. Missing? What did that mean? Probably something a bit more serious than when a teenager hasn’t called home for a few hours, but...

“Sorry,” Saito replied. “Could you help me out here a little? ‘Missing’?”

“Are you aware of the incident that took place at Yokohama today?” Miharu leaned in.

“I know there was some kind of danger zone. They talked about it on the news.”

“The truth is...”

Miharu explained the truth behind the evacuation as concisely as she could. She reached its enigmatic resolution.

“So then this ‘missing,’” Saito responded, speaking slowly as if trying to comprehend, “means they’re actually gone. Like, poof?”

“I’m afraid,” Miharu answered, “we don’t even know if they’re...”

If they truly had been caught in a nuclear explosion, it wouldn’t have left any trace. They had no way to easily confirm whether the members of D-Powers were alive or dead. Sure, Iori and Simon had shown up on the WDARL, but they didn’t know Miyoshi and Yoshimura’s rankings to be able to check them. Miharu’s eyes welled with tears.

Saito got a look in her eyes, and pulled up the WDA site.

“Um,” she offered, “don’t worry. Yoshimura’s still alive.”

Saito wondered if she should say that, but it was obvious Naruse was close with D-Powers. She wanted to try to alleviate her conversation partner’s worries, if she could.

“Huh?”

“And if Yoshimura’s safe, you’d better believe Miyoshi is too.”

She’d have Yoshimura there to protect her, after all.

“How do you know?”

Saito showed Miharu the WDARL list on her phone.

“First of all,” she explained, “my ranking hasn’t changed since this morning.” If someone above her had died, naturally she’d have gone up by at least one.

However, ranks changed frequently among the lower millions. Miharu wasn’t so sure a static rank meant anything.

“I checked the list too,” Miharu explained. “But that didn’t prove any—”

“Yeah, but my rank’s up in the low hundreds,” Saito interjected.

“It’s what?”

The highest-ranked Japanese amateurs she’d heard of were only up in the thousands. Maybe the main members of Shibu T hit the lower-ranking triple digits, but that was it. And most people assumed they were still in the thousands too.

But for an actress, even one known to frequent dungeons, to have shot up beyond that? It didn't seem possible.

"Are you serious?" Miharu stammered. "Are you sure?"

"Of course! Sorry, Yoshimura told me to keep quiet about it, but... You're their dedicated supervisor, and given the circumstances... Please keep this between us, okay?"

"I mean, I am sworn to confidentiality..." Miharu replied.

She took in the information Saito had just provided. Rankings in the triple digits hardly ever changed for Area 12. But then she had an epiphany. For Saito's ranking to be proof of Yoshimura's survival...

"Wait a minute. You're saying that your ranking 'up in the low hundreds' didn't change. Then that means..."

"Yep."

"Yoshimura's ranking is even higher than that?!"

"Hold on. You're their dedicated supervisor and you don't know their ranks?"

"Yoshimura only got his WDA license card last October. It's only been three months."

How could his rank have shot so high in under a year?

Seeing Naruse's reaction, Saito decided to hold off on telling her that she had only met Yoshimura and Miyoshi a bit after that, and only started her training regimen and major ranking jumps even more recently.

But there were some things that she couldn't hold back. Saito had to let Naruse know Yoshimura was still alive. She made up her mind, and leaned in.

"Um..." Saito hesitated. "Please keep this a secret too."

"Okay...?"

"I think..." She pointed to a ranking on the screen. "I think this might be Yoshimura."

The ranking she was pointing to was at the top of the list. Rank 1.

“Excuse me?”

Miharu’s face went blank. They might not have known who the top-ranking explorer was, but... *Yoshimura*?

In *three months*?

Sure, the mysterious top-ranker known as the Phantom had appeared right around the same time, but it had been a bit before Yoshimura had applied for his WDA Card. Didn’t that rule him out—if nothing else did?

“Naruse?”

“Ah. Ah, sorry. It’s just a lot to take in. To tell the truth, I find it a little unbelievable.”

“Of course.” Saito folded her arms and nodded in understanding. “You’d never believe it looking at him or anything.”

Despite finding Saito’s assessment a little blunt, Miharu couldn’t help but smile at how closely it lined up with her own.

“But when the going gets rough, he’s there for you. Believe me,” Saito continued.

She really trusted Yoshimura, Miharu realized.

But did that make her theory possible? And if it were true—how?

Just then a shadow burst out from underneath the table, knocking Miharu to the floor.

“Gwah!”

“Wh-What is that?!”

Saito sprang up and assumed a fighting stance. However, seeing the assailant—a large, fluffy, black dog, occupied with licking Naruse’s face—she relaxed.



“Th-They did it!” Miharu cried. “They’re alive!”

Miharu wrapped her arms around the dog, having noticed a small object tied around its neck with a string. “They’re really alive!!!”

Grinning, she removed the SD card from its fixture and held it up to Saito.

Temple of Darkness, Tower Atrium

Having sent off Cavall, Miyoshi and I exited Dolly and had a look around the tower with our naked eyes. This room, at least, seemed safer than the sanctuary-like area with the altar we’d come from.

“Pretty high,” I commented, gazing up. Thanks to Night Vision, I could see a little way up the tower, but its top disappeared into the dark.

“At the very least it continues up past the drone’s height limit.”

There were vines wrapped around the outside of the tower, but they were parched and withered. The lightest touch sent them crumbling to dust.

“If there were just a hole in it somewhere, we could have a look inside. Doesn’t it seem like it’d be concealing a staircase?”

“If this is a dungeon, then it’ll be unbreakable.”

“Shoot, that’s right. Plus it might be some kind of trap.”

“Now you’re the one jinxing yourself.”

At any rate, while we couldn’t find any way into the tower after circling it, we did find a rather strange cavity.

“It’s hexagram-shaped,” I observed. “What is it?”

“If this were a game,” Miyoshi responded, “you’d definitely need a hexagram-shaped key.”

“So we need to find something that slots in there?” I looked around. “Do you think it’s through one of those seven gates?”

“Probably.”

“Then there’s no way out of this fight?!”

“Spoken like a Peace Patrol Agent with a seventy-five draw-streak record.”

“Huh?”

“*Beast Saga* meme. Google it later. Your line just now was an exact quote.”

“I’ll look it up. *If I make it out of this alive.*” I smiled, knowingly jinxing us. “So, what now?”

“We’ve got to explore one of the other labeled rooms. The S is lit up, but we could check one of the others.”

“Not the S,” I pleaded.

“Any reason?”

“Think about the spelling. The S will be the final-boss room.”

It was the last letter in “Cimeies.” If any of the portals were going to feature a final boss, that would be it. I didn’t want to enter it until we’d explored the others.

“But the final-boss room is exactly where you’d expect to find a hint on how to progress.”

“We’re not trying to *progress!*” I protested. “We’re trying to find the way *out.*”

“Then in that case why don’t we try—”

Just then, the light by the S gate turned red.

“Kei!”

“Yep. Boss fight.”

“If our theory’s correct, it’s Cimeies.”

Miyoshi looked at me with scorn. And *I* was supposed to be the one with a red-hot moral streak?

“If the JSDF is in there, it’s going to be a repeat of Batian Peak.”

“Miyoshi, let’s be clear. The most important things on the line to me here are your life and mine, followed by the lives of our acquaintances, followed by protecting my secret. In that order.”

Sure, the platitude went that everyone's life was equal, but when push came to shove, outside of rare saints, any ordinary person would put their own life and the lives of those they cared about first. If you tried to give everyone's life the *exact* same weight, you'd crack under the stress. You didn't need the Plank of Carneades to realize that.

"Where do the lives of total strangers rank?" Miyoshi asked.

"It depends on the situation," I responded.

I'd want to save them if I could, but if it required sacrificing something to do so... Well, it'd depend on what that "something" was. Still...

I told her I'd do what I could, but wouldn't beat myself up if it was impossible.

"Although," I added, "what if we can't pass through the gate while it's red?"

"What?!"

Apparently she hadn't been planning on conceding her moral argument to the practicalities of a doorway.

Temple of Darkness, S Area

"This place makes an impact, I'll give it that." Sergeant Kaiba illuminated the ceiling with one of the chemical lights. Ornately carved stonework and beams spread out above him. "From what I've read, there's similar stonework on the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi. Although I haven't seen it myself."

"That section's been off-limits ever since it was discovered," Iori responded.

"So I've heard. What exactly happened there?"

All that had been publicized was that the corpses of exploration team members had been found on the peak. Very little had made it out regarding the caverns below.

"No one from the first exploration team came back," Iori explained. "Their last transmission was 'The peak—!' and then it cut out."

Hagane interjected, speaking gravely. "And you know how the team on the peak ended up."

“Wasn’t there a rescue operation?”

“Of course there was. But a horde of genomos blocked off the routes through the caverns. Ultimately the remains were discovered on the peak, and the investigation of the caverns was called off. The rescuers didn’t want to wind up in need of being rescued themselves.”

“And yet now the caverns have become a Mining, er...mine,” Kaiba pointed out. “How’d that happen while the area was off-limits?”

“This isn’t official, but according to JDA leaks, the first explorer to get Mining was hunting genomos in the temple within the mountain. They mistook the off-limits area.”

“*Mistook*’ it?!”

“Yep. They thought it only applied to the peak. Not any part of the mountain below. The maps were revised after that.”

“Wow. Good luck for them, coming back alive.”

“I think if recent experiences have taught us anything, it’s that we can’t afford to look down on private explorers anymore.”

D-Powers had become front-runners in the world of dungeoneering through acquiring Appraisal alone. There was far more to the world of exploration than raw stats, especially in the face of powerful skills. The team was feeling that more and more every day.

Iori listened silently to Hagane and Kaiba’s conversation.

“Commander!”

A scout further up ahead called back to them, reporting that they had reached the end of the cavern.

“It ends with a sheer drop. The floor’s about four meters down. No sign of water. The lights don’t reach the ceiling overhead.”

“Set up a rope. We’re going to explore that next room.”

“Yes ma’am!”

Since it wasn’t possible to stake dungeon floors, they’d have to secure the

rope to a rock or hook it to a crevice or protrusion of the wall. Lori and the others walked through the tunnel, reaching the chasm the scout had described. The darkness stretched on endlessly.

“Funny. This room doesn’t look like a temple,” Lori commented.

She wondered if there was really a floor just four meters down, as the scout had reported. This place didn’t exactly seem like a natural cave, but it was strikingly unlike the ornately constructed rooms they had passed through up to now.

The team secured a rope and climbed into the darkness below.

At the bottom, Hagane, who along with Lori had been one of the first to descend, continued his conversation from earlier.

“About the temple on Yoyogi’s eighteenth floor, there were narrow paths to an inner chamber there too.”

“Hagane?”

“But apparently it was a trap.”

Given that literal mechanical traps had never been encountered in dungeons, Hagane’s words could only mean it was a trap-like scenario.

Lori squinted, trying to peer through the darkness ahead.

Unlike the tunnels on Yoyogi’s eighteenth floor, this passage wasn’t so narrow, and didn’t appear to be man-made. Based on the differences, maybe they could hold out hope this wasn’t a trap. Perhaps one of the other tunnels they’d elected not to take had been the trap, and they’d dodged a metaphorical bullet.

Kaiba spoke up slightly hesitantly. “Given the fact our tunnel opened up so high on the wall, perhaps it was meant to be used for...monitoring something in this room, rather than act as an access point...”

Three scouts returned from investigating the surrounding area.

“As far as we were able to see with our lights, there’s nothing around. It’s just a big empty room.”

"Then we march forward!" Lori proclaimed. "Don't let your guards down!"

The team moved into formation and began inching forward.

"It's an oddly imposing space," Lori mused, "considering it's just an empty room."

"You can say that again," Kaiba agreed.

Here and there along the way the team spotted cracks in the walls that looked like they'd be large enough to fit a person, but when examined up close with their lights, they appeared to be simple crevices and not tunnels.

"Ah, right. There was a note found on the bodies included in the initial reports on the incident at Batian Peak," Lori commented.

"About the trap?" Kaiba asked.

"Yeah. They called the narrow tunnels leading to the interior...birth canals."

"Birth canals?"

"Yeah. Kind of vivid."

"If we're in a similar place, then that would make this room..."

Lori scanned her surroundings. It was still covered in darkness, with small pockets of light here and there where the scout teams had laid down chemical lights.

A womb? Then what kind of fearsome monster would it birth?

Just as that gruesome thought crossed Lori's mind, Kaiba, who had stopped to plant chemical lights, let out a scream from some distance away.

"Commander!"

He came running over, pointing behind him.

The glow from the chemical lights planted along the ground had begun to stretch out in tendrils and crawl toward some central point.

"Wh-What is this?"

"A womb," Lori answered.

She unclipped one of her special magnetic bullets from her belt. Rather than

depleted uranium tips, the rounds used cemented carbide. Perfect for magnetic manipulation.

To Iori, one magnetic object would have been as good as another, but the maker of these rounds took pride in their increased efficacy. Some might have argued that using public money to buy expensive chunks of metal was a misallocation of funds, but... At any rate, even though they'd have been no use against the slimes they'd anticipated for today's mission, Iori always carried them. Just in case.

"Take it easy," Hagane cautioned. "Don't drain yourself all at once."

With Magnetic Manipulation, as long as she had remaining magic, she could make any magnetic object into a formidable projectile. However, that was as long as she had MP. When she'd first met Hagane, she'd expended all of her energy on a single attack, passing out. The team couldn't afford to lose her now.

"I know," Iori responded. "I don't need kid gloves anymore."

"No you don't." Hagane smiled. "Commander."

Ahead of them, in the center of the room, something had started to rise out of the spot where the luminous tendrils had converged on the ground. Kaiba's eyes widened. It looked like a gargantuan knight seated atop a dark steed.

"This place is a dungeon, no mistake!" Iori shouted. "And it's boss time! I don't know how we got here from the second floor of Yokohama, but we're leaving here alive!"

"Brings back some memories, doesn't it?" Kaiba undid the buttons of his sleeves. "Just like Okinawa [\(24\)](#)!" He used his Water Magic skill to conjure a water lance.

"That time we were fighting a crusty old mermaid mummy. Doesn't seem like this'll go down as easily, but to be fair, we're not the same as we were back then either." Hagane prepared a lance just like Kaiba's.

The two of them flung their weapons. Their aim was true. The lances struck the knight dead center.

“Any effect?” Kaiba asked.

“Who knows?” Hagane grinned. “But we drew its aggro our way. That’s mission accomplished for now!”

They were underequipped. They hardly had any firearms, and the only ones with special skills were the four officers. The others readied shields—which they had plenty of, having brought them into Yokohama to fend off slimes—and formed a defensive circle around Lori and the others. It was all they could do.

Team Simon

“Damn, it’s cramped.” Mason loosened his collar with one finger.

The darkness clung to them. To conserve resources, they’d decided to only have one or two members use lights at a time. It felt like they were swimming through ink.

“Shh.” Joshua stretched out his arm behind him, indicating to the others to stop.

“What is it?” Simon asked.

“Can’t you hear that?”

“What?”

Simon focused. In the distance, he heard the faint shouts and clangs of combat.

“So we’re not alone.”

Simon was thankful they’d had time to regroup and redistribute equipment before setting off to explore, but the further they went, the more they realized the labyrinthine nature of their surroundings. They didn’t even have the numbers or equipment to properly scout the area, let alone engage monsters. Rather than splitting up to explore different routes, they’d had to blindly pick one and hope it led toward the exit.

“Maybe they can spare us some grub...” Mason clutched at his stomach.

“If they’re even human,” Simon responded. *“And if they are, there’s a good*

chance they were blasted from Yokohama, like us. They might not have much food on hand.”

It wasn't exactly human nature to share what little food one might have in a time of desperation. Though maybe Simon and the others could bank on that famous Japanese politeness...

“Either way, it's the first lead we've gotten since we woke up here,” Simon concluded. *“We follow the sounds.”*

“Roger.”

The team beat feet toward the raging din of battle.

Temple of Darkness, S Area

“What? No visible HP bar?” Kaiba quipped.

“What I wouldn't give for a skill like that right now.” As he uttered this response, Hagane slipped away from Sawatari and the others, trying to draw the boss's attention and give the team time to firm up a defensive formation. “Maybe we should ask D-Powers!”

“Wait, you really think a skill like that exists?!”

“Who knows. But here's hoping!”

Having taken Hagane's attack, the boss turned toward the nimbly maneuvering sergeant. Hagane had expected it to take a step toward him, but instead it brought down its right fist like a hammer.

“Whoa!”

Hagane and Kaiba jumped out of the way just in time. Shards of rubble flew up from where the boss's fist met the ground.

“I'd hate to take one of those attacks without a shield!” Kaiba shouted.

“I'd hate to even *with* one!”

Not even Team I's vanguard, Sawatari—commanding the troops now facing the boss's back—was confident he could take one of the beast's attacks unscathed.

“Aim!” Lori’s voice signaled to the rest of the team that she’d gathered up magnetic energy. Kaiba and Hagane darted out of the way with practiced precision.

“Fire!”

Magnetic materials from rubble to equipment began to rise up and float in the air. A second later, Lori’s specialized projectiles shot like speeding bullets along an invisible beam in the air. The missiles, still traveling at subsonic speed, let out a shriek as they flew, perforating several holes in the boss’s chest.

“Again!” This time the projectiles struck the horse, similarly tearing chunks out of it.

Lori’s ranking might have been #18, but against a singular foe, there was no one you’d rather have on your side. Her team’s relative calm was a testament to that fact.

The horse toppled forward, its front legs giving way. The warrior atop ceased to move.

“Is it over?” Hagane asked.

“Sergeant, don’t you know better than to ask that?!” Kaiba shouted.

No sooner had Kaiba finished his retort than gushes of bubbling flesh began erupting from the wounds on both knight and mare.

“What?!”

It looked like foaming flesh, a cascade of cartilage, a spray of sinew. And where the bubbling tissue congealed, it slowly took the form of what appeared to be giant serpentine heads, emerging from the holes in the torso. The warrior’s waist, now fused with the horse, sprung hawklike talons, jutting forth from the seam between steed and rider.

“Yuck!” Kaiba shouted. “What is *that*?!”

Finally a long, repugnantly reptilian tail emerged from the mass, squirming like a worm in the air. The tail was followed by several...somethings...popping out from the mass, but they disappeared into the darkness too quickly to make out.

“Now’s your chance!” Iori shouted. “It can’t fit through the tunnel we came through. Fall back!”

“What about you, Commander?”

“No one here is better equipped for single combat, remember?”

“But...!”

“There’s no time!”

Hagane’s face contorted. “Yes ma’am!”

Hagane and Kaiba reconvened with Sawatari’s group to get ready to make their escape. Iori prepared one more attack, this time building up enough energy to launch the bullets at supersonic speed. She lowered her right hand, preparing to fire. However—

“Huh?”

She felt something brush her arm, followed by a sharp pain. When she glanced down at the right arm that should have been in front of her, she found it wasn’t there.



Instead, three giant faces, each two meters across, leered at her.

Hagane and Kaiba turned around, hearing Lori's screams.

"What are those?"

"Death mantises?!"

Standing before Lori, their scythe-like appendages raised high, were three copies of the monster that had made its name as the boss of Evans Dungeon. Reflexively, Hagane started to dash back to help, only to be knocked flat by something that struck him from the side. As he tumbled, he saw the glint of another scythe slicing through the air where he'd been.

"A f-fourth?!"

Hagane had been knocked away by Sawatari. Team I's vanguard stood ready with a shield, trying to force the mantis back.

Kaiba fired a water lance toward the staggered mantis, but it darted back with lightning speed, retreating into the dark.

"Get in!" Sawatari pointed to a line of defense the team had formed with their riot shields while Kaiba and Hagane had been fighting.

Lori, meanwhile, had managed to slip into a crack in the wall just large enough to wedge herself in. Her helmet had tumbled off, headlight illuminating the battle taking place.

I'd changed into my Phantom costume. It meant giving up all my defense, but judging from the monsters we'd faced, our beginner gear wasn't going to cut it anyway.

Taking a deep breath, I slipped through the gate labeled "S." Thankfully the red letter didn't prevent us from passing through. It seemed like the dungeon allowed reinforcements. I wasn't sure if that was the exception or the norm.

But to my surprise, no one was on the other side. We were greeted by a templelike room much like the one we'd woken up in—the place we'd dubbed Room C. The only difference was the wider diameter of the tunnel entrance

behind the altar along the far wall.

“Careful,” Miyoshi cautioned. “A wider tunnel could mean something larger has to get through.”

“Looks like they got too lazy to keep the decorations going through the passages,” I said, observing the walls as we moved.

“Or maybe the idea is that whatever hollowed out these tunnels is different from whoever made the temple rooms.”

It was true—the tunnels didn’t necessarily seem man-made. They seemed like natural cave formations.

“Then there’s another way of looking at it,” I offered. “The temples were put together to ward off some kind of threat trying to come through the tunnels. Like a spiritual barrier.”

“Anything trying to come through would certainly have a hard time. This place is a maze,” Miyoshi complained.

The tunnel behind the altar, which had looked like a straight shot, kept forking off in different directions. Miyoshi had taken to marking our path with a can of spray paint, creating a trail where we’d been.

“You’re a regular Ariadne,” I commented.

“I’ll pass on wandering around *these* caverns forever,” she responded.

The path brightened up ahead. Someone had planted small lights along the ground, each giving off a faint yellow glow.

“Chemical lights?” I bent over to examine them.

“Looks like someone’s been here,” Miyoshi responded.

“Probably the JSDF,” I responded. “Judging from how many lights there are.” Team Simon didn’t have that many members, or supplies.

“By the way,” I asked, “does Team I have any Life Detection users?”

“Not on public record. But they’re one of the world’s top teams. We can’t rule out the possibility that they have *some* way of tracking nearby explorers and monsters. Still, even if they sense two people, I can say I was traveling alone. I

won't blow your cover."

"Thanks. I still want to keep ol' Phanty under wraps."

Thankfully even if they did have a secret Life Detection user, it was nearly impossible to use it to identify individuals. You could keep track of an individual signal by following its movement, but it didn't provide personal information. According to Miyoshi, while my blip read pretty large when I had my stats turned all the way up, I could blend into the crowd as long as I kept them in check.

Stepping around the bend, suddenly the ornate decorations of the temple rooms returned.

"Someone turned the decoration switch back on," I observed.

"Natural caves connecting separate temples?" Miyoshi mused.

Just then, we heard some sort of noise.

"Is that...a battle?" I asked.

"Navigating those tunnels took longer than we'd thought. Hope everyone's okay..."

"At least they weren't wiped out in an instant. Let's stay positive."

We walked closer to the source of the sound. Occasionally light filled the tunnels, concurrent with the sound of gunfire. The din grew gradually louder.

The path opened up into a sheer drop-off. Darkness spread out before us. And below, in an arena-like basin, stood the JSDF, locked in combat with...

"That must be..."

"'Cimeies,' nothing!" Miyoshi shouted. "More like *chimera*!"

"Gnarly."

It looked like a human torso had exploded into a bunch of snakes. Plus hawk talons and a dragon tail. It was quite a mess. Plus it looked like his whole upper body was made of bubbling flesh.

"Any mythological association between Cimeies and chimeras?" I asked.

“According to some sources.”

The lore wasn’t exactly clear, Miyoshi explained, but the names resembled each other enough that there were theories of a shared origin.

“Ancient Greek chimeras are supposed to die if you stick lead in their mouths, right?” I asked.

Unfortunately, we didn’t have the right materials on hand to make the chimera literally eat lead.

“There are lots of different myths. Who knows which the dungeon’s drawing from? On that note, though, the lead thing was because the chimera supposedly accidentally melted the lead with its fire breath, so look out for that.”

“Yikes. Got it.”

Unlike Ngai, the lore surrounding this mythological creature was so wide-reaching, it was difficult to prepare for. We didn’t know what strengths and weaknesses would apply.

But thankfully we knew its name. And by naming it, it felt like we were a little less in the dark.

“Whoa. What was that?” I’d just watched something skittered across the floor.

“Those are...death mantises!” Miyoshi had scanned them with Appraisal.

“Death mantis?” I repeated, shock audible in my voice. “You mean the Evans Dungeon boss?”

Even Team Simon had had a hard time dealing with the single one they’d encountered there. According to Cathy, it’d nearly sliced off Mason’s arm.

“I’m going to have a hard time dodging them,” Miyoshi said, observing the mantises darting around the arena. They zipped around brandishing scythe-like arms.

Still... “They’re fast, but Ngai was around ten times faster,” I observed. “I should be okay.”

Granted, the difference between 0.1 and 0.01 seconds might not seem very meaningful to most people, but...a factor of ten was still a factor of ten.

“Kei to the rescue!” Miyoshi squealed. “Funny, who’d have thought you’d be so dependable?”

“Who indeed...”

Just below us, illuminated dimly by one of the JSDF chemical lights, was a section of floor where it looked like some sort of substance had pooled. It was hard to tell in the dark, but it looked to be a slightly different color from the rest of the floor. I started to get a bad feeling.

“Stay here.” I had Miyoshi wait in the tunnel while I went to check it out.

A rope, probably used by the JSDF members on descent, trailed down from the lip of the tunnel to the floor below.

“Blood?” I knelt down to check the spot in question. Further out to my left, around forty meters away, JSDF members had formed a small defensive line. Meanwhile, just next to me was—

“Gwah!”

“Kei?”

“Don’t come down here!” I hissed.

It’d been hard to see in the near monochrome lighting, but the remains of two JSDF members were hacked up all around me. I’d fallen right over from the shock, and was now staring upward. My right hand gripped my chest.

“Kei?”

I held out my hand to stop Miyoshi. “I’m fine.”

I couldn’t help but feel like those two dead soldiers were beckoning me to join them, lifeless eyes from their bodiless heads peering my way.

“Phew.” I sat up and took a deep breath, then clambered back up to Miyoshi.

“Miyoshi. Stay away from the opening, okay? Don’t shine any lights, and put the Arthurs between you and the mouth of the tunnel.”

Miyoshi listened silently.

“Whoever was planting those lights got...got all hacked up. It’s possible the mantises are photosensitive.”

“Hacked up?”

“Let’s just say you’re lucky you don’t have Night Vision right now. Don’t look down.”

Miyoshi nodded.

“Still,” I added. “Why haven’t the JSDF members retreated?”

The death mantises could have cut the rope while they were climbing up, but it was still worth a shot. They’d be better off up here than being picked off down below.

“Maybe there’s something else down there,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Something worth more than their lives?!”

“Show some respect.”

“R-Right, sorry.”

There were probably soldiers fighting for their lives directly below us. The only difference between this fight and previous battles was my own awareness of the mortality of all involved. I’d been expecting to just swoop in and save the day, but those two cadavers had shaken me.

“Kei, remember what you said earlier? About doing your best but not blaming yourself if there was nothing you could do.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, listen to yourself. You’re not a god. You’re not a superhero. You’re just trying to do what you can. You can’t save everyone.”

“Yeah...”

“So, get out there and do what you can.”

“R-Right!”

I had to do what I could. That was all. Nothing more and nothing less.

“Now, take a deep breath,” Miyoshi instructed. “You got this.”

“Yeah,” I responded, growing more and more flush with courage. “I do! It sucks, but I gotta do what I gotta do.”

“That’s the spirit. Er, Phantom.”

“Don’t patronize me...”

“Now! It looks like it’s time for the Phantom to make his grand debut in front of the JSDF!” Miyoshi cried. “And don’t worry. I’ll get the whole thing on film.”



I had to hand it to Miyoshi. She could get on my nerves, but the banter-as-usual was helping me collect myself.

“You don’t have to.” I grinned. “Really.”

She responded by taking a matte black drone out of Storage.

“Miyoshi, serious—”

“Don’t worry. This thing doesn’t emit light, and I’ll control it from under a blackout tent.”

“Okay... I’m going to be borrowing Drudwyn, but keep the other Arthurs close by. Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Kei, you’re the one who needs to be careful.”

“Good point. By the way, I’m going to pile up some emergency goods over there.”

“Emergency goods?”

“Yeah. Food and water and that stuff.”

“Aren’t they going to ask me where it came from?”

“Yeah, and you’ll explain that you’d been running a bunch of overnight tests at Yokohama, and had a bunch of water and food stocked up by the entrance.”

“And it all got blasted here with me?”

“Yep.”

“But how did I get it over here?”

“You wake up, lost and confused in the darkness. Shots ring out! Following your only clue as to the whereabouts of others, you move closer to the source. As you do, you bring emergency supplies with you a little bit at a time, figuring they might be useful. That last bit is important; there are too many for you to have brought in one trip.”

“And I was just going back to get the rest when the Phantom appeared.”

“Exactly.”

Miyoshi grimaced. “They’ll never buy it.”

“Oh, but they will,” I protested. “Chalk it up to divine providence.”

That excused everything.

“Now you’re getting *too* in the spirit.”

I started unloading supplies a bit further away, in a spot in a side tunnel it didn’t seem like the JSDF had checked, judging from the lack of chemical lights. Thanks to Vault, it only took an instant.

“So what’s the plan?” Miyoshi asked. “Just going to jump into the fight?”

“Without asking first?”

“Asking?!”

“If they need a hand. It’s only polite.”

“Okay, now you’re *really* too into the spirit of things.”

With a smile and wave, I dropped into Drudwyn’s shadow pit.

“Sergeant! Our bullets are just plinking off him!”

One of the support members of Team I shouted to Sawatari from behind. The soldier had fired two shots at the large, writhing black mass of the boss.

“And the mantises?”

“If I could hit ‘em, I’d have been scouted for the AASAM already! I’d be a shoo-in!”

The Australian Army Skill at Arms Meet, or AASAM, was held every year in Australia. The previous year, eighteen countries had competed. The soldier’s quip caught Sawatari off guard, but he was grateful for the levity. They’d already lost team members. They couldn’t risk losing morale.

“Maintain defenses!” he shouted. “Keep those shields up! We’ll take offense!”

“We’re gonna die, aren’t we?” Kaiba smirked. “We haven’t been in this bad a pinch since...when was it? Okinawa?” He prepared another arrow of water overhead.

Despite Kaiba's flippant attitude, there was no one Sawatari would rather have around. He knew from years of experience just how seriously Kaiba took his work.

Sawatari smirked back. "At least we had proper weapons back then."

The mantises darted by, swiping at the two Team I members. Sawatari and Kaiba leaped out of their way and prepared to fire their water lances, but by the time they could aim, the mantises had disappeared.

"Damn!"

Forget landing a hit, it was all they could manage just to dodge.

"We might as well be kicking pebbles at 'em if you two can't line up a shot! I thought traveling light was supposed to *help* with magic-based combat!"

Hagane used the moment after dodging the mantises' attack to conjure a wall of water.

Of course, that time in Okinawa, the team's Type 89 rifles had proved totally ineffective. So even if they'd brought their best gear with them, this fight was destined to come down to magic use.

"Come to think of it," Kaiba said at a volume that only the nearby Hagane could hear, "even the person we're trying to rescue is the same as back then." He glanced upward. "We were ready to die then, but this time, we could run if we wanted, couldn't we?"

The exit, or rather, the way they'd come in, was far enough away from the boss that the team could make a safe break for it. Although Kaiba doubted the mantises would let them climb up the rope unhindered.

"How much longer can you two hold out?" Hagane asked.

"If I could take breaks behind the guard line like we did during training, maybe an hour? But this is the first time we've used these skills in a major boss fight. Our calculations might be off. Plus I'm not sure how long the others' shields will hold up against the mantis attacks."

"Lieutenant Kimitsu's vitals?" Hagane called out.

A man monitoring her vitals on the ESS some distance behind the defense line

radioed with the answer. "No change, sir. She's stable, for now."

Devices attached to the team members' arms and legs provided vital readings to the ESS. There was no reading from the one affixed to Lori's right arm, meaning the device had either been destroyed or removed.

"Then she just can't leave that crack we saw her slip into," Hagane concluded. "We should have two first rank potions on hand..."

The death mantises had congregated in front of the crack in the wall behind the main boss. Lori's helmet had fallen off and tumbled to the floor nearby, drawing the monsters to her location.

"Shouldn't she have blasted them by now?" the soldier asked.

"She might be unconscious, or not have any more ammo on hand," Hagane responded. "We can't get through to her on comms, and we know her helmet's off. She might have lost other gear when she took their attack."

That was an optimistic interpretation, he knew, but he didn't bother saying so. She was alive. That was enough.

Hagane continued. "If the path looks clear, get back up to the tunnels and set up a base there."

The soldier, a private first class, repeated the orders, and the defense team began moving backward, shields raised. Staying out in the open required vigilance in all directions. Retreating back to the tunnel could allow them to focus their defenses solely on the tunnel's opening.

"If we don't keep the big guy distracted, they're toast," Hagane called to Kaiba and Sawatari. The cliff wall might hold off mantises, but if the boss monster decided to shoot fire breath into it, it'd become a giant kiln. "But it's better than fighting out here."

They couldn't have the team go to Lori's rescue either. Hagane had considered, for a moment, reusing the same strategy they'd employed in Okinawa—dividing the team into two, and having one half draw the boss's ire while the other retrieved the rescue target.

The problem was that right now every member was necessary for defense.

The unit couldn't afford to lose any more members.

Furthermore, there was a difference in priorities. In Okinawa, Iori had been a civilian. Now she was a JSDF officer. Risks could be taken for the former, given the JSDF's mission statement, but risking an entire team just to save one other member? Certainly, Iori had that much value to the JSDF, but Hagane couldn't allow that to influence his decision-making. Her rescue would have to wait. Securing the lives of the other team members came first.

"May I render my assistance?"

Hagane spun around in the direction of the strange question spoken in English. He was certain the voice didn't belong to anyone on his team.

But he wasn't prepared for what he saw before him—a white, half-length mask hovering in the dark.

Team Simon had reached the end of their tunnel.

"End of the line," Joshua called. The path terminated in a steep drop. It was about ten meters down to the ground, but to the four members of Team Simon, each capable of jumping down from a third-story building floor with ease, that might as well have been a single staircase step.

"What is that?"

In front of them on ground level was some sort of dark-clad warrior with...an alligator snout (?)...sitting atop a dark horse. It was flailing its arms through the air, lit by the JSDF team's lights.

"A black knight? Seriously?"

Two Water Magic users from Team I were attacking in tandem.

"The JSDF's here."

"Can they beat it?" Simon asked, watching the two hurl thin threads of water. *"Seems kinda like taking on an elephant with toothpicks."*

"Maybe I can help?" Natalie asked. She was by far the one most suited to long-distance combat.

"Hold on. Let's watch for a minute. That's Team I after all."

Iori's skill was public knowledge, but few had ever seen her magnetic capabilities put to a real test. Apparently she fared best against single, powerful foes, but such situations hardly ever reared their heads.

"Aim!" Iori called out below.

"*Here it comes!*" Simon shouted.

The next moment there was a loud whistling sound, and six wide holes had opened in the boss's chest.

"*Nice!*" Mason cried, leaning forward.

The next shot struck the horse, bringing the gigantic foe to its knees.

"*Damn! Now that's exactly the kind of attack you want against a muscle-bound boss,*" Simon uttered. "*Looks like we weren't needed after a—*"

"*What?!*"

Below their vantage point, foamlike flesh had begun to bubble up from the warrior's holes. Something resembling a serpentine—no, dragon-like—head burst forth.

"*Regeneration?*" Simon mused. "*No. This is different.*"

When the process had finished, a grotesque clump of meat sat astride a horse with a dragon's tail writhing in the air behind it—a form that seemed designed to invoke just about every primal fear. The horse staggered to its feet.

"*Psh. Still no match for Iori,*" Simon assessed confidently.

"*Simon! It's not done!*"

Just after the serpentine appendages, a series of large, dark shapes had darted forth from the boss. What's more, it looked like they had scythe-like claws.

"*Don't tell me...*"

"*Yep,*" Mason responded. "*That tingling in my left arm doesn't lie.*"

Team Simon

“A death mantis?”

“And it seems even faster than the one at Evans,” Simon added.

“The team down there hasn’t noticed it y—”

Lori let out a scream.

“Shit!” Simon lurched forward, but Joshua grabbed his arm from behind.

“Wait! Simon. There’s more than one.”

“More?!”

Another three death mantises had reared their heads from the writhing mass that had once been the knight’s body. Emerging fully formed, they dashed off into the darkness.

“There are four of the things we fought as the boss of Evans down there now,” Joshua added sternly. *“What are you going to do?”*

Lori appeared to have wedged herself through a crack in a wall down below. Simon was fairly certain he’d seen her arm get lopped off, but maybe she’d gotten lucky like Mason. At any rate, as long as she was still alive, they could manage something.

“Four...” Simon mumbled, defeated.

“We could barely handle one.” Joshua surveyed the area below. *“Jeez, this is totally fubar.”*

“We can at least join up with Lori’s team,” Simon uttered.

“Hold on! Someone new just showed up.”

“‘Someone new?’ Who else is even here?”

This was uncharted territory, an unfamiliar dungeon they’d been blasted to by the events in Yokohama earlier that night. Someone “new” being there seemed impossible.

“Wait,” Simon spoke again, *“you mean someone from Yokohama?”*

“I don’t know. But you might want to get a look at what they’re wearing.”

Simon peeked down at the field and quickly spotted the figure's ridiculous appearance.

"Let's go!" He took off back down the tunnels, aiming for the entrance it looked like the figure had emerged from.

"Whaaa?" Hagane was at a loss for words. He'd even forgotten he was in the middle of a battle.

This was an unexplored floor in a totally unknown dungeon. What's more, it was crawling with boss monsters capable of tearing seasoned JSDF members to shreds. Yet here was someone waltzing across the battlefield looking like they'd just wandered out of a cosplayer convention. Truly, rather than armor, he appeared to be wearing a costume!

What was more, the man had posed a question as casually as if he were conducting a sales call. Hagane's head was spinning.

"Who are you?" Hagane asked, returning the masked man's English.

The only inference was that this was *not* an unexplored dungeon, but a known one with active explorers. Of course, the only explorers who could handle a dungeon of this difficulty were the handful in the double digits, whose names and faces Hagane had made it his business to know. This masked man wasn't among them.

Another explanation crossed his mind: this wasn't a person at all, but a trick of the dungeons—a monster in a human disguise. Explorers had long speculated that upper-ranking undead or demonic monsters could utilize human speech.

"May I render my assistance?" the masked man asked again.

"I don't know who you are or what your deal is," Hagane responded, "but this is a battlefield! You'd better get out of here before y—"

A mantis zipped in behind the masked man, moving so quickly it practically seemed to teleport into view. The man looked on calmly as the mantis raised its claw overhead. He seemed almost amused.

"Look out!" Hagane shouted, reverting to Japanese. But the mantis's claw

descended before he had the chance to move. However, a moment later, instead of the carnage Hagane had been prepared to witness, he saw the strange man standing just where he had been, seeming completely unfazed.

“May I render my assistance?” the masked man repeated, putting emphasis on the last word.

The mantis's severed claw landed on the ground next to him with a thud, dissipating into black light.

Hagane couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was all his team had managed to do to fend off the mantises' attacks. This man had not only dodged one, but counterattacked instantly.

The mantis, realizing its left claw had been severed, let out an ear-piercing screech. It reared back and then plunged forward to bite. At least, that's how it looked to Hagane. Its movement was too fast to track properly.

However, rather than munching the man with its mighty mandibles, it was instead blasted back by a single movement of its target's right arm. This time the mantis itself shattered into black flecks.

In the mantis's place, a small, silvery object glinted in the dark.

Hagane blinked. What was going on?

Guess I should have figured death mantises would be cannon fodder at this point. Miyoshi radioed in telepathically. All that worrying for nothing. But why English?

I don't know. I thought that would help throw them off my trail. More importantly, Miyoshi! The mantises drop iron too!

That figures.

Everyone's going to know the Phantom has Mining!

What'd you do with the drop?

I put it in Vault. But that's another thing! If I'm not careful, they could notice I have a storage skill too.

Ordinary monsters won't spawn on this floor because it's a boss arena, so the only drops you should have to worry about are the ones from the mantises. You can manage something. Probably.

Hm...

Still desperate to get the JSDF members to ask for my help, I took out a second death mantis who came my way with swift swings of the Sword of Deserts, pocketing the iron drop. It seemed like the team was focused on one of the cracks on the far wall, but I wasn't sure why.

They mentioned vitals earlier, Miyoshi pointed out. Maybe there's someone stuck there?

Now that you mention it, I haven't seen Lieutenant Kimitsu anywhere. You don't think...!

She could have been left behind in Yokohama.

That's possible, if optimistic.

Still, come on, I thought to myself. Tell me you need help against the boss. Did the sergeant have some kind of social anxiety preventing him from answering? Help me keep up the shtick!

Switching back to telepathy, I complained, Miyoshi, I keep asking, but he still hasn't given me an answer. Maybe he doesn't understand English?

He responded in English earlier. It's probably because of your crazy getup. You're making him nervous! How would you respond if someone dressed like you showed up and asked if you needed help?

Okay, so what am I supposed to say?

You seriously have to ask? You're going to bust in like Taira no Kagekiyo (25) from the Heikei Monogatari! "You must have heard my name. Now see me with your own eyes! I am the Phantom! The Rank 1 Explorer!"

Really?

I mean, hey, Kagekiyo starved to death, so if you think about that...our situation's not far off!

Miyoshi, get your head in the game! Still, it is embarrassing to keep repeating the same words over and over again.

Like a broken record, they used to say.

Uh, I was pretty sure they *still* said that. Plus records actually last longer than CDs. But anyway...

“Y-You!” the sergeant called out in English. “Who are you?”

Ah, shoot! There went my chance to give my own cool, unprompted introduction. But no! I had my shtick! I was going to make this work. The Phantom had a character to maintain!

“If you’ve no business with me, then I’ll be going.”

Kei, that stubbornness of yours is going to get you into trouble.

Keep out of this!

“Wait!” he called out. “Are you...him? That explorer?”

There it is. I gave a generous nod. Yep, should have gone with the strong, silent type from the start.

“Do you know a way out of he—”

Before he ruined my whole self-consciously cool routine by asking something I couldn’t answer, I held up my right hand, dramatically gesturing for him to stop. I cast my eyes on the far wall. *“Is someone indisposed over there?”*

“Y-Yes. One of ours. She’s trapped!”

“Understood.”

“Huh? Understood what?”

The chimera and remaining two death mantises were taking turns whaling away at the JSDF’s wall of defense. The JSDF was holding firm for now, but it was only a matter of time.

Were you listening? I signaled Miyoshi.

Loud and clear. Feel free to use a rank five potion, or Super Recovery Orb as needed.

Sorry.

As D-Powers, we could always bill the recipients later. As the Phantom, that wouldn't be the case.

Still, Miyoshi's tone told me she'd be more than comfortable making the sacrifice. Necessary expenditures.

Kei, it's pretty far to the opposite wall. I'll provide whatever bird's-eye info I can, but you might wander out of telepathy range.

Thanks for the heads-up.

The masked man nodded to Hagane, then began walking toward the wall where Lori was ensconced.

"H-Hey!" Hagane shouted instinctively in Japanese. The man was heading for the two remaining death mantises and the boss. It was suicide.

When the man was partway to the wall, the boss took note of him and swung its dragon-like tail horizontally toward him like a whip.

Hagane winced, watching the tail rake the ground. However, just as with the mantises' attacks before, when the cloud of dust settled, the man was still walking, as though he'd only been brushed by a cool breeze. Hagane could swear he had even seen the tail move straight through the masked man.

"Sergeant? Is that...?" Kaiba's expression was uncharacteristically grim.

"I don't know. He's an explorer. But...he destroyed those death mantises in an instant. He walked right past the boss like it wasn't there."

"The death mantises *are* the same as the one at Evans Dungeon, right? The monster Team Simon could barely beat?"

Hagane gulped. "Yeah."

The JSDF had just learned firsthand how tough the mantises were. A feeble defense was all they could manage; even using magic, they couldn't land a retaliatory strike. And this explorer had defeated them in just one blow?

All eyes were on the masked man. Something miraculous was taking place.

"It's like their attacks pass right through him. Like he's a ghost," one of the JSDF members uttered.

"Or," commented a private first class, "like a *phantom*."

The entire team whirled around to look at the private. "You mean...?"

"Maybe. Though if it is him, he's an even crazier guy than we imagined." The explorer was headed straight toward one of the mantises guarding the crack in the wall.

Kaiba had partially regained his composure. "What's the big idea? Does he think if he just struts over confidently enough, they're not going to bother with him?"

"Maybe he just doesn't care. Those mantises earlier didn't even know what hit them." Hagane kept watching the Phantom's approach.

"Great," Kaiba quipped. "Just what I always wanted: to sympathize with a mantis. Are we sure this guy isn't pulling the strings? Maybe he's our first dungeon master!"

How long had it been? There was no light in the recess—only the faint outlines of objects illuminated by her helmet-mounted light, which had been knocked away during the mantises' attack.

Her consciousness was growing dim, but Lori could hear the sounds of fighting outside. That meant the others were still alive. That was good.

She'd managed to dodge the swings of the mantises' claws while retreating to the wall, clutching her wounded arm, but they'd torn off her shoulder belt in the process, leaving her even shorter on supplies.

Thankfully she'd still just barely managed to wedge her body into the crack and retrieve a potion from her waist belt to seal up the open wound. Just when she'd had a moment to catch her breath, however, she'd been struck by a claw stuck in from the crack, hooking her leg and attempting to drag her out again. When her right leg had been pulled out from the crevice, the mantis bit down on her ankle. She'd managed to grab a cocked and locked H&K USP with her left

hand and fire fourteen .40 S&W rounds into the creature's compound eyes, forcing it to let go.

Finally free, Lori had pulled herself deeper into the alcove, using her second and last potion to seal the wound on her ankle. Her memories were spotty after that.

Now, still waiting further inside the recess for either death or a rescue—she herself wasn't sure—Lori sensed something else coming. She struggled to rouse herself unsuccessfully. Her right arm was missing from the elbow down. And her right leg—well, the reason she'd been able to free herself from the mantis's mandibles earlier was because it had taken her right foot with it.

Thanks to the potions, she was no longer bleeding, and the pain was...not absent, but faint. But she was out of USP bullets. Anticipating a monster, she placed her left hand on the pin of an MK3 she'd had strapped to her belt.

"You okay?"

She was certain the question was a trick—its asker, a sharp-dressed man leaning over her, an illusion.

He was like a character from an opera she'd seen once at Suntory Hall. He took one look at her broken body, then stood up and asked calmly, "So, where's your hand and foot?"

"Foot's probably in a monster's stomach. Arm's lying somewhere over there. I don't know. Go look."

If she'd sounded rude, it was only because it was a rude question in the first place.

I spotted a woman slumped over near the back of the alcove. Sure enough, it was Lori. So that's what everyone had been so concerned about.

It was a risk getting close, but I figured since we'd only exchanged a few words up until now, she wouldn't recognize me.

The situation was worse than I thought. She was missing a hand and a foot. After what she'd been through, it was probably lucky there was even this much

left of her. She'd been through more than I had been, but still... Blech. I felt sick to my stomach. I could never get used to this blood-and-guts stuff. She seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness, so I kept it simple by opting for Japanese.

Fighting to keep my lunch down, I asked as quickly as I could about the location of her hand and foot. If they'd just been severed and were lying around somewhere, we could use a lower-ranked potion to heal her.

"Foot's probably in a monster's stomach. Arm's lying somewhere over there. I don't know. Go look."

Whoa. Talk about staying cool under pressure. She was conscious, that was for sure.

But at least her foot was long gone. That meant we'd have to use at least a rank seven potion or above. We had some rank seven cure potions, but no healing ones.

"You don't happen to have any rank seven potions, do you?" I asked.

She weakly shook her head.

Damn, yep. No choice. We'd have to use a Super Recovery orb, just like that time with Asha.

"You don't happen to have any rank seven potions, do you?"

Right. The only way to regrow completely missing limbs. Unfortunately, no one in the JSDF possessed a rank seven healing potion. As far as she knew, rank five was the highest they had.

So she was stuck like this. She sadly shook her head, feeling as if all the strength had been sapped out of her. The weight of the realization was heavy.

The figure in the dark took another step closer, and the death mantis closest to the crevice let out a piercing screech. It shoved its claw inside—the same attack that had hooked, and ultimately taken, her leg.

"Behind you!" The words seized in her throat. She struggled to force them out. However, by the time she did so, it was too late. The mantis was already

bringing its claw down directly over where the man stood.

An enormous shadow washed over the crevice, blocking what dim light there was. However, the man seemed to know it was coming. He stepped gingerly out of the way. The claw struck the ground. The next instant, a flash of light shone from within the man's cape, and the mantis's claw was in a different spot from the rest of its arm.

"Huh?"

The man placed a foot on the fallen scythe-like claw, which soon evaporated into black light. He had cut it off, but how?

"Phew. They could reach in this far?" He looked out toward the entrance.

Without another word, he casually picked Lori up princess style, and brought her further back in the nook. Somehow, despite the situation, Lori couldn't help but blush.

"Ah... Erm?"

She could only make out the faintest traces of his features, but had the sense she'd seen him somewhere before.

Arriving at the back of the recess, he pulled out a shimmering, rainbow-colored orb—she wasn't sure where from—and placed it on her chest.

"Wh-What?" she stammered.

The man nodded. It was a wordless instruction. *Use it.*

She placed her left hand on the orb, rotating its title her way.

"Super...Recovery?"

She recognized the name. It was one of the orbs that had been sold at those preposterous auctions. She'd heard rumors about its effects. Perhaps the most sensational was that it could regenerate long-lost limbs.

But it had gone for five *billion* yen at auction. Was he just giving it to her?

"Listen, okay? Think about your hand and foot when you use this. Focus really hard. As long as you do..."

"As long as I do...?" she prompted.

"You'll regain that beautiful figure you had," the man said with a grin.

Lori could feel steam coming out of her ears. "Beautiful"?! Of all the pompous asshole lines! How about just "They'll grow back"?!

Whatever. Lori placed her hand on the orb, eager to distract herself from that last comment. She focused on her lost limbs.

I was still crouching and holding Lori as the orb converted to light and enveloped her, just as it had Asha. And just as with Asha, the process of regrowing an arm and a foot was accompanied by...sounds...that probably made it seem like something altogether different was happening in this literal hole in the wall.

Holding her as she moaned, I felt my cheeks growing red-hot. *Please, I silently pleaded, don't let anyone outside be able to hear this.*

"You hear that, Sarge?"

A rather...strange series of breathy sounds was coming from the crevice. They'd started just after the masked man had walked in, with rather impressive acoustics. Meanwhile, one of the mantises had staggered back from the crack, suddenly missing an arm.

Lori's heart rate had shot up on the ESS vitals monitor.

"You don't think..." Kaiba raised an eyebrow. "In there...?!" He knocked back one of the mantises' attacks with a shield.

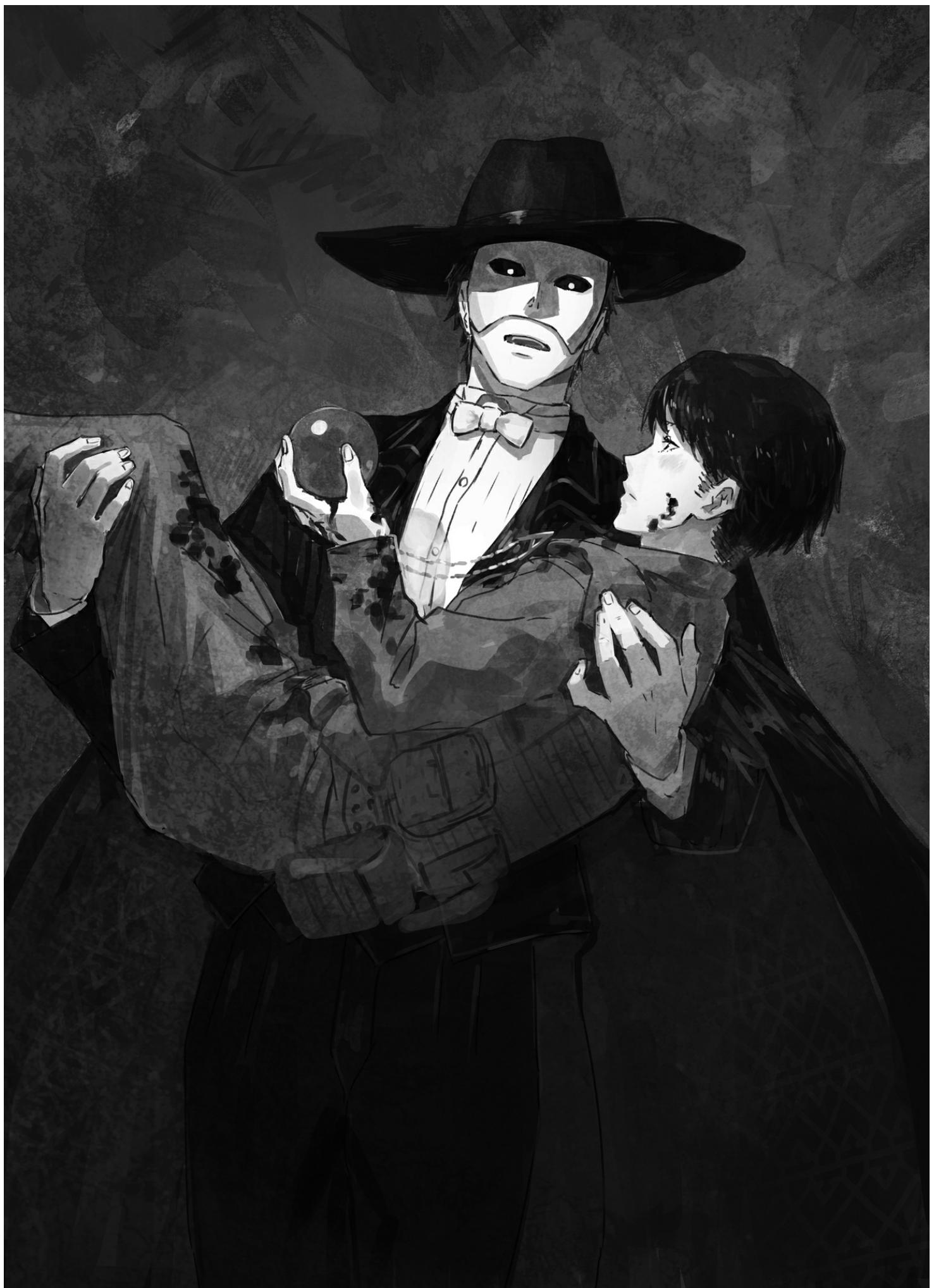
"No." Hagane scrunched his face. "No way."

The noise continued for a moment, then the crevice went silent again.

"Guess the mystery man isn't just fast on the field," Kaiba grinned.

The rest of the team looked at him, raising their eyebrows.

Lori focused on the shape and form of her body, keeping her hand on the orb. What followed was a haze of sensation.



It was hot—an intense heat spreading in waves through her body—but not unpleasant.

She was aware she was moaning and crying a bit, and was beset by the sudden realization that she probably should have gone to the bathroom earlier.

And then the mixed feelings of confusion and pleasure abated, replaced by a bottomless exhaustion. Her body went limp, both arms dangling at her sides.

Both arms!

“My right arm!” She sat up. “It’s there!”

She stretched out her right arm before her, curling and uncurling her fist. Gradually she became aware of its feeling, down to the tip of each finger.

The masked man nodded, setting her down on the ground. Instinctively she clung to him for a moment, worried about her balance, and the pain, but she found she had two feet planted quite firmly on the floor. She could stand! Her right foot was intact.

The masked man took out a right shoe—again, from somewhere, but she couldn’t tell where—slipped it on Lori’s foot, and tied it.

She would later write up a report. What she wouldn’t write was the strangely pleasant sensation she felt being Cinderella’d by this masked gentleman.

Incidentally, the shoe—a sneaker—was too big. But it was better than nothing on the rough cavern floor.

“Now...” The masked man stood up, then asked “Want to beat that sucker?”

Beat him? Of course. Plus, that was probably the quickest, and maybe only, way to find an exit. What else were they going to do?

But then speaking of exits—where had this mystery man come from?

“Now...” I tried to sound resolute. “Want to beat that sucker?”

Lori’s magnetic abilities let her single-target attacks pierce monsters like a rail gun. Against a huge boss like this, her skill was probably more useful than any of mine.

"You bet," she said. "But how?"

I handed her several eight-centimeter iron balls. "Will these be enough?"

"Where did you get—"

"Will they be enough?"

Iori examined the spheres. She nodded.

"Then get ready." I smiled. "When I give the signal, fire."

"A signal? Why not attack right away?"

A good question, but not one easily answered. I had my own preconditions. Specifically, getting my kill count from ninety-one to ninety-nine.

I'd been counting ever since getting an orb from the slimes at Yokohama. I'd been ready to give up on keeping track when we encountered that horde of bomber geckos, but was thankfully able to keep tally since my initial barrage of water lances hadn't killed a single one. Miyoshi, the Arthurs, and the chain reaction of explosions took out most of them.

"I have my reasons. Wait for the signal, okay?"

"What will the signal be?"

"Um... A pillar of fire. When you see it, shoot."

"A pillar of fire? What does that—"

I left without answering, slipping back through the crack and slicing down the remaining two death mantises with single strikes of my sword.

Kei! Everything all right?

Apparently I was back in range for telepathy.

Suddenly four fresh new death mantises spawned, all targeting me, charging forward like bugs out of hell. I cut the first one to cross my path through the neck—but it still didn't die. It kept swinging its arms for a moment before finally collapsing and dispersing into the familiar black cloud.

Kei, Miyoshi called telepathically. What are you doing? Don't tell me you're going for an orb!

I won't tell you, then. Just got up to ninety-two. Whoops, plus one more. Ninety-three.

Don't you think you might be taking this too lightly?

Amazing. I could almost hear her sighing even over telepathy.

I understood the sentiment. We'd barely escaped with our lives against Ngai, but this situation—believe me—hardly ranked in comparison. I had Iori to help me, for one thing.

Well then, I'll at least share this. It looks like there are mantises coming out of Cimeies's back, or rather an egg sac on it. Seems like it's trying to maintain four at all times.

I could always trust Miyoshi to provide reliable information, even when she was sick of me.

Egg sac? You mean that lump the mantises are shooting out of?

Of course.

Wait, and they come out fully formed?!

Two buzzed in, attacking high and low. I slipped in closer to the lower one, getting in under its arms and cleaving both off with one swing, then slicing it vertically up the abdomen. The second zoomed down from above. I knocked it off course by launching several iron balls into its head. It landed and stumbled, and then I took off the head itself.

Thanks, I thought to Miyoshi. So, are they, like, starting out as giant larva?!

I don't know. But if it's like a real-world mantis egg sac, there could be at least two hundred in there.

Yikes! Well, at least I don't have to worry about not hitting that orb count.

Also, Kei.

Yeah?

Keep your wits about you. And don't take too long. Remember where we are. There might be other creatures besides the Arthurs hiding in the shadows.

You mean the Cimmerians? Those darkness-dwelling guys we talked about?

Yep. You never know. Be careful.

Keeping track of all this lore is hard work. Respect.

There are more things on heaven and earth...

Roger, Shakespeare. I'll be careful.

You better. Remember, you're fighting a demon. You might think you have holy power, but I think you're "wholly" overconfident.

Ho, lean back and watch.

Miyoshi had just finished her telepathic conversation when Aethlem poked her with his nose from behind. She wheeled around to check what was happening when a gruff voice called out.

"Azusa?"

"Huh?"

Leading a group emerging from the darkness was...Simon?

"I recognize that mighty mutt! Azusa!"

"S-Simon?! You wound up here too?"

"Looks like it. Though I don't know exactly where here is. Ah, but never mind. How's the battle?"

Mason peeked his head forward over the ledge, then jumped back with the exact expression of someone who has just seen an alligator running on two legs.

"I-It is death mantises! I knew it! They've really got death mantises here!"

He knew their ferocity perhaps better than anyone. Darting about down on the floor were several of the same death mantis they'd faced as the boss of Evans Dungeon, now more clearly visible than before. Only these seemed even faster. Watching them dart back and forth at nearly untraceable speed, brandishing their scythe-like claws as they menaced their targets, they truly seemed worthy of their name.

But that wasn't all.

“Who’s the loon in the Halloween costume?” Joshua asked, a hint of irritation in his voice.

Whoever it was, they weren’t even responding to the death mantises’ attacks. What was more, every time they struck, the mantises would suddenly disperse in clouds of black light.

“A-Are we sure those aren’t goblins wearing mantis costumes?” Natalie asked, slack-jawed.

Okay, just three more.

Kei, finish up. Everyone’s watching.

Everyone? Damn, I really didn’t want to pass up this chance for an orb.

I leaped up on top of the boss, leaving the two mantises I was fighting behind. Then I quickly spun around and cast Ultimate Flame Magic in their direction.

I lifted up my hands dramatically, like an orchestra conductor. “Metatron Pillar!”

Two pillars of roaring, white-hot flame erupted, each consuming one of the mantises. From each pillar sprouted manifold flaming eyes and wings, true to the technique’s name.

Iori stood some distance away, framed by the pillars in relation to the boss. “Now!” I shouted.

I wasn’t sure if she’d heard me, but right on cue, she let loose all of the power she’d been storing.

Several iron balls shot forward, complete with a deafening sonic boom. Cimeies was reduced to so much Swiss cheese.

Watching her attack land, Iori closed her eyes and sank to the floor with a satisfied smile on her face. *Respect your limits a little! You just recovered!*

I brought the Sword of Deserts down on Cimeies’s body just as it was drawing its last breath. It toppled to the ground, then burst into an enormous cloud of D-Factors. As they rose, the D-Factors seemed to take the nearly palpable

darkness with them, sopping it up like sponges. The room lightened as they floated up.

Above us, in place of what we'd thought was an ordinary cavern ceiling, a sky full of stars peeked down. As the stars cast their twinkling light down onto the arena, it felt like dawn had finally broken.

I hastily retrieved the boss's drop item and, ignoring the orb menu that had opened in my field of vision, made my way over to lori.

She still looked dazed, but I pressed the drop item into her hands.

"This is yours."

She took it and clasped it to her chest, as if in prayer.

She was probably just out of MP. She'd be fine.

I heard footsteps getting closer. Quickly standing up, now more visible than I'd expected beneath those twinkling stars, I stood in the makeshift spotlight of Lieutenant Kimitsu's helmet.

I lifted my hat, bowed, offered an "*Au revoir tout le monde*," and disappeared into my cape.

"Did he just...vanish?"

The man in the spotlight had furled his cape around himself and...been eaten by it?

The cape now floated gently down, nudged by gravity, until it covered the collapsed lori. The team searched the area for any trace of their mystery guest, but found none. If it hadn't been for the cape, they might have doubted he was ever really there.

"Sergeant Hagane, what just happened?"

"Who knows. He said he was an explorer, but..."

"Can any explorer do what he just did?"

"You saw it with your own eyes. But never mind that. Help me get lori up. Make a stretcher out of whatever we have on hand."

“Is Lieutenant Kimitsu all right?”

“She just overdid it as usual. I don’t think we need to worry.”

Hagane looked at Iori.

Her right sleeve looked as though it had been cut cleanly off at the elbow, and there were traces of blood at the edge. His first thought was a death mantis attack, but her arm didn’t have a scratch on it. Even if she’d reattached it with a potion, that didn’t explain why it no longer had her vitals-monitoring band. To make matters stranger, her arm wasn’t just uninjured—it was so spotless it almost looked...new.

Her right ankle was similarly undirtied, and she was wearing a non-JSDF-issue shoe. He had said they didn’t need to worry, but he didn’t know how to make heads or tails out of what he was seeing. Still, Iori was unharmed.

He’d have to ask his team commander for the full story, but if she truly had regrown lost limbs, that would have required at least a rank seven potion.

“I haven’t heard of anyone in the JSDF having one of those...”

But it was equally hard to believe anyone would simply give one to a stranger. Even the existence of rank seven potions, which possessed the ability to restore any lost limb, was kept under the tightest wraps. There were rumors, yes, but official information was tightly controlled by both military and government institutions, to avoid too much outside pressure. That made their value hard to calculate by the standard model (the value of the previous rank multiplied by the current rank’s number), but supposing it followed suit, it would reach at least five billion yen.

Had someone used an item that valuable on Iori, then disappeared without so much as leaving his name? The situation was making less and less sense.

“Even if he were planning on charging the JSDF, there’s no way he’d expect us to be able to cough up that kind of money within the last three months of the fiscal y— Huh?”

Loading Iori onto the stretcher, Hagane noticed she was clutching something. Attempting to investigate, he gently touched her hand.

“Nnh?”

“Iori?”

“Hagane?” She opened her eyes.

“Commander, are you all right?”

“Huh? Uh, y-yes. I’m fine. Sergeant Hagane, what happened?” Iori sat up and looked around, then hopped off of the stretcher, electing to stand.

“It’s over,” Hagane responded. “Thanks to you and Mr. Mask.”

“Any casualties?”

It was Sawatari who answered, grim-faced. “Two dead. They were trying to set up lights by the entrance when the death mantises...”

“I see...”

The JDAG had the highest casualties of any division of the JSDF, but that didn’t mean anyone was used to hearing them announced.

“Formation of the defensive line prevented further losses. Although we hardly have any potions left.”

“We’re going to hear it from the brass again...” Iori couldn’t wait to go and report that they’d used up all their potions on a mission where their main opponent was supposed to be slimes. “And our hero?”

“Our hero?”

“Opera House guy.”

Hagane had merely been surprised by her phrasing, but Iori had interpreted it as him asking who she was talking about.

“We don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“He...vanished. After you two defeated the boss monster.”

“Vanished?”

“Poof.” Hagane explained what the team had witnessed after Iori had passed out.

Iori ran her hands over the cape that had been left behind atop her. “I see.”

“Commander. What happened in the crevice earlier?”

“I’ll write up a full report. But before that...” She held up the item the masked man had handed her. It was some sort of thin hexagonal rod, about fifteen centimeters in length.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know. I’m guessing it was the boss drop item.” Iori passed the item to Hagane.

He read the item name. “Gate Key (32)?”

“Let me see.” Kaiba walked up and took the item, turning it over in his hands. “Well, if it’s what the name implies, it’s a key to the thirty-second floor, which makes this...the thirty-first?”

If there were a staircase to a lower floor, there had to be one going upward as well. The key was obviously made to slot in somewhere, but it was only about a centimeter across. Searching for a one-centimeter hexagonal hole across the entire floor was going to be its own kind of boss fight.

“Maybe there’s something like an obvious gate somewhere?” Kaiba suggested.

“That ‘gate’ may not be literal. Could be a magic sigil or something,” Iori responded.

“But how do we begin looking for th—”

“Commander! Supplies! Food! Water!”

“Huh?”

The private first class had come back from exploring their surroundings, bearing good news.

“What? How?”

“She was bringing them over.”

“She?”

Iori looked in the direction the private was pointing. In the distance stood who might have been the world's most famous explorer.

"Well," Iori said, "I know someone I'd like to have take a look at this key."

Hagane and Kaiba followed Iori's gaze, nodding in understanding.

Standing at the tunnel opening, the members of Team Simon bantered among themselves.

"Is it over?"

That behemoth of a boss seemed to have been defeated, and the darkness enveloping the room had disappeared. Those dastardly darting mantises seemed to have vanished too.

"Seems that way."

"Probably."

"Thank goodness we didn't have to act on the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security there."

The aforementioned treaty, signed between the United States and Japan, required explorers under either government's employ to help each other in times of need. Team I's predicament would have called for it to go into effect, but the only American team present was Team Simon. Had the situation not been resolved so quickly, they would have been forced into action.

"Some rescuers we would have been. We would have run in just to wind up mantis meat ourselves."

"But in the end it all worked out, didn't it? We did our part by checking, and as soon as we got here, it was basically done! No casualties either."

Against four instances of the boss of Evans Dungeon, the JSDF was lucky casualties hadn't been higher.

"Azusa." Simon addressed Miyoshi. *"Were you here alone? Where's Yoshimura?"*

"Kei? Probably still back in Yokohama. Maybe sitting down to a nice, warm

dinner?"

"Yokohama?"

"He was on the first floor of the building, in our rental space."

An unusual expression crossed over Simon's face. *"You're saying he stayed clear of all this?"*

Although he couldn't voice it, he was positive the figure who had just been mangling mantids on the battlefield had in fact been Yoshimura. *"So then why are you here?"*

"What? I was in the dungeon." Miyoshi provided the explanation she had cooked up with Kei.

"But Azusa," Simon protested when she was done. *"Last I saw of you, you were running into the dungeon shouting Yoshimura's name."*

A light smile played across Simon's lips, like a predator sizing up its prey. But just when Miyoshi was struggling for an answer, a savior appeared.

"Are you Azusa Miyoshi?" a man who had climbed up from below called.

"Y-Yes! That's me."

"Can I have a minute? Our commander wants to speak with you."

"With me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?" Simon asked. *"Did something happen?"*

"No." Miyoshi shook her head. *"Apparently their commander wants a word."*

"Iori? My condolences."

"Why?"

"She's the scariest monster in the dungeons. A Gorgon. She'll scold you so bad you won't even want to move afterward for fear of getting out of line. Like being turned to stone." Simon put up his hands and backed further into the tunnel.

"A Gorgon." Miyoshi smiled.

"Miyoshi?"

“Coming!”

Thankful to have been called at that moment, Miyoshi followed the soldier down the rope.

“Hey, Drudwyn?”

“Wruff!”

“What do we do now?”

I was lying on my back in the shadow pit. Drudwyn loomed in front of me, gazing down. It was great that I’d pulled off my disappearing act, but the shadow pit couldn’t carry me across a dimensional barrier. I was still stuck in the boss room. It was full of explorers, but I didn’t want to be dropped off in the middle of a mazelike tunnel either.

“Guess I’ll wait for the team outside to get moving.”

Drudwyn gave a sympathetic look, then patted my face twice.

“Ah, right. Two magic crystals?”

“Growl!”

“Okay. Coming up.”

On that note, when exactly was the team outside going to leave? It was probably going to be a while. I took a deep breath.

“But wait,” I mused. “Even once the others leave, if we’re still in here, that S character above the door will still be lit up green.”

I didn’t want them coming back in for a second check, thinking they’d left someone behind. Or worse, coming back to try to catch me.

“Miyoshi, it’s all up to you!”

I had nothing to do but wait, but held off on eating or drinking for now. After all, I didn’t know how long I’d be here. Now I just had to pray I wasn’t hit by the need to go to the bathro— ***

“Thank you for coming, Miyoshi. Sorry to trouble you.”

Miyoshi couldn't help but notice that Lori was wearing Kei's right shoe. For a moment she worried about the make of the shoe and whether it would enable someone to zero in on the shops it could have been bought from, but this was Kei. It had to be your average major sneaker brand—the kind you could buy anywhere.

Miyoshi exchanged pleasantries and handshakes, then got straight to the point. She had to get the team out of the boss room so Kei could escape. "So what did you want to ask me?"

"We have something we'd like you to appraise." Lori held out a thin rod in the shape of a hexagonal prism.

Miyoshi examined the item. "It's a gate key. Apparently to the thirty-second floor."

Kei might have objected to the request for a free appraisal on principle, but it was hard to say no to a direct petition from the JSDF. The Queen of the Merchants was nothing if not adaptable. Plus, this was an emergency situation. Any hint as to their current location was welcome.

"She doesn't even need to touch it," Hagane gasped, astounded.

Very little had been revealed about the workings of Appraisal. Only the barest of explanations had gone into the JDA database.

"Do you know where the gate is?" Lori asked.

Miyoshi borrowed a pencil and wrote the results of her Appraisal check onto a piece of scrap paper.

Gate Key (32)

Paves the way to the thirty-second level. Exits and entrances are two sides of the same coin. Keys and locks, too, are linked, as those who search for the latter will soon see.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

“The Gospel of Matthew?” Lori asked, looking up from the note. Why was the Gospel of Matthew quoted in a dungeon item description? “In other words,” she concluded, “pray?”

Matthew 7:7’s famous exhortation was most regularly interpreted as an instruction to pray.

“Flavor text is always like that,” Miyoshi responded. “Cryptic and quote-heavy. It might just be to add atmosphere, but maybe you can think of it as a hint.”

“So maybe we just take the first part at its word? The entrance is the exit?”

“Either way, if there’s a place to use it, it’s probably back in the starting atrium. Bring the key there. You’ll see.”

Miyoshi felt like she’d seen a hole that shape before—back in the tower outside the boss room.

“Starting atrium?”

Miyoshi’s heart skipped a beat. She’d forgotten she was supposed to have woken up and been moving supplies in their current area.

“Uuuuum. I found it while exploring a little bit ago. There’s something that looks like a shrine on the opposite end of the tunnels. If you go through a gate there, it lets out into a big atrium.”

Don’t let them be onto me, don’t let them be onto me, she pleaded.

She told them she’d painted the walls, too, to help mark her tracks.

Lori called out to a young man with ruffled hair on her team, asking him to go check.

“Well then, I’ll just be going on ahead,” Miyoshi said.

“What? Don’t you want your Appraisal fee?”

“My services aren’t for sale. I’d never hear the end of requests.”

“I see. Then thank you for letting us borrow them.”

What was Simon so afraid of? Miyoshi wondered. She seems nice! Gorgon? He was exaggera—

“Plus, Miyoshi!”

“Yes?”

“Back there at the Nouveau Mare, we had a danger zone established, but you were still on the premises.”

“Eh?”

And so until Kaiba returned and announced he’d found the atrium, Miyoshi found herself quite unwilling to take a step out of line—as though she’d indeed been turned to stone.

Temple of Darkness, Tower Atrium

“Commander. Over here.”

Kaiba gestured to what looked like a keyhole on the side of a towerlike structure. As they approached, the key began to glow.

“Bring the key there. You’ll see.” Iori parroted Miyoshi’s earlier words. “Appraisal really is something.”

Team Simon was with them. Supplies would be easier to share sticking together as one group. Iori imagined that the American team was also likely eager to gather intel on the JSDF’s top explorers.

“Have you already tried the key?” Iori asked.

“About that...”

“What? Cat got your tongue?” Hagane asked.

“It’s just...” Kaiba answered, frustrated, “which end of this thing is which?”

“Why not just try it both ways?”

“Because...” Kaiba trailed off. “Here.” He inserted the key into the hole—it kept going in. Kaiba stopped when about one centimeter of the rod still extended from the wall. “Any further and if it’s facing the wrong direction, we’ll

never get a second chance.”

“Hm...”

The hole in the wall was apparently the same depth as the length of the key. Once the key was in and sat flush, it would be nearly impossible to get it back out. Even the normally guns-blazing Kaiba was hesitant to push his luck—or the key—any further.

Still, with no answers forthcoming, they’d have to make a bet.

“Odds are fifty-fifty, right?” Iori closed a fist and tapped it against the key, shoving it the rest of the way in.

“Whaaa?!” Kaiba and Hagane were speechless.

“Uh...” Beads of sweat began to form on Iori’s brow. “Nothing’s happening.”

Just then, the ground began emitting a low rumble. Team I darted away from the tower, assuming fighting stances. Team Simon did the same.

It sounded as if the rumbling was coming from deep underground, getting closer, intensifying with each passing moment. Finally, a crack appeared in the tower wall next to the key.

“What?”

Debris tumbled outward, as if the wall had been struck from the inside. Thanks to the cracks, a small but rapidly growing hole had formed, expanding until it formed an opening through which the team could slip.

Kaiba fearfully approached and looked through the hole. Staircases ran up and down.

“Commander! If this is the thirty-first floor...”

Iori gave a small nod. She called over a signalman and sent him and Sawatari up the stairs. The JSDF campaign into Yoyogi had currently gotten as far as floor thirty. Using the expedition-style, support-team swapping method, they had set up a rudimentary communications network. If they used their comms one floor up, there was the possibility they might work.

“The dungeon closest to Yokohama *is* Yoyogi,” Iori added. “Let’s just pray

that's where we are." She and the remainder of the team descended to the next floor.

Temple of Darkness, S Area

"Huh? What is it, boy?"

Drudwyn, who had been waiting patiently like a good boy with me in the pit, suddenly looked up. He scanned the room, as if responding to something, then spat me back out into the real world with a plop.

"Yowch!"

"Ah, there you are! Kei!"

Telepathy didn't work between the real world and the shadow pit, since they were different spaces. Though if you opened the pit, no matter how little, telepathy would work again with the usual restrictions; I guessed because the spaces would be connected again. In addition, the Arthurs maintained some sort of mental connection to the space they'd formed the pit in, to help them navigate its terrain while in the shadows. Finally, Miyoshi had a special link to the Arthurs as their summoner, separate from telepathy, which allowed them to commune even when they were in Arthur Space.

"Ah, Miyoshi." I took in my surroundings. "Where's everyone else?"

"They went to the atrium room with the tower. You gave them that key, didn't you?"

"Key? Ah, yeah. No point in us having it. We want to let the pros do the work. They can find our way out." Apparently they'd gone back to the atrium room to search for the hexagonal hole we'd found. "Any way you look at it, that was the keyhole, right?"

"Its description said the entrance and exit were two sides of the same coin. I figure the only place where you could hide a staircase going both up and down is the tower."

"Even if they go up a floor, judging from the item name it'd still be the thirtieth. We can take our time; it'll take a while to reach the surface."

Apparently both Team I and Team Simon had returned to the atrium room together. Even then, they were probably thinking the same thing—that if a safe area truly awaited them on the thirty-second floor, it was going to be a first-come, first-served international race to claim it.

“Guess they’re feeling less pressured to get to immediate safety now that they’ve got food and water,” I commented. “They can prioritize the exit over the safe zone. What about you?” I asked Miyoshi. “Weren’t you raring to give the thirty-second floor a check?”

“Why, I never!” she feigned protest. “I couldn’t leave you here *all alone!*”

“Uh-huh. Your actual, real reason?”

“Finding a safe zone doesn’t personally affect us all that much. I was more worried about you having an accident in Arthur Space.”

The kind of accident that can come in number one or number two.

“I actually was cutting it close.” I smirked.

But I hustled right over to the recess where Lori had been hiding to make a little stream among its rocks. Don’t worry—I cleaned up using Powder too.

“Phew.”

I washed my hands with a glob of water summoned using Water Magic and scrubbed my face with a towel before emerging from the alcove. The corpses from earlier and leftover equipment had already disappeared.

“So what now?”

“It’s almost 8 p.m.”

So much had happened that it felt like we’d been in the dungeon for days, but it’d only been three hours.

A starry sky stretched overhead, much like the one we’d seen on the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi. Gazing up at the starlight, it was hard to believe the inky darkness that had enveloped the area had ever been there at all.

“By the way, Miyoshi.” I eyed our surroundings. “Are we safe?”

“Does Cimeies respawn, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“He dropped the key to the next floor, so he might be a unique boss character.”

The common logic was that unique boss characters didn’t respawn. Though they might have respawned every few years or so—we couldn’t be sure. Few had been defeated in the first place.

“Should we head back to the observation tunnels, just in case?” she asked.

“Let’s.”

The rope up to the tunnel had disappeared, but it was only four meters up. At that height—“Alley-oop!”

I picked Miyoshi up like a suitcase, tucking her under my arm, and leaped up to the tunnel ledge.

“I know I shouldn’t be surprised after that time at Shinjuku Gyo-en, but I am,” she responded. “Every time.”

“I’ll pass your compliments to my stats. But yeah, my speed and strength have probably doubled since then, so it feels more unreal than ever.”

“Yeah. Um, by the way, like I said last time, do you have to carry me like luggage?”

“Sorry. The princess carry’s for emergencies and Phantom role-play only.”

“Hrrm. I guess that’d be more embarrassing anyway.”

The time with Asha had been an emergency, and afterward Miyoshi and the others hadn’t let me hear the end of it. It’d been an emergency with Lori too.

“Anyway,” Miyoshi said, “what orb did you get?”

“Ah, right.” I wrote down Cimeies’s only two orbs, still visible in the menu hovering in my view.

Skill Orb: Otherworldly Language Comprehension 1/6

Skill Orb: Support (Cimeies) 1/6

“One in six? It’s like they’re handing them out.”

“Well, he is unique. And I still didn’t get an orb as a free, random drop even with my 100 LUC stat. Figures.”

“So which are you going with?”

“We don’t need another Otherworldly Language Comprehension right now, do we?”

“Not with Heaven’s Leaks going strong. If anything, auctioning off another one could lead to us getting fewer submissions.”

If someone else had the orb, they might hoard any dungeon text they encountered for their own translations, which we couldn’t verify.

“Right. Then in that case...” I pushed the selection for Support (Cimeies), and showed the orb to Miyoshi. I also passed her the second drop item I’d gotten.

She quickly dashed out a note showing the results from Appraisal.

Skill Orb: Support (Cimeies)

Increase party members’ AGI by ten percent, up to one hundred percent, for every one percent reduction to your own. Passive skill.

The power of the shining-necked needle’s tail passes to those who serve him. Wielded deftly, this power may be passed to those who serve his servants as well.

“Is it drawing from the bit in Cimeies’s description earlier about ‘giving his servants the power to quickly cross rivers and seas?’” Miyoshi asked.

“Probably. Still, a one hundred percent AGI boost for rank 66 in the demonological hierarchy? Seems pretty impressive to me.”

“For most people that’d just be going from ten up to twenty though.”

That might not have been that much difference, but a jump from one hundred to two hundred would be something.

“But what is this ‘shining-necked needle’ and its tail? I’m picturing, like...some kind of deep-sea fish with a scorpion tail?”

“Would it be fast?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, we can look into that later. Anyway, this orb’s obviously meant for you.”

“Yeah...” I trailed off.

“What is it?”

“What about child parties?”

“Oh.”

Right now, my party members included Miyoshi, Cathy, and Mishiro. With child parties, it included anyone who joined our bootcamp and Komugi.

The problem was the bootcamp.

If the skill applied to child parties, everyone who joined the bootcamp would suddenly get a huge burst of speed at the beginning, and then they wouldn’t wind up feeling like their AGI had risen by the end of training. If they were perceptive, they might even notice they’d gotten slower.

“Judging from the flavor text, it sounds like the boost would pass to child parties if your DEX is high enough, judging from that ‘wielded deftly’ bit,” Miyoshi surmised. “That could be a problem...”

Welp, nothing to do but to experiment with it later.

“If worse comes to worst,” she continued, “we could just tell them they need to drink a special ‘temporary boost’ drink at the beginning of training and hand them cups of water.”

“Yeah! If you drew a pentagram on the bottom of the cup or something, even I’d buy it!”

“Then it’s decided! We should probably think up a sigil for each stat, just in case.”

“This is starting to feel like a childish secret society,” I commented.

In Victorian Britain, occult social clubs had flourished, all but identical to child's play clubs and secret forts but for the money and social prestige involved. The most famous of these were the Hellfire Clubs, but most of their Satanic and magical pageantry was just set dressing for taboo sexual acts.

"We'll go down in the history books alongside Ordo Templi Orientis or the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the end," I added.

"Before we know it, someone will be accusing you of being 'the wickedest man in the world' [\(26\)](#)." Miyoshi crossed her arms and nodded smugly. *And they'd be right*, she seemed to be implying.

Wait, who's the more wicked between the two of us?!

"I mean, hey, I'm not indulging in any vices here. Besides, that's your role."

No vices here; just making a weird secret society.

"That's right! You're not wicked. You're just letting your puppets dance for you while you pull the strings from the shadows."

"Hey!" But I couldn't help but crack a smile.

For now I put the orb into Vault. We wouldn't need its boosts right away, so we could wait until we had a better plan for bootcamp if the passives applied. *Kicking the can—can't beat it.*

"Here's the drop item." She passed me a second piece of paper.

Ring of Cimeies

Auto Adjust

Gives mastery over trivium.

"Trivium?"

"It came up in the description of Cimeies earlier. An old word for rhetoric, logic, and grammar."

According to Miyoshi, studies in Europe in the Middle Ages were divided into seven categories. The three associated with language were known as the

trivium, and the four tied to numbers and mathematics were called the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. At first I was surprised to hear music was in the second category, but hey—it's all numbers, after all.

“Grammar...” I mused. “In what language?”

“If it’s faithful to the era, probably Latin? Or maybe Hebrew or Greek.”

“It doesn’t cite a language though, so maybe it works for all of them.”

“King Solomon was supposed to have a ring that let him speak to animals.” It helped him commune with and subjugate both angels and demons—the ultimate cheat item.

“I can’t say I have a lot of use for it. Miyoshi, you take it.”

“If it really lets you understand every language, gladly. But if it just helps you better understand languages you already know, it should go to Naruse.”

“I see. Well, then let’s just store it for now. We can decide who gets it after seeing how it works.”

It didn’t seem like it was bound to one user. We could run tests, then pass it off.

“Sounds good.”

Miyoshi took the ring and put it into Storage. Now there was just one drop left... One very mysterious drop.

“So, I actually have one other thing...” I pulled out what looked like a small vase. Its top opened into an utterly unremarkable hole.

Miyoshi looked at it and her eyes went wide for a moment. She quickly dashed out one more note.

The Soul Vessel

Place your soul inside and the door will be opened for you.

“Uh...Ms. Miyoshi?”

“Mr. Yoshimura.”

“What do you think the ‘soul’ is?”

“A rather philosophical question.”

What the hell is this item? No instruction manual? I want a refund!

“Maybe,” I said, crossing my arms, “you put your soul inside, and the door to heaven opens, since you’re dead?”

“Want to try?” Miyoshi asked.

“Maybe eighty years from now.”

“Planning on hitting your centennial?”

“And going out surrounded by grandkids watching with bittersweet tears in their eyes.”

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up for that one.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll have to have kids first!”

I brought a fist down on Miyoshi’s head.

“H-Hey! That was rock! You’re supposed to use paper!”

“The mouth is a gate of misfortune. The tongue is a sword that cuts the body,” I intoned, citing an old proverb.

“Mmmrr.”

“What are you, a cow? But anyway, let’s get moooving. What do we do with this?”

“What do we do with this? Nothing. We don’t even know how it works.”

A soul. A soul... Something was tickling in the back of my mind, but I couldn’t quite remember what it was.

“You think you just point it at a target and call their name?” I asked.

“And if they answer, their soul gets sucked in?”

“Yeah, no way. This isn’t *Journey to the West*, and this is no mythical gourd.”

Just then the ground started to rumble. A deep grinding sound echoed from underfoot.

“What the—?!”

We instinctively got into fighting stances, but somehow I didn’t have the sense that Cimeies had respawned. Then just as suddenly as the rumbling had started, it stopped.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Given the timing, maybe something happened back in the atrium,” Miyoshi responded.

“What? Wasn’t that a separate subspace?”

“Who knows? Let’s just go!”

“We can, but I’m not supposed to be here, remember? It doesn’t seem like there’s any active danger left... You take most of the Arthurs, just in case, and take the lead. If it seems like we’re going to run into anyone, I’ll drop into a shadow pit. Drudwyn, can I count on you, buddy?”

“Wruff!”

With that, we turned back toward the S gate and the atrium room.

Temple of Darkness, Tower Atrium

“Kei, no one’s there.”

Miyoshi cocked her head, having just run back from the atrium room to where I waited just behind.

“Huh? No one?”

“Not a soul.”

Even using Life Detection had apparently produced no results.

We stepped through the S gate to the atrium, eliminating the glow on the letter by the door.

“You know, the light turning off might indicate that the room has reset,”

Miyoshi observed.

“Maybe. I’ll pass on confirming that now though.”

“We’ve still got plenty of holy water if you want to give it a second round.”

“Room C? If it works like Yokohama, we don’t know if the same bosses will spawn.”

“Good point.”

Our surroundings were dark, but not the supernatural darkness that had been present before. More like just...dim.

With the starlight to help, it wasn’t hard to see even without Night Vision, after a little bit of adjusting. Still, since that left me out in the open if anyone approached, I took care to stay on the opposite side of the tower from its now-open entrance.

“So much for the ‘Temple of Darkness,’” I commented.

“When morning comes, this place is probably bright as day.”

Miyoshi popped her head through the tower door and saw stairs running both upward and downward inside.

“Which way do you think they all went?” I asked.

“If they were all going up to the exit, they’d probably have come back for me,” Miyoshi commented.

“Then they did go to check downstairs first?”

“Probably. But it’s been a little while. And there’s not even someone on standby here. Do you think something happened on the next floor?”

“Dunno. We could go check, but... For right now, maybe it’d be better to set up a tent behind the tower and wait. Doesn’t seem like there’s any danger here, and the Arthurs can keep watch anyway.”

We couldn’t risk being spotted with Dolly, but being inside a tent was normal enough, and would give me time to drop into a shadow pit inside it if anyone walked up.

“Okay. By the way, I’m staaaarving.”

“Wha? But...it’s only been four hours since we ate!”

“I’ve been under a lot of stress since then! Being stressed-out uses energy!”

“Okay, okay.”

How can Miyoshi eat so much and not put on any weight? Sometimes the world isn’t fair.

We set up a tent behind the pillar, out of eyesight to anyone coming back to the floor from above or below. We would hear them before they spotted us, giving me time for my vanishing act. We only had to worry about those with detection skills.

For right now, though, we could kick back, relax, and enjoy a little dungeon-camping grub.

Miyoshi stuffed her mouth with a cream puff. “Wha a hay, am I hwrigh?”

We’d made the puffs at home. Although they were popular, most bakeries didn’t stock them. They didn’t last long, and easily lost their shape and color.

“Finish chewing,” I scolded.

I popped a puff into my own mouth, along with a sprig of green broccoli—boiled separately—and posed a question that had been on my mind for a bit.

“Do you think those leaftailed lizards who blew themselves up earlier counted?”

“For orb selection?” Miyoshi asked.

I nodded, crunching into a Viron Rétrodor baguette. It was about fifty centimeters long, with wide coupes running diagonally across its surface, which had a fair amount of give. It had a delectable fragrance too. I’d been storing it since around two hours after it was baked, so it was still basically fresh.

Needless to say, it was Miyoshi who’d turned me on to it. Or rather, who had practically begged me on her hands and knees to store a freshly baked loaf. Japan’s humidity didn’t allow them to sit for long.

I’d thought she was exaggerating at the time, but no—it really did make a

difference. I'd thought that in the worst-case scenario, you could just rebake it, but that would make it all crispy and ruin the texture.

"They dropped iron," Miyoshi answered. "So they probably did."

"Most of them were taken out by the chain reaction, so if those kills went to anyone, they'd go to you."

If they'd counted, and gone to me, I would have gotten an orb selection screen. So either the self-destruction kills didn't count, or they counted for the explorer most responsible for causing them.

"Guess there's no way to know," I concluded, "until we come up against them again."

"Until? Are you planning on coming back here?"

"If it's not hard to get to. That encounter gave us a rank five potion, after all."

That was one of the most useful items to have on hand for guaranteeing explorer safety.

"That's true..." Miyoshi answered, sounding slightly perturbed.

"Though I'd be a little worried about the leaftails accidentally summoning the Manor, with their numbers..."

"Oh, that's all right!" Miyoshi announced. "They had asterisks by their names."

Just then one of the Arthurs stuck its face out of the shadows.

"Cavall!" Miyoshi cried.

He had switched places with Aethlem—their little swap routine.

Cavall had a microSD card strapped around his neck, just like the one we'd sent him off with earlier.

"A reply?" I asked.

"Hold on," Miyoshi responded. "I'm checking."

The card contained footage of Naruse and Saito together.

"What's Saito doing there?!"

“She came over to meet with us for something and ran into Naruse.”

“Okay, I guess. So, what’s the response?”

“Um,” Miyoshi paused. “Let’s see...”

For starters, Yokohama Dungeon was safe. It looked as though nothing had happened. That was good news, but now there was debate about whether the bomb planted in it had even been atomic at all—there was no trace radiation. All America had to do was play dumb and the actors involved would get off scot-free. However, with the top DSF team still missing, Washington couldn’t wash its hands of the situation just yet.

“Great,” I responded. “So they’ll wait until Team Simon’s back before burying the whole thing.”

“Which they can do since there’s no damage or side effects,” Miyoshi agreed. “But why?”

“Who knows. Dungeons are as dungeons do.”

The missing persons report came to two private explorers, four members of the American DSF, and a twelve-member JSDF team.

“Hold on, Miyoshi.”

“What?”

“Two private explorers.”

“Ah!”

Our cover story had involved me still being in Yokohama, but at this point it would be blown as soon as everyone returned home. Now how was I going to convince everyone I hadn’t been in the dungeon tonight?

“What do we do?” Miyoshi asked frantically. “Should I get in touch with Naruse and have her edit the report?”

“No. That’ll still get out, and it’ll just make things worse. I-I’ll think of something.”

“We should have time. Apparently most of the fuss now is on the use of a nuclear weapon.”

"Okay. For right now just send Naruse a message telling her everyone's safe and will be back soon," I instructed.

"Got it. 'Everyone' including you?"

"The official report says we're both missing—not specifically where I am. Let's keep our story flexible. Don't mention a specific count or my name."

"Consider yourself glossed over."

Miyoshi recorded a simple response and this time sent it off with Drudwyn.

We'd sat back down to our food and were just about to get eating again when a serious expression spread across Miyoshi's face. She waved a spoon back and forth as she talked.

"Talking about the Manor reminded me. We do have a soul-like item!"

"The benitoite?" I asked.

Sure. You could call it the soul of that ghost maid who gave it to me, I supposed.

I took out the Soul Vessel and the rosary.

"If I put it in," I asked, "do you think the vase is going to, like...turn into a maid?"

An image of the vase bowing its neck and welcoming me home after a long day flashed across my mind. *No, no, that's way too surreal.*

"I'm...pretty sure that won't happen." Miyoshi grimaced.

"Well, then let's try it out!"

I set the vase on the small table we had set up inside the tent and put the bead of benitoite on the end of the rosary inside.

"K-Kei?"

The vase began to glow. I wasn't sure *what* was happening, but *something* definitely was.

The strength of the vase's glow seemed to fluctuate as if it was calculating something. Then it dipped down all at once before erupting even brighter than

before.

“Wait, wait, wait! Don’t tell me this thing’s going to expl—”

Before I could even get the words out, the world went a bright white.

When my vision cleared, I realized I’d landed on top of Miyoshi, practically pinning her down. I scrambled to my feet, whipping out a shield in anticipation of the blow that was sure to come. But instead of a deafening *whack*, what I heard was— “*Cheerily, cheer up, cheer up, cheerily, cheer up!*”

“Come again?”

Turning around, the only thing in my field of vision was a small...bird? Its gray feathers were trimmed with white edges, its beak and belly a burning, brilliant orange. But its eyes, rather than black like I’d expected, shone a deep indigo. Almost like benitoite.

The bird hopped over and began pecking at the baguette crumbs littering the ground. Then it bounced to the tent’s entrance, staring expectantly at the zippered door.

“Huh?” I asked. “You want to go outside?”

I unzipped the tent door, and the bird eagerly flew through despite the fact that it was still—judging from the starry sky—night.

We slipped through the tent door and followed. When we caught up to it, the bird had its talons wrapped around one of the ivy vines on the tower. She—I had this intuition it was “she”—was gently rocking back and forth on the vine, trilling. We moved toward the base of the tower as if compelled.

“The one with the power to see truths shall emerge...” I intoned the rosary’s flavor text.

The bird zigzagged down the vines until she was about waist level with us. Then she pecked at a spot on the wall before flying over and landing on— “My head?!” I peered upward, alert to the prodding of little taloned feet. “Why my head?”

Miyoshi burst out laughing. “So close. And here it almost would have looked cool if it’d landed on your shoulder.” She walked over to where the bird had

pecked at the wall and examined the stone.

Just barely visible behind a tangle of vines was what looked like a doorknob.

“Was that there when we were walking around the tower earlier?” she asked.

I shook my head. Probably not. It didn’t seem like something we could have overlooked, in terms of its size and location.

“You know... I know a story about a secret door in a castle wall concealed by vines.”⁽²⁷⁾

“Me too. But this is an *American* robin. Very different.”

She threw up her hands. “*This* is why you’re destined to be single.”

“Been a while since I’ve heard that.” I smiled. “It’s almost reassuring. Like the world keeps turning.” Shifting my expression, I gestured toward the knob. “Do we ‘open sesame’?”

“What kind of explorers would we be if we didn’t?”

“Natch.”

I stored the tent while Miyoshi kept investigating the door.

The bird, which had hopped back off my cranium, played around in the vines.

“By the way,” Miyoshi called.

“Yeah?”

“Cimeies was supposed to be able to give his powers to his followers...”

“The trivium or whatever?”

“Right, but that’s not all. The ring gives trivium, and the skill orb gives speed, but he was supposed to have one more ability.”

“What is it?”

“The power to find hidden objects.”

A sense of understanding dawning upon us, we both looked up at the amicable avian alighting on the vines.

We couldn’t just keep calling her “the bird,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Don’t worry,” I responded. “I’ve already settled on a name. There’s only one thing that makes sense.”

“Only one name? Uh-oh. The only name that’s come up this whole time is... Wait a minute, you’re not just going to call her Robin, are you?!”

“That’s a boy’s name anyway.” I smiled.

Okay, it was true that it was becoming more unisex recently, but I couldn’t shake the knowledge that it once been short for “Robert.”

“Okay, well given your excellent naming tastes...Kotori?” she guessed. Kotori was a Japanese name made up of the characters “small” and “bird.”

“You’re roasting *my* naming tastes? Though actually,” I mumbled, “that’s not bad.”

“It really isn’t.”

“It’s actually kind of cute.”

“But anyway, cut to the chase already! If it isn’t ‘Kotori,’ what is it?”

I glanced up. The bird looked down at me almost—if it wasn’t my imagination—expectantly. “Rosary.”

Rosary let out a trill.

She seemed to like her new name.

The Thirty-Second Floor

Stepping through the staircase’s exit out onto the thirty-second floor, the team turned around. They were greeted with the sight of a giant tree, whose trunk they had just emerged from. It reached up from the ground like a gargantuan arm, fingers spreading out overhead. The tree seemed to be at the center of the floor.

“*What the heck kind of dungeon floor is this?*” Natalie asked, emerging from the hollow and taking in the hazy light of their new surroundings.

Scraggly undergrowth spread before them, dotted here and there by flowers that seemed to faintly glow.

Simon gazed up at the tree. “*Oak?*” His voice wavered with uncertainty. Spherical objects that looked almost like paper lanterns dangled from its branches. “*Packed with...mistletoe?*”

“*I’m guessing that’ll make most people think of Christmas. I’m expecting an appearance from the King of the Wood.*”

“*From the what now?*”

“*It’s recorded in James Frazer’s mythography: the priest of the ancient Roman cult of Diana Nemorensis, or ‘Diana of the Wood,’ with the temple at the grove by Lake Nemi. This floor even has Diana’s Mirror—the lake.*” Natalie pointed to a shimmering lake ensconced in a grove, reflecting the starlight and glowing flowers.

“*Either way,*” she concluded, “*this place seems a little different from your average dungeon locale.*”

Team I was also exploring. A moment later, Simon watched a scout return from the floor above and deliver some sort of news. The members of Team I looked shocked. He wondered what the message had been.

“*It does fit the bill...*” he mumbled.

Joshua turned around “*What does?*”

“*You’ve read Heaven’s Leaks, haven’t you? The tablet from the Isle of Man dungeon.*”

“*The safe area?!*” Joshua’s eyes went wide.

Simon held up a finger in front of his mouth, throwing a pointed glance toward Team I.

“*Right...*” Natalie responded, realization washing over her. “*Being a safe area would explain the surreally tranquil atmosphere.*”

“*And, if it is...*” Simon prodded, staying hushed.

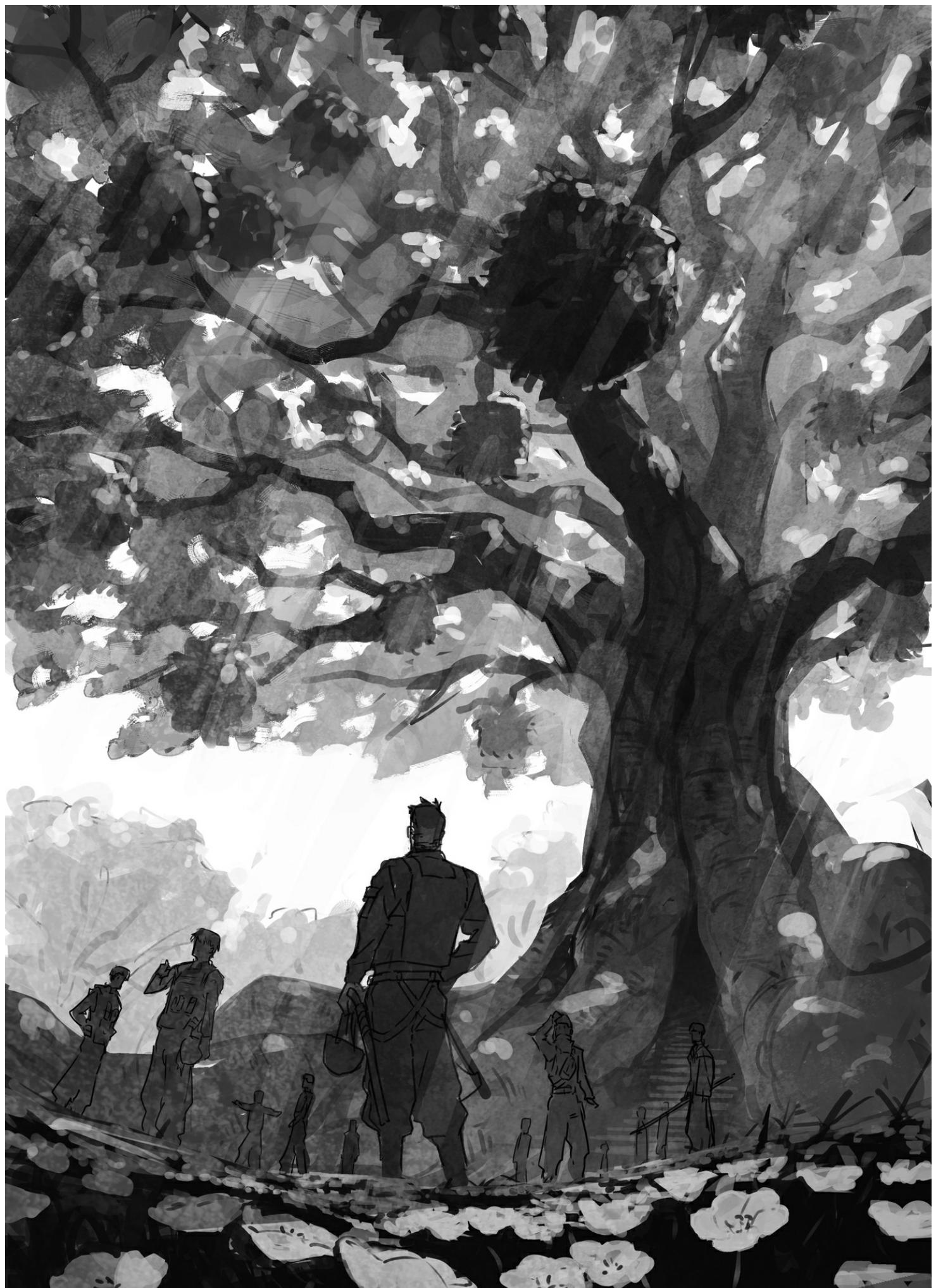
“*It’ll make for one heck of an international turf war,*” she concluded.

“*Whoa, whoa! We don’t even know where this is.*”

“*Well, if this place is anywhere in a public dungeon, land use is going to be*

first claimed, first served. You want to make Uncle Sam pass up a shot at setting up a base in the middle of an uncaptured dungeon?"

"Point taken," Simon responded. "Move out."



With that, Team Simon slipped away from the crowd by the tree and began charting their surroundings.

"You're saying we're really in Yoyogi?!" Lori repeated, dumbfounded.

The signalman, who had gone up a floor up to test the theory about their location and see if they could access the comms network, had returned. He'd successfully made contact with the JSDF team on the thirtieth floor.

"I was so happy I could cry!" The signalman's voice was choked with emotion.

Lori felt about ready to cry herself. She was certain that if she'd been the one to reconnect with the outside world, the waterworks would have turned on. They'd been blasted to a mysterious location, had been wandering with no guarantee they'd ever see home again, and had already lost two of their own. But now...!

If this was the thirty-second floor of Yoyogi, then they'd surpassed the thirty-one floors of Evans Dungeon and stepped into uncharted territory in terms of dungeon depth. Anything could happen from here on out.

Speaking of "anything," this floor itself seemed rather...strange.

"I can't quite put my finger on it," Lori said to Hagane, who was taking in the scenery with his head cocked, trying to make sense of it. "It's almost like it's *too* quiet." For a moment she and Hagane stood in silence, staring up at the tree.

"Do you think this is the safe area?" he asked.

"The Americans seem to think so," Kaiba called, wandering up. "They took off thataway a few minutes ago."

Hagane's expression grew grim. "Opportunists. Trying to stake a claim? Good luck. I doubt they have the equipment with them to set up a base right now."

Having been transported here unexpectedly from Yokohama, no one had even known what dungeon they'd been in until now. There was no way the American team was carrying what they'd need to secure a section of the floor.

"Then again it may not matter," Lori commented, "When it comes to

uncharted territory in a public dungeon, if you can actually develop land here, they might be able to claim finder's rights."

"So what do we do?!"

"Simple. We chart more uncharted territory than they do, and we do it faster. Shouldn't be hard." She looked at her troops. "We have numbers on our side."

"So it's come to this." Kaiba grinned. "Like a pack of dogs marking hydrants."

"Sometimes hydrants need marking for the greater good," Hagane responded. "You know. Think of it like jury duty."

Despite her team's grumbling, its members dutifully went off in groups of two as Lori doled out their assignments.

"And here they were, all about to keel over a minute ago. Not a real complaint among them. We've got some formidable personnel," Hagane commented.

"Formidably trained," Lori responded. "Thanks to my present company."

"I can't take all the credit." Hagane smiled. "What about the men we sent higher up?"

"They're going to hone in on the upper team's signal to ascertain our exact location. They'll be down after that. Until then, nothing left to do but to chart this floor at our leisure."

Lori was in high spirits. Her team had stepped from the flames of hell into the gentle breezes of heaven. She was certain that same sense of relief now washed over her whole team.

Ministry of Defense, Ichigaya

"They're alive?" The date hadn't even changed over, and the director of a certain JDA department was already calling to inform the MOD as to the status of the missing explorers, including the American DSF members. All accounted for.

The Dungeon Management Section director wouldn't explain how he'd

obtained this heartening information, but the teams would be returning sometime soon, he promised. For now there was no need to worry. With that, the phone call cut off.

“Alive...” Terasawa repeated, only half believing the word. “But how the hell do I report *this* to my superiors?!”

Saying something like “Trust me. My contact in the Dungeon Management Section said so” wouldn’t cut it.

Just then, the phone rang again.

“This is Terasawa.”

“Major Terasawa! We have word from First Lieutenant Kimitsu’s team!”

“What’s that?! Are they safe?!”

“Yes, sir. The contact came from the thirty-first floor of Yoyogi.”

“The what of where?!”

Did Terasawa have something in his ears? The twelve missing personnel had been in Yokohama. What were they doing in *Yoyogi*, and on an uncharted floor no less?

“Is there some kind of secret passage between Yokohama and Yoyogi I didn’t know about?!”

“We’re not sure, sir. All we have is secondhand information at this p— Wait. What?!”

“What is it?!” Terasawa urged.

“A-Apparently the thirty-second floor Yokohama is... It’s a safe area. They’ve confirmed it’s a safe area.”

“They what?!”

That would make it the first safe area humanity had discovered—and humanity’s first chance to establish a permanent dungeon base.

“I’ll... Hold on,” Terasawa responded. “One moment.”

He had to get word of this back over to the JDA. Now it was his turn to offer a

shock. He was as giddy as a child.

The Secret Garden

I brushed aside the ivy covering the door Rosary had pointed out, gave the knob a good turn, and pushed using nearly all my strength.

“Nnrragh! Man. This thing doesn’t open easily.”

The door gave off the sound of scraping stones as it opened, swinging open to the inside.

“Looks like a tunnel that extends for a while,” Miyoshi commented, peering in.

The tunnel seemed to curve along with the tower’s walls, as if the passage ran along its perimeter. Or...did it?

“Doesn’t it seem like it’s curving more gradually than the walls of the tower itself?”

“Good point,” Miyoshi responded. “Dungeons use kaleidoscope geometry, with intersecting spatial planes. I guess we shouldn’t be surprised by anything. Maybe this tunnel has nothing to do with the tower. Heck, we could probably build Anywhere Doors like in *Doraemon* if we figured out how this principle works.”

“Careful,” I warned. “Once teleportation technology gets out there, if there’s no way to block or prevent it, we’re fast-tracking a futuristic dystopia for sure.”

If people had the ability to transport themselves anywhere, there would be no secrets, no privacy. It’d be a sabotage smorgasbord. Countries would topple in seconds. If there were no way to limit the technology itself, you’d probably even have to implant some kind of chip in each person to record their whereabouts!

“Erm, maybe,” Miyoshi responded disinterestedly to my speculation. “But don’t you think they’re already researching that somewhere?”

“I mean, yeah, definitely. Not that they’re necessarily getting anywhere. But you do see those research teams set up with equipment by the entrances to

floors sometimes. What do you think they're measuring anyway?"

"Hard to say, if it's something different than what we measure for stats... But personally, I'd probably start by trying to ascertain where exactly the spatial dimension switches over."

"I guess if you started looking for where radio waves stop... That wouldn't necessarily help, huh?"

"Not if there were a separate barrier for radio and electronic signals, different from where the planes shifted. And you wouldn't be able to prove if there was or wasn't."

"Maybe there isn't even a distinct point of changeover," I mused. "Maybe it's a gradual blurring."

"So at any rate," Miyoshi concluded, "seems like your dystopia's a long way off."

"Well that's one bit of good news."

Plus, if someone did invent an Anywhere Door, they'd probably want to keep it to themselves. Forget about the military applications, its impact on commerce and distribution networks if released to the public would be too much to want to deal with. Or at least too much for *me* to want to deal with. Transport and logistics stocks would plummet; international markets would crash.

Apparently fed up with our chatter, Rosary spread her wings and flew into the tunnel ahead.

"Hey!"

"Looks like she wants us to follow," Miyoshi observed.

"Well, no time like the present..."

We slipped through the door, taking step after cautious step. The hallway was lined with stones, and dim. We followed its gentle curves, until they let out into...a bright clearing?

It looked as though we had stepped out into a garden, its perimeter surrounded by towering stone walls.

"Kei, look around..."

"Looks like it's seen better days."

The garden was withered. It seemed as though it had once been immaculate, ornate. There were dusty remnants of flowerbeds, bare lattices for climbing roses, and a hollow trench that might have once been a water feature. It was the very image of picturesque, rustic beauty.

In the center sat a decrepit, octagonal gazebo. Withered vines ran up and down its cracked pillars. Withered as they were, the vines' placement seemed intentional—an attempt to incorporate the gazebo into the nature that surrounded it.

A cracked table and rickety-looking chairs sat under its roof—beckoning visitors as a reminder of bygone days. Even in their unkempt state, they seemed to invite you to sit and stay a spell.

We walked up to the gazebo. Rosary played around in the vines along one of its pillars, just as she had the tower outside.

"It isn't mine. It isn't anybody's." To my surprise, a high-pitched voice rose from behind us. "Nobody wants it," it said, "nobody cares for it, nobody ever goes into it. Perhaps everything in it is dead already."

We turned around at the sound of the sudden voice. A little girl in a white dress and white sunhat was kneeling with her back turned toward us, digging away with a trowel. In the entirety of the withered garden, the section around her alone displayed some fresh sprouts.

Sound familiar? Miyoshi asked over telepathy.

Straight out of Burnett. Has the dungeon been doing some reading?

The Secret Garden, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, had been published over the course of one year starting in 1910, catching attention for being a children's story serialized in an adult magazine. The novel's protagonist, Mary Lennox, discovers a key and door to a secret garden after following a robin.

The girl in front of us seemed to be the dungeon's Mary Lennox.

No response on Life Detection, I commented. Could be an illusion.

Speaking of, I haven't had a signal from the Arthurs for a bit either.

Say what?! Did that mean the Arthurs hadn't been able to follow us through the door? *Where the heck are we?*

The little girl collapsed into a hovering ball of dark light and moved over to the table-and-chair set, where it reformed as a casually seated man.

"If you mean this place right here, it's the thirty-second floor of Yoyogi," he responded.

Miyoshi and I looked at one another. *Yoyogi?!* But what surprised us even more was the face of the speaker.

"And this," the man continued, "is, I suppose you could say, a collection of memories. A psychological imprint."

"Kei!" Miyoshi called. "That's...!"

"I know, I know... But how?!"

It was a face we'd seen many times while perusing dungeon material: Dr. Theodore Nanase Tylor.

The signer of the final page of *The Book of Wanderers*—someone I'd expected we'd meet if we went up to the study in the Wandering Manor—here, in the...flesh?

"Dr. Tylor...I presume?" I asked.

"Perhaps. To be honest, it's a bit hard to say one way or the other." He fidgeted with his hands, seeming to try to get them in a position he was comfortable with, then shrugged, open-palmed, in that typically American way. "I am, and I'm not. Let's just leave it at that."

"Rather philosophical," Miyoshi cut in.

"Science so often is."

Miyoshi, Life Detection's not registering Doc Ty here either.

But we're both seeing him, so he's not a personal illusion... A weirdly chatty ghost?

"I'm neither ghost nor illusion," he spoke up, as though we'd been speaking

aloud right in front of him. “Though I might hesitate to call myself ‘human’ too.”

“How did you...?”

“Here telepathy and speech are one and the same,” he explained.

“Wait, then you can read our thoughts too?”

“Of course.” He chuckled. “If I wanted to. For starters, I sound like I’m speaking your native language, right?”

Of course. Tylor was an American, yet to us it sounded like he was speaking perfect Japanese. It must have been because he was broadcasting directly into our minds.

What was more frightening was that the movements of his lips even looked visually like they were matching the Japanese words he was saying. I didn’t even want to know how that worked.

If the dungeon, or whatever was behind it, was able to so perfectly project audio and visual information into our minds, there was no reason to think it didn’t have the ability to get it back out.

“If that’s the way the dungeons normally communicate, then the different languages used for things like D-Cards and item names aren’t determined by region, but individual language comfort,” Miyoshi surmised.

That made sense. Assuming the capability, the quickest and easiest way to determine the best translation for a dungeon item would be to let the mind of the first native speaker to encounter it do the work.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Although our D-Cards have a mix of English and Japanese. What’s up with that?”

It seemed like the dungeons rendered certain key terms in English, but relied on that auto-translation feature for others.

Yikes, I thought to myself. I kind of feel used.

“Still,” I said, somewhat doubtful. “That’d all be a pretty impressive feat for something that’d never encountered human biology or culture before.”

“Maybe the dungeon creators are basically humans themselves.”

“But down to their *neural cell structure*? Argh, maybe it’s not worth wondering. The ways of the gods are opaque to us mere mortals.”

Meanwhile, our conversation partner had been leaning back and listening, a smile playing across his lips. He straightened up.

“Do you know what we were doing in Nevada? Three and some change years ago?”

“I know you were trying to make micro black holes,” I responded to his sudden query. “To prove the existence of extra dimensions, or something.”

“Quite right. And we did. Make a micro black hole, that is. But—”

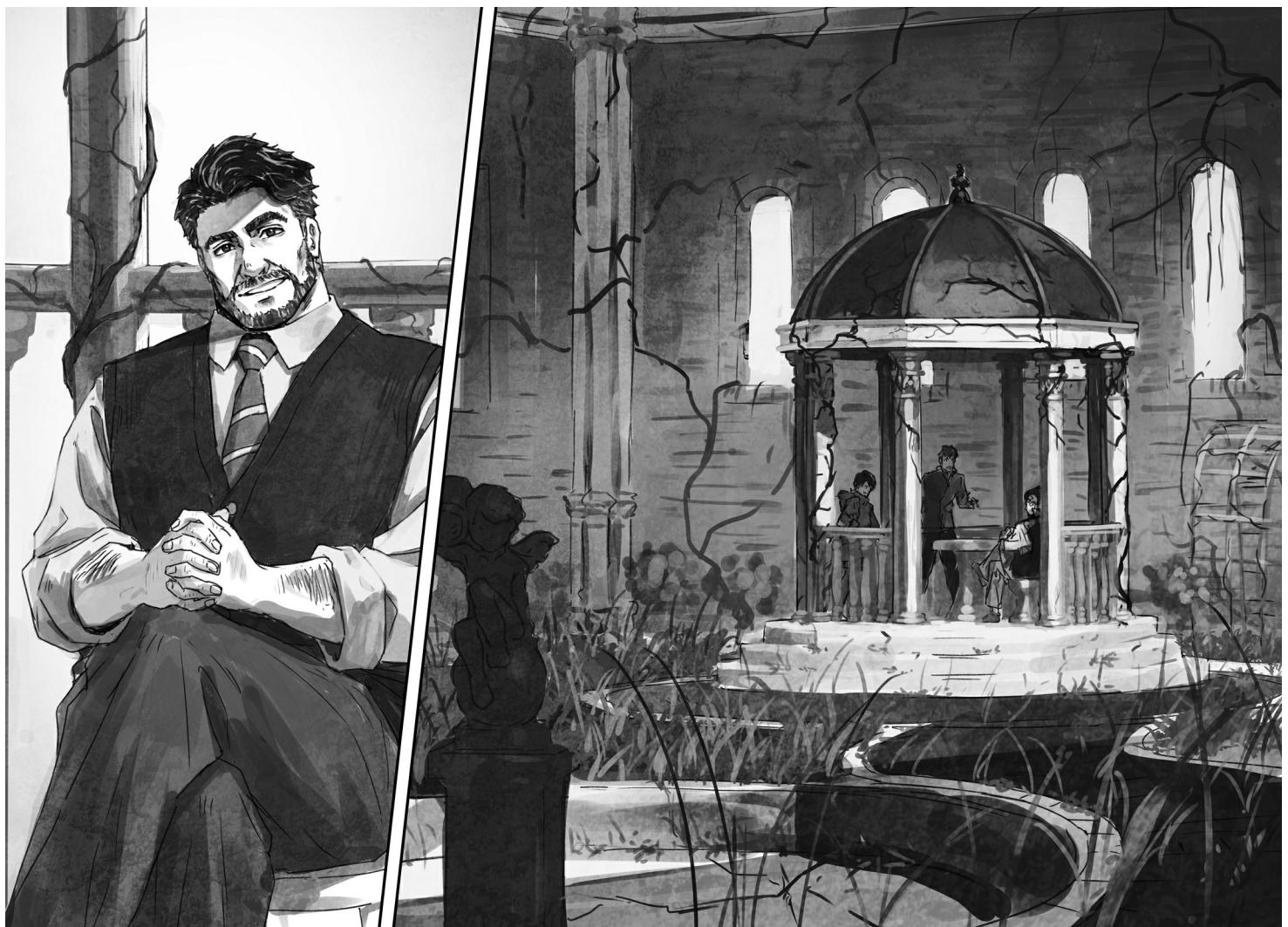
“But...?”

“It didn’t disappear.”

“What the heck? They’re supposed to evaporate, like, instantaneously. They don’t have sufficient mass to maintain their own existence.”

“Versed in quantum mechanics, I see.”

“Just the basics, thanks to a general STEM education.”



Tylor nodded. “Well, you’re correct. Ordinarily, we’d have expected it to evaporate. Unfortunately, due to a twist of fate, I suppose, the gate it opened—just for a moment, on the order of femtoseconds—became the impetus for the creation of the world we’re currently in.”

This was quickly starting to sound like science fiction, or fantasy. Then again, the same could probably have been said of the dungeons from the start.

“Hold on,” I responded. “Gate? Experiments? Monsters pouring out? Are you sure you aren’t recapping a game?”

“Fortunately it wasn’t a gate to hell.[\(28\)](#)” His smile indicated he’d spent some time playing DOS first-person shooters himself. “Anyway, the entity on the other side of the gate noticed something—electrical impulses surrounding the opening, emanating from this world.”

“Electrical impulses?”

“Yes. And it found the source of those electrical impulses, disincorporated them, scanned them, and incorporated them into itself.”

“You don’t mean—!”

“Don’t worry. It didn’t hurt,” he responded bemusedly.

According to Simon, Dr. Tylor and his team had vanished without a trace. So they had been disincorporated and scanned to learn about human culture? Was that it?

“Yes,” he responded, as if reading my mind. “Twenty-seven people vanished.”

“Then the reason the dungeons resemble games—the reason they stick so close to human culture—”

“It’s my fault. Or, well, perhaps that’s claiming too much credit, but I had some influence, no doubt.”

So *that* was the reason the dungeon’s key terms used English...

“But make no mistake—I expect it’s not just us in there now. The dungeons are probably taking plenty of information from the explorers who visit. Their wants, their expectations—all resources to be used.

Otherwise the dungeons would never be so diverse, he continued with a laugh.

"I feel like more explorers getting...disincorporated...would have made the news," I pointed out.

"I suppose that means our sacrifices weren't in vain."

In other words, the initial consumption of Dr. Tylor and his team had given the entity enough of an understanding of humans to reach directly into our minds to get the rest of what it needed—no further disincorporation necessary.

It was probably that very understanding gleaned from breaking down Tylor's crew that allowed phenomena like telepathy to work.

"Think we should tell Simon?" Miyoshi asked.

"Even if accidentally, America did play a role in inviting what might become humanity's greatest enemy to Earth..." I mused.

If that came to light, it might make the scuffle over Yokohama look like a drop in the bucket.

Dr. Tylor shook his head ruefully. "It *was* an accident," he assured us.

Certainly, it was like a passenger plane slamming into a UFO—something no one could have predicted. "Be that as it may," I responded sympathetically, "that doesn't change the fact that it would look bad for America."

"What's the official story now?" he asked.

Apparently Dr. Tylor wasn't privy to everything we knew, nor all the information the dungeons had gathered from explorers.

I filled him in on the public record regarding the accident at Groom Lake, along with the existence of the Ring.

"I see. Then perhaps I made a mistake," he muttered.

"You mean signing the final page?" I asked.

Dr. Tylor's eyes widened. "You found the book?"

It wasn't too surprising, he added with a sincere grin, given we'd found our way here.

"To tell the truth, we were expecting to find you in the Manor's study," I replied. "Meeting you here was a surprise."

"Almost as surprising as finding Klingon mixed into the book," Miyoshi cut in.

"Ha ha ha. My little prank. I'm sorry. Have you published the final page?"

"Not yet," I answered. "We've kept it under wraps on the advice of an American friend."

"It may come to light sooner or later," he responded, "but perhaps keeping quiet about it is for the best, for your own safety."

"Our own safety?"

"As we've learned from recent events, my country's the kind that would send in a nuke to take care of a dungeon problem, after all. No telling what they'd do to you to protect the national interest."

"Ha ha ha. Wait..." Was he serious? Then the weapon at Yokohama really *had* been... But wait, if it were atomic, what about the radiation?

"Seems it was used as energy to disincorporate and transport you to the first unexplored floor of the nearest dungeon," he responded to my unspoken question.

Uh, Miyoshi, any word in that last bit catch your attention?

"*Disincorporate*?"

So the versions of us standing here were the same as Dr. Tylor?
Reconstructed inside the dungeon?

"All those slimes were good for something after all," he added.

Miyoshi and I had spoken before about whether monsters, especially slimes, might act as D-Factor generators. If that process had been working to full effect, then maybe the energy from the explosion, the resulting radiation, and the monsters' bodies themselves had all been converted into a tremendous amount of D-Factors to be used for our disappearing act.

"So that's why Yokohama came out spick-and-span." Miyoshi nodded with an expression of understanding.

Why do you look so satisfied?! Every part of that was nonsense!

“Either way,” I responded somberly, “If word gets out that a nuclear weapon was used as part of an active military operation inside a dungeon, there’s going to be trouble in more ways than one.”

Furthermore, apparently if there hadn’t been enough slimes around, both we and the dungeon would have been toast. If someone misinterpreted what happened and believed it had been the dungeon setting alone that led to a safe outcome...

Dr. Tylor nodded. “I leave what to do with that information, as well as the incident three years ago, entirely up to you.”

“What?!”

“Why the surprise? I have no horse in this race. What happens in the outside world is of no concern to us now. Besides...”

“Yeah?”

“I hate to see scientific progress bound up by politics. That’s all.” He gave a put-out smile.

So he’d rather bind *us* up in politics? *Thanks*. This was just passing the buck. Personally, I had no interest in getting involved in political battles or becoming the target of international espionage—not any more than I already had.

“But what is the point of all this?” I asked. “I mean, what does the...whatever it is...on the other side of the gate want?”

“Kei, let’s give it a name already. This is confusing.”

“Does this entity have a name?” I asked Dr. Tylor.

“It does, but it’s nearly impossible to pronounce. And its meaning is impossible to render with human vocabulary.”

“And it made the dungeons?”

“Yes.”

An entity that sifted through our ideas in order to give the dungeons form...

“Demiurge?”

“From Platonic philosophy? Clever.” Dr. Tylor nodded.

The Demiurge was a figure in Platonic philosophy responsible for giving form to ideas and creating the world. In other words, it was a bit like a draftsman working off a blueprint to bring a structure to life. In this case, our minds and cultural knowledge were the blueprints.

“That was actually a pretty good choice,” Miyoshi offered, impressed.

“Well, I had to pick something,” I responded. “If we left it up to you, we’d have ended up with Daddy Dunge or something.”

“Please! Obviously the maker of the dungeons is female! Call her Ms. Dungeon Maker, at least.”

“Okay...”

I felt like *that* particular stone was best left unturned for now. The gender of the dungeon creator was one public debate I *didn’t* want to invite.

“So, what do you *think* Ms. Maker’s goal is?” Dr. Tylor asked.

“Ah, hm... Good question.”

“Ms. Maker...”?

“Well, here’s a thought.” Dr. Tylor brought his thumb and pointer finger to his chin. “As you two have seen, I’m just an information construct made of D-Factors—nice name, by the way.”

“Information construct?”

“A bundle of memories. Call it a soul, or call it data. Normally you’d only find this kind of data stored on human hardware—in a body, a brain. But reconstruct the equivalent hardware on the quantum level and you can get that data playing again. Like putting an old disc into a fresh DVD player. Make sense?”

Some religions might take issue with that, given how little it seemed to mesh with the traditional concept of a soul, but fair enough. It made sense—impracticalities aside.

“Guess I can’t really disagree, since I have a living example before me.”

Dr. Tylor grinned.

“Given that,” I continued, “couldn’t you make additional copies?”

“That may be possible. Although our Ms. Maker is limited to a single instance of my data. If she tried to make another me now, for example, the me you see in front of you would vanish and become something else.”

“Singleton design pattern, huh?”

In programming, a singleton pattern referred to a class of object which only allowed for one instance at a time. In this case, the stored pattern for Dr. Tylor could be activated, or deactivated, but it couldn’t be in multiple spots at once. If the instance were constructed elsewhere, this one would vanish, or revert back to energy. Whatever new version formed would likely have its own new experiences and memories.

“But if you could merge instances somehow...”

“Not possible with its current method of needing to reconstruct the hardware.”

The dungeons hadn’t yet cracked the code to memories or the soul—only a means of replaying them by constructing the same players they’d run on before: human bodies. It couldn’t manipulate the memories or souls on their own. In some ways, that was even more impressive. It had brute-forced a solution.

“So, you could call me a part of your dungeon mommy,” Tylor joked. “I mean, she does have full access to my mental activity. Unfortunately it’s a one-way link.”

Well, gods wouldn’t be very impressive if you could just read their minds.

“However, I can take some guesses,” he continued, “given what I’ve seen up until now.”

Words from communion with the dungeon’s creator? We were dealing with a modern-day prophet.

“Over the course of our disincorporation, analysis, and reconstruction, I have come to one irrefutable truth. What you call Demiurge,” he said, shifting to our

more distinguished name, “is sapient. And she was *elated* to learn that there were seven billion more just like us.”

“Elated?”

“No other word for it. Overjoyed.”

Elated that there were so many people? But why? Wait, don’t tell me! The other side is some spooky vampire world where everyone is just waiting to gobble us up?!

I just came out and asked. “Why?”

“I surmise that her desires center around one thing—offerings.”

Offerings? That was way too big a shift from the vampire-realm I’d been imagining.

“Offerings,” I repeated, letting the weight of the word rest on my tongue. “You mean like she wants to make humanity her worshippers? Take all our resources?”

This was bad. We were suddenly talking about a full-blown alien-invasion film!

“No, no, no!” Dr. Tylor protested. “If anything, the opposite.”

“Come again?”

“She wants to *make* offerings to humanity!”

“She wants to...” I trailed off. “Wha?”

What the heck was he saying? Dr. Tylor was leaning back, framed by the gazebo pillars, staring up at the sky.

“I think Ms. Maker is trying to get people accustomed to utilizing her offerings, by presenting a few new hardships, of course.”

Miyoshi gave me a look. “Kei, the wording’s a bit different, but that’s pretty close to your theory from before!”

“You mean the theory about the dungeons trying to get people hooked on them?”

“Right!”

But was that really an offering? Getting someone hooked was usually the prelude to a rather steep price increase. Was that “price increase” the entity’s true goal?

“Does making offerings in itself confer any kind of advantage to her?” I asked.

“There are some people who work because they enjoy it, rather than for a reward,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“I’m not sure that logic holds for eldritch beings.”

But if I thought about it, sure. After obtaining sufficient funds, the next thing a lot of people would do would be to... Well, actually, *first* they’d turn to debauchery, but *then* they’d look toward ways to establish and secure legacies. After the quest for stability came the quest for fame. I wasn’t sure if the same applied to interdimensional entities, but...

“I don’t profess to know the motivations,” Dr. Tylor responded, “but maybe that’s immaterial.”

“Perhaps there are some things man was never meant to know,” Miyoshi said smugly.

“You’ve just been waiting to trot out a line like that.”

“Eh heh!” Miyoshi stuck out her tongue.

I took the opportunity to pose another question I’d been wondering about. “But let’s say that is her goal,” I said. “Why use dungeons? Why not just come out and help?”

There had to be a better way.

“As a human—or perhaps I should append ‘former’ to that—and a scientist, I can think of one or two answers to that.” Dr. Tylor leaned forward, as if preparing for a lecture. “If, three years ago, miraculous technologies had started emerging out of the blue, what do you think would have happened?”

There would have been a fight to monopolize them, for one thing. And they would have been used for weapons development, first of all. The more they were used, the more collateral damage from the world’s conflicts would have

increased.

I didn't like to think about it, but the Arthurs alone would make incredible assassination tools. There was no way to stop or impede them. In fact, each and every magically equipped explorer could be viewed as a walking time bomb. If all of that had been foisted upon humanity at the start, without time to acclimate to it and regulate it, we'd probably be in the midst of a third world war.

"Point taken," I conceded.

"Your Demiurge must have taken that point as well, after perusing our consciousnesses. Or perhaps she'd had a similar experience in the past. Who knows."

"So she decided to give us a common threat," I deduced.

"And I wouldn't be surprised if that decision point was exactly the moment when 'Demiurge' became 'Ms. Maker.'"

The WDA had been formed with surprising speed. The dungeon's "technologies"—that was, the skills and items—had come under the agency's supervision, and humanity had accepted their existence as they matched up with common concepts, like magical skill orbs and potions. It had all been encountered gradually.

"But if we reveal all this—the motivation for the dungeons' creation—countries are going to race to try to monopolize their dungeon resources again. It's going to be an international conflict no matter what," I observed.

"But you're smarter than that. If you weren't, you'd never have made it here," he replied, as if it were a perfectly natural conclusion.

Explorers like us were necessary to help unveil the entity's messages and mission a little bit at a time. So was Dr. Tylor.

Plus, what better way to pique human curiosity, to make people feel like they were investigating the dungeons of their own accord, than to hide her gifts in the structure of a game?

Even if it resulted in some casualties, to Demiurge, they were drops in a

bucket of seven billion.

“Though if it doesn’t work out, Ms. Maker might try a different tack,” Tylor added.

“A different tack?”

“Well naturally,” Tylor explained, “the recipients of its offerings don’t necessarily need to be on Earth. They don’t need to be Earthlings at all.”

She could abduct Earth wholesale, pulling our world into her realm, set the whole planet off-limits to others of her ilk, then strip all the dungeons away and offer to take her services elsewhere. Then, just when humanity, having relied on the dungeons for so long, was in the throes of its deepest greed, she could offer them again—a once-in-a-millennium chance. We’d accept it with open arms.

I sighed. “This is all too much to take in. I’m just an ordinary person.”

Dr. Tylor laughed deeply. Come to think of it, he’d said this place was a projection of his mind. *The Secret Garden* was the story of a little girl raised by servants and plagued by loneliness who discovered a secret garden and nursed it back to health, while restoring her own deadened feelings, bringing about miracles as she did. Had Demiurge found a kindred spirit in Mary Lennox?

“Going back a moment,” Dr. Tylor continued, “the fact that you found your way here means you did a certain something in the Manor.”

“Did something...” I repeated. All I’d done was worked through my personal frustrations with my own former job by helping that window-washing ghost.

He responded happily. “She gave you her heart, you know, for freeing her from her endless toil. And then—you reaped your reward.”

“And...?”

“We all have our roles to play,” he said cryptically.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. A silence settled over the gazebo. Rosary, perched on the edge of the table, ruffled her feathers.

“You earned the right to come here, you know,” he added. He slowly opened his eyes, seeming to consider our conversation finished.

"There's still a lot I don't understand," I responded, "but thank you for sharing this much."

"Much of it is no more than my own guesswork," he answered back. "But it seems Ms. Maker has trusted you with quite the information management role. Try to make the most of it."

"Try to make the most of it," he says. Great. Miyoshi and I looked at each other.

"A number of important decisions lie ahead." He suddenly struck a tone of great gravitas.

"What is that?" I asked. "A prediction?"

"A prediction. You've received the cornucopia."

"Cornucopia?"

Just then, the space around us started to break down.

"That may be why she saved you!" he called. "From your fate in Yokohama!"

It was the same phenomenon as when the bells at the Manor started ringing. Our surroundings distorted, beginning to undulate.

"The time's come for us to part," he called. "The maintenance of this place and my actions take an enormous amount of D-Factors."

This was a garden where worlds grew.

It wasn't hard to imagine the enormous energy spent recording each moment, each instant of their change.

"It's a terribly lonely place," Tylor added. With that, he melted away, and the little girl from before reformed.

Where you tend a rose, my lad, a thistle cannot grow.

Somewhere, distantly, I thought I heard those words echoing.

My vision was awash in streaks of rainbow colors. It felt as though my senses of hearing, sight, and touch were all swapping, mixing, and splitting apart once again. Then, when they all merged together one last time—

“Where are we?”

We were in a rather familiar looking cave.

It wasn’t the one where we’d been fighting Cimeies, nor was it the one we’d found on the eighteenth floor.

As if to confirm my dawning suspicions, I heard the familiar *shlop* of some round, gelatinous monster wriggling around further up ahead.

“Kei... This is...”

I checked my watch in a hurry. If it was working correctly, the date was still the nineteenth.

“We were just on the thirty-first floor, right?”

“Pretty sure,” Miyoshi answered.

“And now back to the first floor, just like that?”

“I mean, as we’ve learned, teleportation is child’s play for Ms. Maker.”

“At least call her Demiurge, will you? Here I went through the trouble of thinking up a cool name...”

“Dr. Tylor seemed to like ‘Ms. Maker.’”

Never mind that. For now, my mind was on how Miyoshi’s sudden disappearance would be interpreted by the military teams she’d left behind. If we were lucky they might have been swept up in our return teleportation too, but...

“I guess this is good luck for me,” I said, trying to find a silver lining.

Being able to show my face at this time would help “prove” I’d never been in Yoyogi at all. Too bad the same couldn’t be said for both of us.

“So, uh, what do we do with all this?” I asked.

“You mean Dr. Tylor’s theories?” Miyoshi had taken out her tablet and was fiddling with something on it. “Whether we publicize them or not?”

“Yeah.”

“No way,” she responded. “If someone told you that all the people who

disappeared three years ago were disincorporated at the quantum level and had their memories scanned by Ms. Maker in order to stage the world's biggest game of D & D, would you believe it?"

"Hmm..."

The world was a cruel place to those who spouted new ideas. The fates of early proponents of heliocentricity crossed my mind. I had no intention of being labeled a modern-day scientific heretic.

"No one's even going to believe that we basically talked to Dr. Tylor's ghost in the first place," she continued. "Heck, we'd be lucky if we aren't taken in for mandatory psych evals."

"Come on. Knowing you, you probably got some kind of footage." We should have had enough evidence.

"I did, naturally. However..." she gestured toward her tablet. "It wound up being a big, fat zilch."

The footage Miyoshi had taken showed us walking up to the door. Everything after that was just white.

"It's like this through the end," she reported.

"Well, we could show someone else the door," I suggested.

"You really think it'll still be there?"

My shoulders slumped. "No."

If it worked like the Manor, then the door had no doubt disappeared.

It had probably only shown up for us anyway. Team I hadn't noticed it while they were searching for the keyhole. Even though it had been partially covered by vines, there's no way they would have missed the doorknob.

"I think, probably..." Miyoshi started, struggling to find the words, "that whole experience was like a shared psychic phenomenon. A subjective world."

"That would explain why the Arthurs couldn't follow us, and why we couldn't get footage. Hey, speaking of, where are the Arthurs?"

No sooner had I asked than their snouts poked expectantly out from the

shadows.

Looked like everyone was okay then. I gave Drudwyn a hearty pat on his scruff.

“Either way,” Miyoshi said, “right now let’s just get back home and write down everything we just heard—since we don’t have any footage. I want to jot it down before we forget. There was a lot we just heard that seems like it might be important.”

“No kidding.”

It had been an exhausting day. We left the dungeon and started on the road for home. There weren’t any stars in the sky overhead, but there were plenty of lights along the ground to chase off the darkness.

Epilogue

Daiba, Minato City

In a small conference room in Central TV, Ishizuka grinned broadly while watching Haruki Yoshida's pilot. Haruki was a little put out by the formerly distant producer's sudden familiarity, but quickly warmed once he realized the reaction was genuine. There was just one problem.

"This is great! Yoshida, baby, you killed it! Can you get this guy on again?"

The subject of his praise was, of course, the mysterious masked man in the footage.

It figured. No matter how many times Yoshida explained it, Ishizuka still took the footage for a scripted performance.

"It might be kind of tricky, with his schedule, but—"

"Schedule?" Ishizuka interrupted. "Use your head. Get creative. Make an opening. Whew! Where did you find this guy?"

"A-Ah," Yoshida grasped for words. "Ah, well, I was thinking it might be a bit much to...you know, have him on again, so suddenly..."

It was 9 a.m.—which might as well have been the crack of dawn for someone who worked in production—when Yoshida got the call. He had been rocking on the waves of a gentle sleep, reluctant to climb ashore. Eyes shut, he reached a hand lazily toward his bedside table, on which his phone incessantly buzzed.

He slowly sat up, returning to the world of the waking. Why did answering phone calls have to be so hard? He steeled his resolve, and hit "Accept."

"This is Yoshi—"

"Yoshida! This is bad!" The voice on the other end was Jo's.

Yoshida let Jo run on for a while, but after one circular minute or so, all Yoshida had been able to ascertain was that Jo was panicked.

“Pull yourself together,” Yoshida urged. “I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“No time to pull myself together! This is bad! Yoshida, this is really bad!”

“What is?”

“Those guys! In the military gear!”

Jo had shown the footage to an acquaintance in the international news scene. Edited, naturally, to avoid spoiling anything they planned to air on the show.

The acquaintance didn’t have any leads, but a veteran in the field who happened to pass by his desk and notice the footage did.

“He said he recognized one of the guys, so I pressed him for details and...”

Jo was still speaking too frantically to understand. Yoshida scrunched his face and pressed his ear closer to the phone, asking again.

“Jo, what are you getting at? What was that? ‘Rate’? And ‘Basilisk’?”

“Cyrenaica. The Basilisk of Cyrenaica.”

“What the hell is that?”

It sounded like the name of a B movie. Yoshida repositioned the phone.

“Anyway,” Jo continued, “This Rate guy is bad news. You don’t know the half of it.”

According to Jo, Rate was the man in the center of the military group in their footage—the one who seemed to be taking point. He had made a name for himself as a mercenary in the Iraq Civil War, then earned his serpentine nickname snaking around lands controlled by anti-Gaddafi forces during the First Libyan Civil War.

“That’s not all. There are also rumors that in Libya he acted as an agitator at protests, to aggravate regime response before American, English, and French intervention. Then afterward, he worked to drag out the conflict, and single-handedly stopped a South African private military squad’s attempt to drive Gaddafi out.”

“Playing all sides,” Yoshida realized.

“Then apparently he used the formation of the Islamic State to smuggle himself out of Syria. The reporter was shocked to see him in Japan.”

“So he’s an opportunist profiting off instability and confusion.”

“Maybe. Who cares about his motivation! All I know is he’s bad news, and we’ve got footage of him! That tussle with Tenko in the dungeon...they might have actually been trying to kill him!”

“Hold your horses. Not a chance. Anyway, they had no idea who we were.”

“Then you’ll keep it that way?” Jo asked. “You won’t use the footage?”

“Ah, er... That’s...”

Even if they avoided showing the mercenaries themselves, using any scene on the tenth floor would make it clear they were there. If they truly wanted to avoid outing themselves, they’d have to cut the tenth floor entirely. That would mean cutting footage of their cosplaying companion, but...

“Come on, come on! Audiences’ll eat it up. The masked hero! Appearing once per episode at the end! That’s the show. It’s a lock.”

“I—I’ll think about it.”

The scene would have to stay.

“Yoshida, what are we going to do? We’re dealing with a psychopathic mercenary! Plus—”

“Don’t tell me there’s more,” Yoshida answered exhaustedly.

Once the studio Jo’s acquaintance worked at had caught wind of his footage, quite a crowd had gathered to watch. That was when someone noticed something else of note.

“The French Commandement des Donjons? The Dungeon Tactical Unit?”

“Someone on the international dungeon exploration beat spotted them.”

There was a rattling sound on the other side of the phone. Jo must have been searching for his notes.

“Alain Baugé. Special Operations Command. Often runs with Victor’s team.”

“Victor? That’s something...” Victor was currently ranked tenth on the World Dungeon Association Ranking List. “But wait, you’re saying they were working with French soldiers, and still tried to kill us?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying!” Jo cried pleadingly. “This is bad news!”

“Come on. You’re overthinking things, surely. See? Official military personnel don’t attack civilians.”

“The official military being mixed in is *exactly* what makes it so bad. Who knows what we stumbled across, or what they’d go through to conceal it. We need to erase that footage. Right away!”

“Now hold on! You’ve been watching too ma—” Too many movies, Yoshida was going to say, but something stopped the words from coming out. Perhaps his better judgment. “P-Perhaps we can bring this to the French Embassy...”

“Please, *please* don’t go poking the hornet’s nest on this one!”

Maybe this had legs beyond being a simple dungeon variety show—it might turn into a bona fide documentary.

That was Yoshida’s hope, anyway.

“The show’s already got a slot.”

“What?”

Yoshida was dumbfounded. Ishizuka just laughed.

“Really. I shopped the show around through an agency. A major sponsor’s on board. I was just as surprised as you.”

“Wh-What?”

The sponsor Ishizuka named was a major company involved in dungeon research. Practically a household name. And they were willing to risk their reputation on an unknown dungeon show? Sure, they could advertise their own

products during the slot, and go for product placement if any stars emerged, but why take the risk? Frankly, it wasn't as if they had much competition. So why sponsor the show?

"However, there's one condition."

"What is it?" There it was. Yoshida had been expecting this. When a deal seemed too good to be true in his business, it almost certainly was.

"Saito keeps appearing on the show."

"Uh...huh?"

Saito? Sure, he could see how she was a draw. She was pretty, up-and-coming, and bubbly while still being a diligent worker. She had star potential for sure, and chops as an explorer to boot. However, the question remained. Why would she be enough for a major scientific firm to take a needless risk?

Even if they wanted her as a company mascot, or rep, they didn't need to go through the trouble of sponsoring a show she was on. They could simply have approached her directly.

"Does Saito mean something to them?" Yoshida asked.

Ishizuka was silent for a moment. Yoshida sensed some hesitation.

Ishizuka remembered what had happened to Ryuji when he'd been sent to investigate Saito—the state he'd come back in, on the verge of panic. Ryuji the Fireball, who wasn't supposed to be afraid of anything.

There was something about Saito. That much was clear. He just wasn't sure what.

"Ishizuka?"

"It's nothing. I can only conjecture, but she has that coach, remember?"

"Coach..." Jo had said something about that. But what would a scientific firm want with an acting coach? The connection wasn't clear. Unless... Wait. The image of the masked man once again flashed across his mind.

No, that couldn't be it... Could it?

Yoshida turned over the possibility, thinking about asking whether he could

use some of the show's budget for voice analysis.

The problem with Saito was that her contract had only been for the pilot. He could probably only coerce so much work out of her with the picture he'd used. If he stepped any further over the line, she'd likely sue for criminal intimidation.

"Ryoko Saito..." Yoshida repeated the name out loud.

"Yoshida," Ishizuka called. "Can I trust you on this? Can you get her?"

"Uh, probably."

"Probably'? The clock is ticking. Can I consider this a deal?" Ishizuka furrowed his brow.

If Ishizuka was gripped by uncertainty, it was matched by Yoshida's. But having drifted this far out from shore, the latter knew it was sink or swim.

"Of course."

And so, unbeknownst to the two in the studio, new gears began to turn in an entirely different location.

Hair G, Shibuya

It had been a long two days. Around a quarter past 6 p.m. on Saturday, Yokohama—which he had been watching while hardly swallowing for forty-eight hours—went quiet. All flow of information stopped. He'd panicked, wondering if a nuclear bomb had gone off, but the shots of the scene from an emergency helicopter circling overhead soon put him at ease. It looked as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

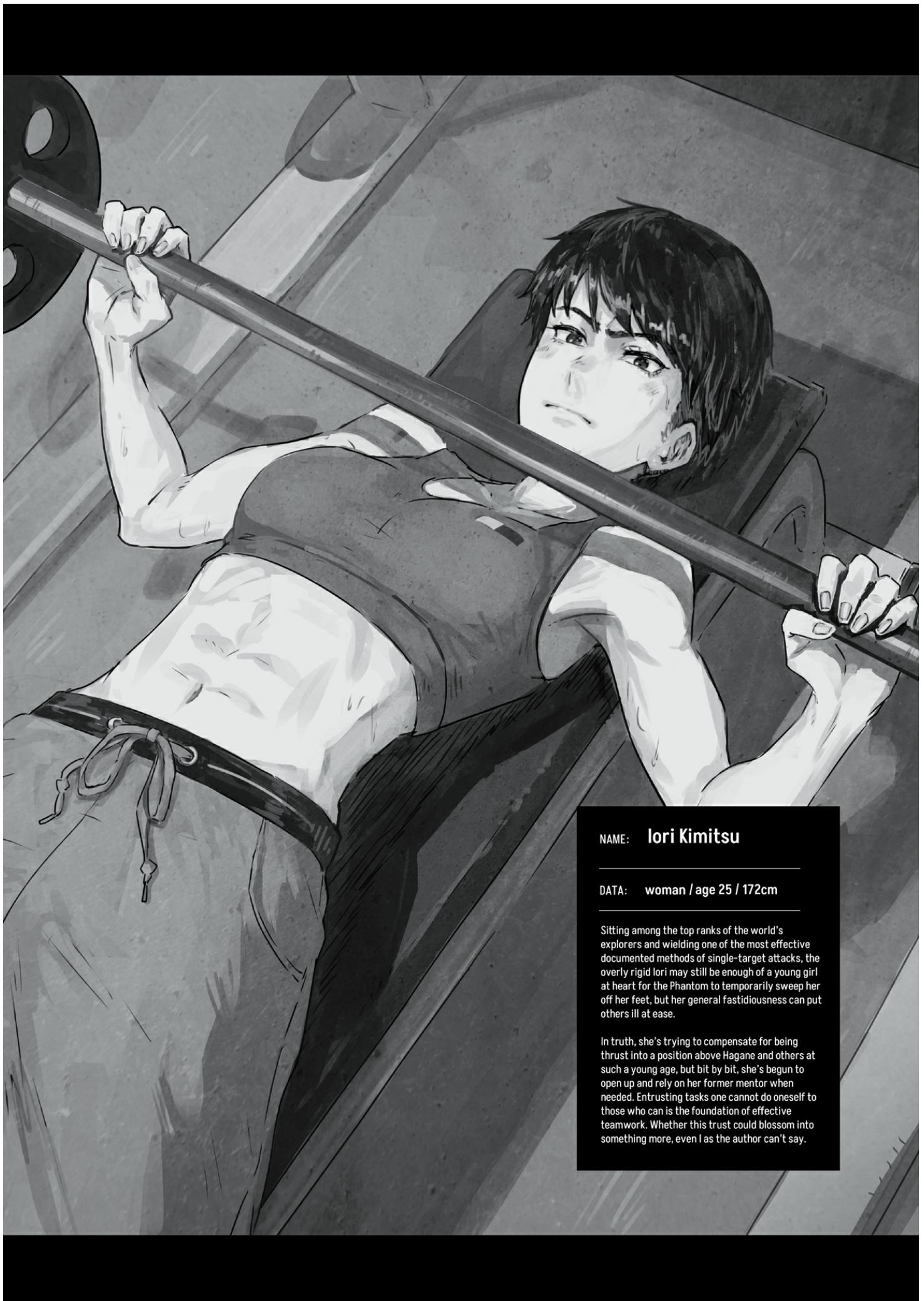
He wasn't sure what to make of the report that had emerged from Sakuragicho ten minutes later. Apparently everything had vanished from the second floor of Yokohama, as if nothing had ever happened at all. No one knew what had happened. No one knew whether an atomic weapon had been brought in, much less used. From intelligence gathered later, he understood that a bomb *had* in fact been brought in, but there was no evidence. In addition, twelve members of the JSDF and two civilians had gone missing, but all except two were reported safe later that night. Their location had been

unexplainable, truly beyond understanding—not even in a children's story would he have accepted such slapdash developments—but at any rate the situation had been resolved, so it didn't bear questioning now. Nothing good would come of poking around America's closet at this point. Best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Now was the time to be happy that almost everyone was safe. In addition, they'd finally found the safe zone on the thirty-second floor, but what would happen with it was up to the JDA. Japan was about to break new ground in the world of dungeon exploration. Exciting times, exciting times indeed.

Today was Sunday. He'd decided he'd go get a haircut.

The work to come could wait until tomorrow. Ibe reclined in the simple, black leather chair, closed his eyes, and entrusted himself to the barber.

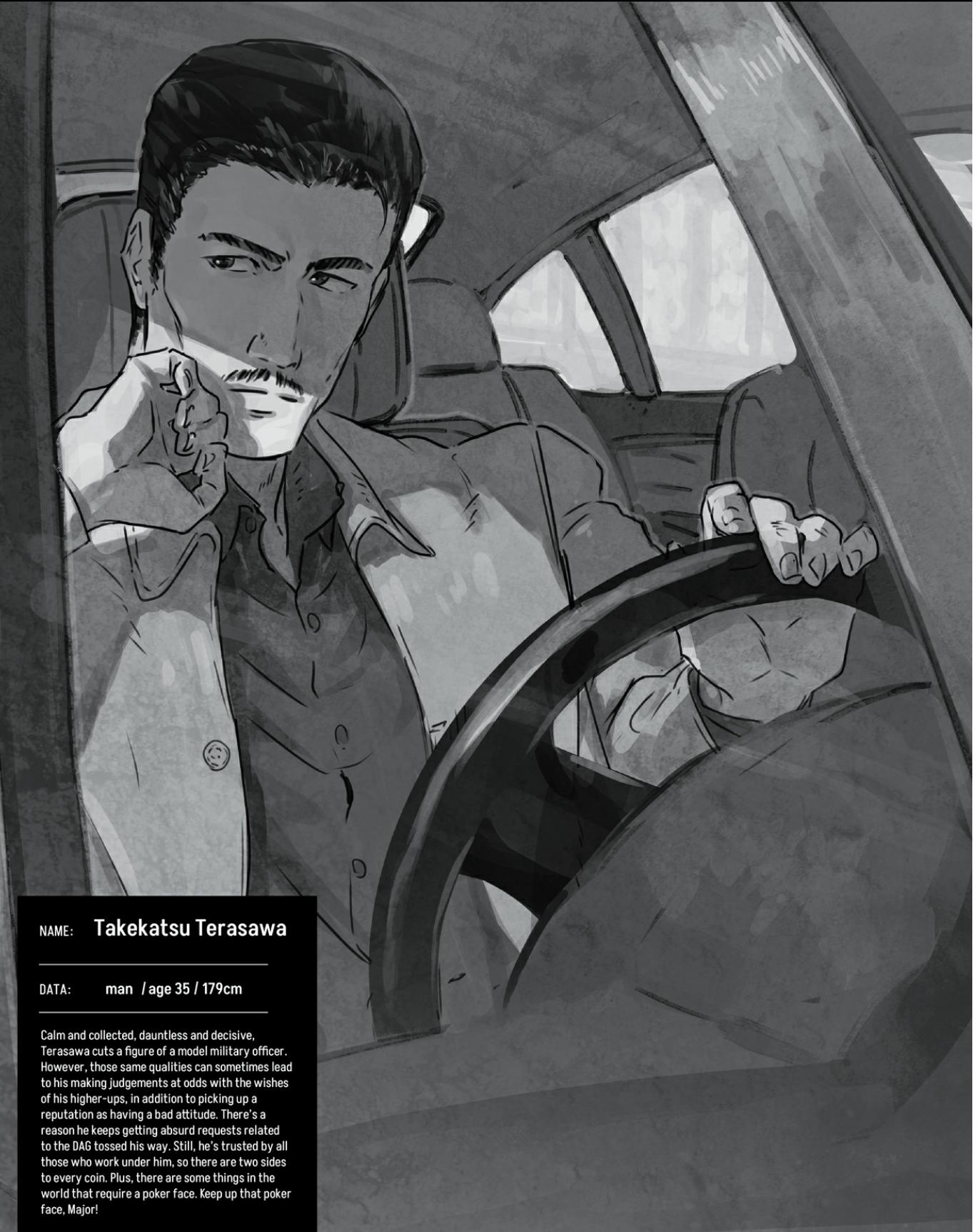


NAME: **Lori Kimitsu**

DATA: woman / age 25 / 172cm

Sitting among the top ranks of the world's explorers and wielding one of the most effective documented methods of single-target attacks, the overly rigid Lori may still be enough of a young girl at heart for the Phantom to temporarily sweep her off her feet, but her general fastidiousness can put others ill at ease.

In truth, she's trying to compensate for being thrust into a position above Hagane and others at such a young age, but bit by bit, she's begun to open up and rely on her former mentor when needed. Entrusting tasks one cannot do oneself to those who can is the foundation of effective teamwork. Whether this trust could blossom into something more, even I as the author can't say.

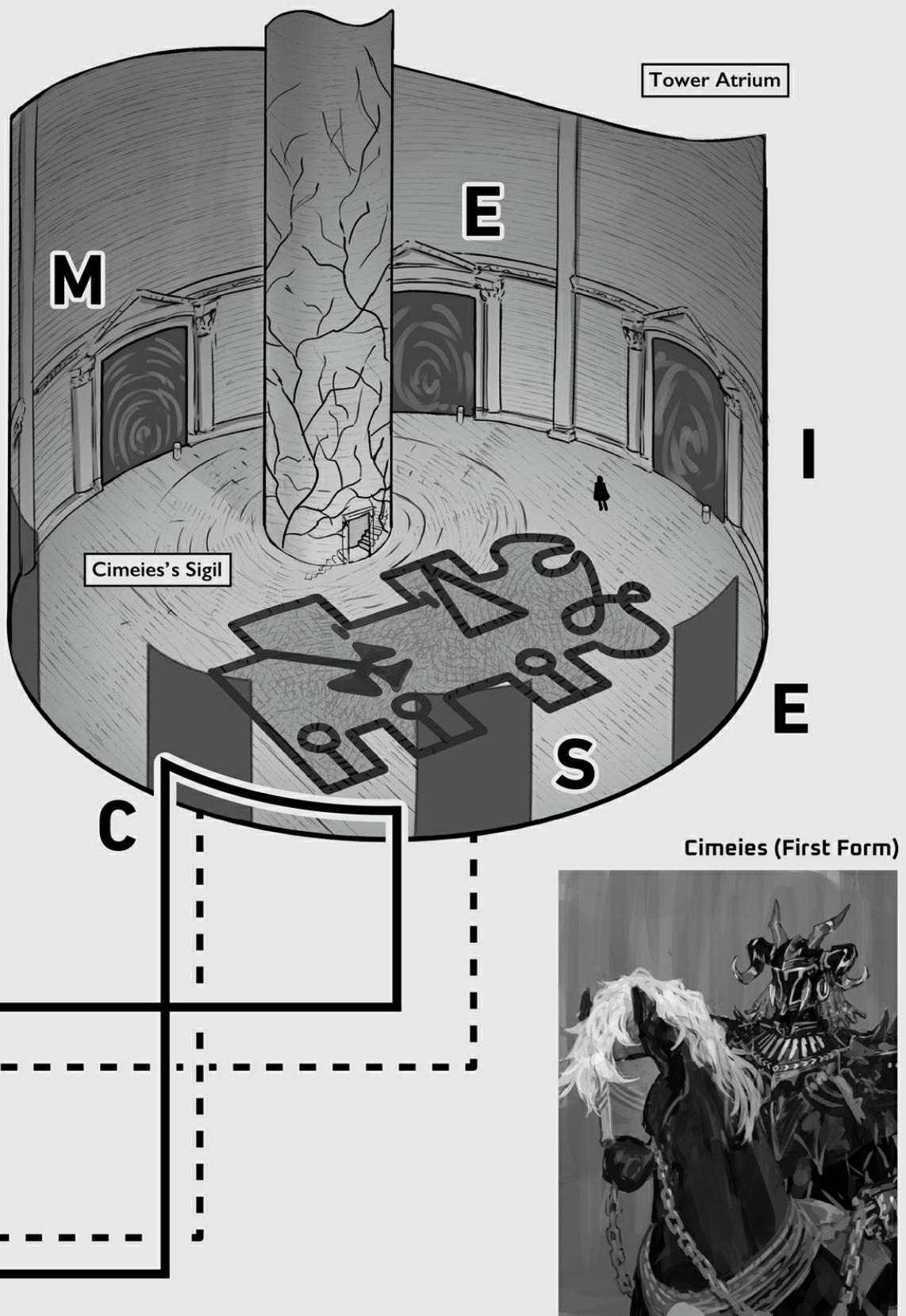


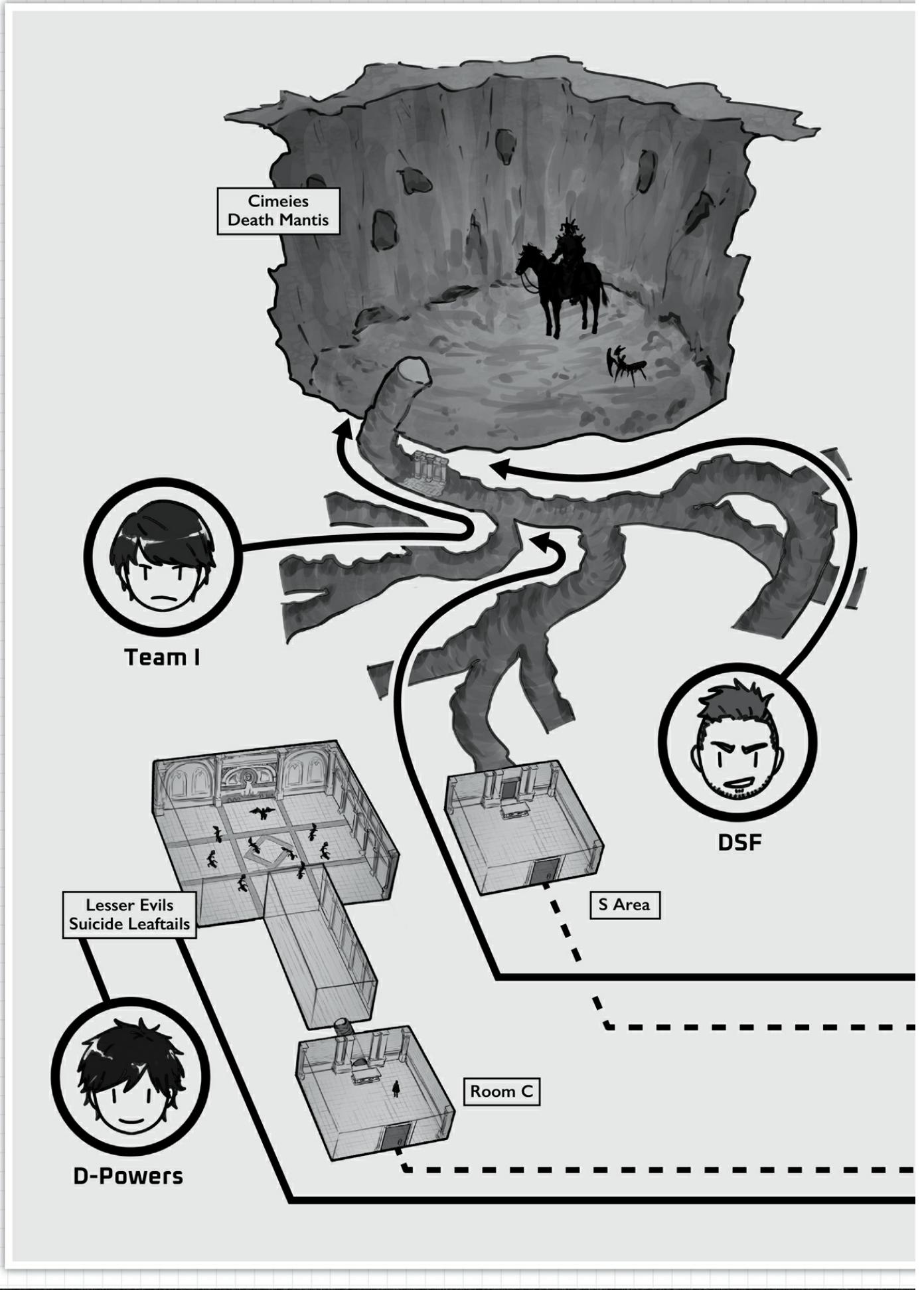
NAME: Takekatsu Terasawa

DATA: man / age 35 / 179cm

Calm and collected, dauntless and decisive, Terasawa cuts a figure of a model military officer. However, those same qualities can sometimes lead to his making judgements at odds with the wishes of his higher-ups, in addition to picking up a reputation as having a bad attitude. There's a reason he keeps getting absurd requests related to the DAG tossed his way. Still, he's trusted by all those who work under him, so there are two sides to every coin. Plus, there are some things in the world that require a poker face. Keep up that poker face, Major!

Yoyogi Dungeon, Floor 31: Temple of Darkness





Annotations

1. EST: Eastern Standard Time, a timezone covering portions of Canada and America, including New York and Washington D.C., -5 hours from UTC. Abbreviated “EDT” during daylight saving time in summer. Fourteen hours earlier than Japan Standard Time. 11 p.m. EST on January 23 would be 1 p.m. January 24 in Japan.
2. SADM: Special Atomic Demolitions Munition. A portable atomic device that can be carried by one individual. Mostly employed during the Cold War. Special forces units tasked with carrying these devices to target locations were known as Green Light Teams.

In May 2019, American journalist Annie Jacobsen revealed in one of her works that Green Light Teams had conducted confidential training with W54s, a category of SADM, at Camp Hardy in Ginoza Village, Okinawa.

3. W54: A diminutive nuclear warhead developed in the United States, with a shell diameter of approximately twenty-seven centimeters. Manufactured over the course of one year in 1961, the devices remained in circulation for the following decade. They offered yields ranging from 10 tons to 250 tons.
4. Bid for the casino resort development: In 2013, the real-world Yokohama mayor won her third election by promising to withdraw her bid for a major casino resort project due to popular demand. After receiving backing for the project from the Cabinet Office in August 2019, she reversed her stance.
5. Nuclear munitions being used in Los Angeles: Los Angeles is roughly equivalent to Yokohama in terms of population, and thus is a suitable comparison. Yokohama is home to approximately 3.7 million, and Los Angeles to 3.9 million.
6. Condom Boot Camp: The brave and the bold are invited to search for the video in question on Japanese condom manufacturer Okamoto’s

homepage.

Or rather, here in the year of our Lord 2022 (at time of printing), I might invite you to just search “Okamoto Condom Boot Camp” on YouTube.

7. [Attomachine](#): Nano-sized (10^{-9} m) machines are called “nanomachines.” Atto-sized (the size of a quark; 10^{-18} m) machines are “attomachines.” Incidentally, the prefixes after “nano-,” in descending orders of 1,000, are “pico-,” “femto-,” “atto-,” “zepto-,” and “yocto-.”
8. [“Any sufficiently advanced troll is indistinguishable from a genuine kook”](#): A riff on Arthur C. Clarke’s third law posted to usenet by one Alan Morgan, addressing the difficulty of knowing when to take someone seriously on the web. Clarke’s third law states that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”
9. [Maybe it was all like Plato’s theory?](#): A reference to the Theory of Forms, or Theory of Ideas, which postulates that the material world is composed merely of representations of universal absolutes, known as “Forms” or “Ideas.” Like blueprints of items outlined in the blueprint of the world. Perhaps, in keeping with the collective unconscious, we could call those essences “archetypes.”
10. [MPS simulation](#): The moving particle semi-implicit method. A moving particle simulation method (a method for modeling movement of fluid as a collection of particles—there are many variations) involving algorithmic modeling of incompressible free-surface flow.
11. [H2 scrap](#): A category of scrap metal in Japan encompassing rebar, tin plating, thin sheet iron, car suspensions, cut-down drum barrels, car wheels, motor blocks, and other iron odds and ends. H1 includes scrap such as rounded poles and pipes, while H-beams, rails, and car bodies fall into the HS category.
12. [Okay, Pastor...](#): Kei quotes *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren (a famous Baptist pastor). A Bible-based living guide, the book topped bestseller lists, selling over thirty million copies.
13. [Pansy Award](#): An award the Hankyu Railway Corporation’s Takarazuka

Revue Committee grants to standout players and staff within the all-female Takarazuka Revue musical theater troupe, a subsidiary of the aforementioned railway giant. The 2019 (the year this story is set) winner for best actress playing a female character went to Ayase Senna of Flower Troupe.

14. *Substances to trigger signal gradients moving from the head to the tail*: A decreasing signal from head to tail in the gradient of ERK (Extracellular signal-Regulated Kinase, an intracellular signaling protein and kinase) governs body regionality in planarian regeneration. In addition, an opposing β -catenin signal increasing from head to tail helps, leading to further head-to-tail ERK suppression. Research from a 2013 study conducted by Riken and Tokushima University team.
15. *Tales from thirteen hundred years ago*: The story of Wake no Kiyomaro, an eighth century Japanese politician who successfully convinced Emperor Kanmu to abandon a doomed construction project at Nagaoka-kyo and move the capital to Heian-kyo. Attained multiple distinctions of honor both during his life and posthumously under Emperor Kanmu. His designation as a god, which Miyoshi refers to, occurred one thousand years later, under Emperor Komei in the Edo period.
16. *Marlowe*: Philip Marlowe. A character invented by Raymond Chandler, and a template for many a hard-boiled fictional detective.
17. *MK3*: An American-made hand grenade. In this case intended for a suicide attack.
18. *I love it when a plan comes together*: The catchphrase of the leader of the eponymous commando-turned-mercenary unit in NBC's *The A-Team*: one "John Smith."
19. *The second circle*: The second circle of hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Reserved for the lustful, who are buffeted by ceaseless tempests.
20. *C4I*: Stands for "command, control, communication, computer, and intelligence." A total information management system used for military operations. Refers in this case to tactical-grade portable systems used to support JGSDF front-line operations.

21. [L3 F-PANO](#): Fused-Ground Panoramic Night Vision Goggles developed by L3 Technologies, Inc. The next generation in darkness-penetrating tech.
22. [Yasutaka Tsutsui's natural history book](#): *A Personal Account of Natural History*, by renowned comical sci-fi author Yasutaka Tsutsui. A nonsensical piece of literature in the style of a natural history book covering fifty species of plants and animals from the warthog, depicted on the cover, to man. All described in the author's effortlessly quirky, certainly inaccurate, style.
23. [Not the energy drink?](#): As covered previously, "Maiden's Holy Water," a female-targeted energy drink with a rather eyebrow-raising advertising campaign, especially when you're caught off guard by its Tokyo train car ads. Let the healing power of plant fermentation awaken the goddess in you. Also known as "the holy water of beauty." If you're wondering what was so eyebrow-raising about this golden-colored drink, you're in for a surprise.
24. [Okinawa](#): The site of a newly formed dungeon where Iori and Hagane first met, shortly after the dungeons first appeared. See volume 1 for details!
25. [Taira no Kagekiyo](#): A samurai and fictionalized character in the fourteenth-century Japanese epic *Heikei Monogatari*. Known for announcing himself on the battlefield in sensationally exaggerated style, to the point that he's the common reference for flowery self-introductions in Japanese. The most commonly quoted version varies slightly from the original text, presumably to give his lines more memorable stand-alone flow.
26. [The wickedest man in the world](#): A reference to a scathing newspaper criticism of Aleister Crowley, a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and one of the world's most well-known occultists.
27. [A story about a secret door in a castle wall concealed by vines](#): A reference to *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett.
28. [Fortunately it wasn't a gate to hell](#): A reference to *Doom*, 1993, the gold standard of FPS (first-person shooter) games. The plot of the game centers on military teleportation experiments being conducted on Mars

accidentally opening a gateway to Hell, through which all sorts of grisly monsters pour.

Afterword

Sorry I'm late! Sorry, sorry! (Sliding into the room on my hands and knees.)

This volume was a nightmare to write. I just kept typing and typing. It felt like the end would never come. (Isn't that always how it is for netizens?)

By the time I was a good ten thousand characters over my initial plan, I began to regret saying, "I'd like to get it done in **** characters" during my initial publisher meetings. "Still, if it's just a little over, they'll still cut me some slack," I told myself, and wrote on.

Twenty thousand characters over: It's still not done...

By the time I was staring down the barrel of my thirty-thousandth character over my initial proposal, I started to get cold sweats. "Maybe they won't cut me slack after all..."

I furrowed my brow and pressed on.

Forty thousand characters over: Dry, bitter laughter reverberated through my room.

Fifty thousand: My soul exited through my mouth.

It wouldn't end, wouldn't end, wouldn't end.

When I handed in the first draft, my editor, staring at a tome nearly a full volume's length over the expected amount, said, "We're going to have to cut this down."

And so with a heavy heart, I set out to do just that.

Thus, here we are, through the fire and flames: *D-Genesis Volume 6.* (Applause.)

To mark the occasion, a little commentary! (Spoiler alert. I heavily recommend reading this only after finishing the main volume!)

Volume 6 takes place over the course of two days. Humanity is thrust into a

thoroughly unexpected crisis by the emergence of multiplying multiheaded cleaners. I wonder how many people the threat of being wiped out actually felt real to. (Incidentally, Ms. Maker, what was going to come of your plan if humanity really was wiped out?) When faced with the sight of an erupting volcano, shockingly few people down in the foothills instantly flee. The overwhelming majority's reaction is to stand there slack-jawed, looking up for a bit and taking it in as a kind of unusual scenery. This instinct—this lack of danger—would probably be magnified in the face of a threat humanity had never encountered before. It wouldn't register until it was too late.

Still, the numbers don't lie.

But understand the threat on paper as we may, if Godzilla suddenly emerged from Wakasu, you can bet people on Tokyo Gate Bridge would simply bunch up to polite calls of "I'm sorry; foot traffic is only allowed in the outer lanes," only half comprehending the danger.

So it was that I gazed upon the final character count, to whose danger my senses had been dimmed. A fool. A damned fool. I'd seen the count running up while writing it. The threat posed at the time, reduced to simple mathematical theory, simply didn't seem real until the finished work was in hand.

It's fine; failure leads to growth. (Unless you're one of those types for whom it doesn't—for instance, a certain someone I regularly see framed in a square sheet of polished metal under a pane of glass.) But I digress.

Faced with a new type of crisis, even basic decision-making becomes hard. Let alone when it's a crisis that could determine the fate of humanity. Extreme circumstances probably force world leaders into all kinds of no-win choices. I respect politicians. I really do. I just don't always respect their childish squabbling on live Diet broadcasts, etc., but... Hang in there, politicians! Fight on!

I'm not dissing representative democracy, mind you. It has its faults, but it's overall not a bad system. It is bad at responding to crises in a timely fashion, however, which leaves no room to doubt that it's the most ill-equipped system for actual governance (or, no, there *is* some room to doubt that, actually). Dictators often come to power by taking advantage of those weaknesses.

Among the major cuts in this volume were various plodding Diet meetings meant to examine these themes.

Most cuts revolved around Ibe, but don't get your hopes up too high. Even *Shin Godzilla* skipped over its Diet scenes with an "Abbreviated" title card!

Kei makes fun of Miyoshi's homemade anti-slime suit when he puts it on, but the truth is there was lots of DIY equipment hanging around in my college dorm. These days it's more common to just order pristine items straight from the manufacturer. A shame. There are a lot of advantages to the DIY approach...

The lens our NEET Net poster uses to scope out Yokohama would be the 300 mm telephoto Niko "san nipa" variant. It was popular for doing portrait photography from a distance. The lens retails for 705,000 JPY. Where did he get the money for that?!

I asked him and he laughed and said, "Assets. Assets." The rich really are built differently.

Why not the 400 mm variant? Too heavy, he said. Weakling, I say.

The ALTA workers in this volume hope that if all goes well, they might get a budget increase next year. The budget requests discussed in the January session of the Diet (this year February and August, as an exception) need to be submitted by each agency by August the previous year at the latest. In other words, they're already SOL. Sorry, fellas! Maybe the year after next. Argh, I can practically see their tear-slicked faces. Forgive me.

Ibe visits a hair salon for a cut at the end of the volume, but in real life, this practice of simply getting a men's cut at a hair salon became a subject of minor controversy after Ibe's namesake was revealed to have done the same. It sounds unbelievable, but the source of the conflict was in a 1978 notice published by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare designating different discrete business practices of "beauty salons" and "barbershops," the former of which did not include men's cuts. Of course this was never often enforced, and most people had no way of knowing. History sure is wild.

The rule was overturned by a 2015 notice by the same agency, reducing the distinction between the two business types to whether they can use razors, and that's about it. Even then, there are exceptions made for light use of razors

accompanying makeup application, so...jeez, just hurry up and join up under one name already! You're confusing everyone!

Now, as mentioned, *The Secret Garden* was originally published in a magazine aimed at an adult readership. From the publishing venue, you might expect an altogether different story from something called *The Secret Garden*! Perhaps because of that (or perhaps not), what is now regarded as one of Burnett's masterworks didn't get a very warm reception at the start. What exactly Ms. Maker sees of herself in Mary Lennox, we'll learn down the line.

Speaking of! Ms. Maker finally makes her debut, we have the safe area in play, and developments surrounding dungeons are picking up momentum on all fronts! You can bet agricultural majors aren't just going to sit back and take dungeonized wheat lying down either! What will become of D-Powers? What will become of the world? All this, and more! See you again next volume.

NEXT VOLUME



MIYOSHI

Kei! We got disincorporated!



What are you, a car engine? But if you rebuild the hardware using the same parts, you'd expect it to run just the same. If you're feeling better, maybe it's because something was wrong from the start.



YOSHIMURA

Yeah. But I feel like I'm running better than ever.



But wow! They found a safe area in Yoyogi! The JDA's going to be swamped with business land use applications.



MIYOSHI

Other businesses might want to grab a spot, just in case.



YOSHIMURA

This isn't staking out a claim for a picnic!



MIYOSHI

Then there's the tourism industry too.



YOSHIMURA

Tourism? In the dungeons? It's the thirty-second floor. It'd be more practical for most people to take a round trip to the moon.



MIYOSHI

They could offer room and board to deep-level explorers.



YOSHIMURA

Oh. Like a hotel? I wonder what one night would cost.



MIYOSHI

I don't even want to think about it.



YOSHIMURA

Well, any explorers who can get to level thirty-two are making bank, so that might actually work out.



MIYOSHI

They could use magic to make water, but what about food and equipment?

They're coming out with porters soon. Maybe a caravan of them? Speaking of, who's going to use the JDA's Storage orb?



You'd think people would be lining up around the block for a real-life cheat code.

Who knows. Maybe fewer than we think. It cost 45 billion yen. That's a lot of pressure.



Kei, I've got a bad feeling...

Yeah...



Next time! In D-Genesis Volume 7!



The discovery of the safe area...



...has the Dungeon Management Section half dead!

The open-call boot camp...



...turns the world of sports on its head!

The impact of the wheat dungeonizing experiments...



...forces major multinational grain companies to invest in G13-type tractor fleets!

Take this seriously.



I am! Now then...



Look forward to the next volume!

D-Genesis Volume 7

TO BE CONTINUED...

Bonus Translator's Note

Here we are at the end of yet another volume of *D-Genesis*. Yokohama has been saved, the demonic marquis has been defeated, and we've gotten a bit of a deep (ahem) dive into the dungeons' origins. This is the translator, Ian. As with the lower floors of the dungeons, a few tidbits from the Japanese and translation choices deserve more exploration.

In the opening scenes of the volume, we're greeted by a cavalcade of named political entities both American and Japanese, nearly all of whom lightly lampoon real-world politicians at the time. The referenced incident of the Yokohama mayor being forced to give up a bid for a casino resort development also ties into national Japanese news around the time the novel is set. In addition to the like-names, reference is made to a "Democratic Liberal Party," a reversal in Japanese of the characters used for the real-world "Liberal Democratic Party," the ruling party in Japan nearly continuously since 1955.

In these same early scenes, the politicians gathered at Prime Minister Ibe's (see above) residence refer to a "witching hour," held generally to be 3 a.m., wondering if they might not see a ghost. (It's 2:30 a.m. in the scene.) This is a bit of cultural serendipity. In Japanese, the reference is made to "*ushimitsudoki*," or the third quarter of the hour of the ox on the Chinese zodiac hour system. This time, falling around 2:30 a.m. to 3 a.m. on the modern 24-hour clock, is host to similar superstitions. Incidentally, in Japanese, the group expects to see a parade of *yokai* rather than ghosts.

Established under the Ministry of Defense in 2015, Japan's Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Agency is a real organization founded shortly before the dungeons would have appeared in-universe, resulting in it being the subject of in-fiction conspiracy theories. Kiyomaro Urushibara, an R&D officer of ATLA, has a nickname that posed some trouble in translation. In the English version, he becomes known as the "Sixth O" outside of the organization, supposedly standing for "Sixth Officer"—a sixth, off-the-record member of the agency's secretariat. It turns out his nickname was actually the condescending "Sicko,"

owing to his off-putting zeal for his work. In Japanese, he is known to those outside as “The Sixth,” which turns out to be a misunderstanding of “The Sicks.” This owes to the “th” (not native to Japanese) and “s” sounds being written identically in Japanese, which doesn’t track in English. Likewise, “The Sicks” doesn’t sound anything like a native-English jeer, leading to the change.

Finally, transported to the lower floors of Yoyogi in the final third of the volume, Kei and Miyoshi encounter the “lesser evils”—chimera-like sub-boss monsters—and have a bit of a back-and-forth about how dealing with Miyoshi has Kei used to choosing “the lesser of two evils” in all cases. The Japanese name for the monster is identical to the English—“lesser evil,” rendered phonetically—but in Japanese the latter gag stems from the two attempting to translate it back into their native tongue. They surmise that it corresponds to a Japanese phrase for small devils—“koakuma”—that’s also slang for a certain type of impish fashionistas, and Miyoshi jokes that that’ll probably make them one of Kei’s weaknesses.

Not long after, Kei makes a comment about there being no way out of a fight that Miyoshi tells him to Google. This refers to a specific Japanese meme his line is 1:1 with, featuring a series of humanoid pigeon peace-keeping agents boasting a “75-draw streak record” in battles from the *Beast Saga* multimedia franchise. This one was on the border, but stayed in just in case there were any, uh...*Beast Saga* fans in the audience (unlikely) who wouldn’t want its one reference cut. Uh...Google it!

With that, see you next time for more thrills, spills, and bills! *Adieu!*

D GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared

WRITTEN BY
KONO Tsuranori
ILLUSTRATED BY
ttl









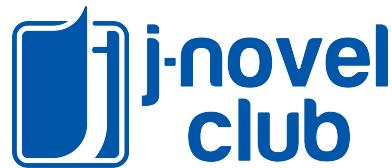
When my vision cleared, I realized I'd landed on top of Miyoshi, practically pinning her down. I scrambled to my feet, whipping out a shield in anticipation of the blow that was sure to come. But instead of a deafening whack, what I heard was—

**“Cheerily, cheer up, cheer up,
cheerily, cheer up!”**

Turning around, the only thing in my field of vision was a small...bird? Its gray feathers were trimmed with white edges, its beak and belly a burning, brilliant orange. But its eyes, rather than black like I'd expected, shone a deep indigo. Almost like benitoite.



“Come again?”



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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 6

by KONO Tsuranori

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