

# D GENESIS

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Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared





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**There are moments when one has to choose between living  
one's own life, fully, entirely, completely—or dragging out  
some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its  
hypocrisy demands.**

——— *Lady Windermere's Fan / Oscar Wilde*



# Prologue

## Akasaka, Minato City

Tenko had been summoned to a meeting at a chain restaurant near Jo's studio in Akasaka. It wasn't an enormous trek from Yokohama, but the meeting spot was still relatively far, which didn't sit well with the dungeon-based YouTuber. Entering the restaurant, he saw Yoshida flagging him down from a booth near the back.

"Hey, Tenko! Over here!"

Tenko raised his hand weakly in response and headed over to the booth. Along the way, he couldn't help but notice the rows of dividers for single-occupant spaces, more resembling the self-study room at a preparatory school than a chain restaurant priding itself on its "family atmosphere." *What the hell kind of family restaurant is this?* he wondered.

A short time later, having regaled Tenko and Jo with a summary of their current situation as well as their upcoming plans, Yoshida flashed the two of them his trademark grin.

"So, now the rest just depends on Ryoko Saito's schedule."

The conversation having reached a stopping point, Jo went to and returned from the drink bar, distributing refills to Tenko and Yoshida. He posed the question that had been on his mind.

"Yoshida, were you really able to clear this with Saito's production team?"

There was nothing for Saito to gain from appearing in a dungeon variety program at this point. Let alone a mere pilot.

"Are you kidding? They wouldn't even hear me out." As if nothing were wrong, Yoshida calmly poured some sugar into his espresso.

"Huh?"



Yoshida couldn't help but smirk at Jo's dumbfounded expression. "However, I got the okay from Saito herself," he replied from behind his raised cup.

Jo scrunched up his face. "Yoshida. You're not out to take the rest of us down with you, are ya?"

Jo's studio worked with Central Television. If they were found to have interfered with another of its productions—well, it wasn't impossible to imagine he'd find himself on the streets. Maybe it was time he washed his hands of this whole sordid affair.

"Don't worry," Yoshida responded. "All we did was talk. After hearing me out personally, she was more than happy to be on board."

"Talk'?"

The situation was growing more suspect by the minute. Yoshida had probably blackmailed the starlet. And if the blackmail involved the footage Jo had captured and edited...that might make him an accomplice.

"Relax. I'm not going to do anything that would jeopardize you and your studio."

Jo squinted at Yoshida. *Not going to do anything?* Blackmailing a Central Television star was already more than enough.

"Next week she's filming at a New Year's archery tournament hosted at Hikarigaoka," Yoshida continued. "She said that after that, she could make time for our pilot."

Jo let out a dissatisfied grunt.

"Whoa now. You guys are gonna hafta think about increasing your security contingent," Tenko cut in. "I got my hands full with the two of you as it is. That's before adding some fragile actress to the mix." He didn't care if she were the biggest movie star of all time—what he cared about was doing the job he'd been given.

"We saw her escaping from that mansion, remember? Are we sure she even needs protection?" Yoshida countered.

Sure, she was being carried by someone else in the footage, but she was still



running away from the direction of the Wandering Manor. If she could escape from that death trap unscathed, she was likely a cut above your average explorer.

“But Yoshida. She’s involved in a current movie shoot. A big one. If anything happens to her on our watch—”

“Then it’ll be her own fault. Personal responsibility—ever hear of it? I’ve made sure we won’t be liable in our contract.”

“Bro, I don’t know how you got her on board, but all the way down on the tenth floor?”

Everyone who was anyone among explorers knew the tenth floor of Yoyogi Dungeon as the “Death Floor.”

Discovery of the assimilation drug drop item, allowing the user to blend in with the throngs of skeletons and zombies, had made the floor easier to traverse. However, that didn’t change the fact that if anything went wrong, explorers there would quickly meet their end—besieged by the floor’s undead hordes. It was said that half of all explorers who had met their end in Yoyogi had fallen on its tenth floor.

“Of course I’ve heard it was dangerous in the past, but now it’s practically like morning traffic if you’re just passing through,” Yoshida responded. “Besides, I’m no fool. While some battle footage *would* be nice, it’s important to remember there’s nothing more important than your life.”

“Better hope you’ve finally got *that* through your head...” Tenko couldn’t help but remember Yoshida frozen in panic with his smartphone aloft while Tenko alone readied himself to fight off the encroaching horde of eyeballs from the Wandering Manor. Unfortunately, Tenko was in too deep in the project to back out now. His own livelihood and reputation were wrapped up in its success.

“Don’t worry. *Ahem*, lessons were learned. Besides, if push comes to shove, we should have one other party we can depend on to give us some interesting footage.”

“Another party?”

“Don’t you remember? The mystery man Jo was making such a fuss over last



time.”

“Who, bro?”

“The coach!”

“‘The coach’... You mean Saito’s?”

“Indeed.” With a look of satisfaction, Yoshida took a sip of his coffee, crossing his legs and leaning back. “Listen, we had Saito begrudgingly agree to come along, and our target is the tenth floor.”

“So it *was* ‘begrudgingly’...” Jo’s shoulders slumped.

“Ergh, what I’m saying is, if she’s concerned about her safety at all, she’ll probably have her ‘coach’ or whoever come along too. And then—”

Yoshida grinned, implying he needn’t say more.

*Is this guy really on the up-and-up?* Thinking of the shoots ahead, Tenko was less anxious than he was overcome with fatigue.



# Chapter 06: The Phantom

January 8, 2019 (Tuesday)  
Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“So you see, coach, you gotta help me out!”

“Whaa?”

Saito had shown up unannounced at our office looking like she had some kind of urgent news, but it turned out she’d come to request assistance because she’d have to head down to the tenth floor!

I couldn’t exactly claim to be uninvolved—she had agreed because she’d been caught escaping the Wandering Manor with us—but “Help me out”? *What exactly am I supposed to do?*

“Why not keep watch? You know, trail her group from behind? We could also work to pump up Saito’s stats in advance,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Pump up her stats...” I crossed my arms. “Hmm...”

The problem was I’d spent most of Saito’s remaining SP before Christmas last year. She might have gained a bit since then, but it probably wasn’t enough to make a substantial difference.

The last time I’d adjusted her stats, the readout had looked like this:

Name: Ryoko Saito  
SP: 0.23  
HP: 34.90  
MP: 60.50  
STR: [-] 10 [+]  
VIT: [-] 16 [+]  
INT: [-] 30 [+]  
AGI: [-] 25 [+

DEX: [-] 50 [+]

LUC: [-] 12 [+]

At a glance, they seemed like decent enough stats to carry her through the tenth floor. However, her main weapon was a bow. Its matchup against the hordes of the tenth floor left something to be desired.

*Hey, Miyoshi, what do you think?* I asked over party telepathy.

*If she runs out of arrows or any monster gets close, it's game over.*

Her STR—strength—was only that of your average adult man.

I hadn't invested any of her points into VIT, so her HP was on the low side as well. If she were surrounded by monsters on the tenth floor, it'd be game over indeed—no continues, no resets.

*We could let her hold infinite arrows with a storage-style orb, or up her INT and equip her with some offensive magic, or assign one of the hellhounds to her, or just go all in on raising her STR and VIT and give her a mace or something.* Miyoshi offered rapid-fire suggestions.

*Hmm...* That all sounded nice, but she hardly had any SP left to work with.

"Saito, do you have your D-Card?"

"Yep."

"There's something I want to check. Could I have you party up with me for a moment, and then stand on that measurement disc?"

"Okay."

After forming a party with Saito using her D-Card, I had Miyoshi operate the SMD while I discreetly opened Making.

Name: Ryoko Saito

SP: 4.19

HP: 35.00

MP: 62.80

STR: [-] 10 [+]



VIT: [-] 16 [+]  
INT: [-] 31 [+]  
AGI: [-] 26 [+]  
DEX: [-] 53 [+]  
LUC: [-] 12 [+]

It looked like she had gained nine points of SP since I'd last distributed her stats, with half going naturally into DEX (dexterity), AGI (agility), and INT (intelligence).

The results Miyoshi recorded using the SMD were the same.

"How many times have you dived since we last measured your stats?"

"Let's see... Three times?"

*Three times... That would mean an average of around 150 slimes per dive.*

"You've really put in the effort. Your stats have gone up quite a bit."

"Naturally. I have to try to keep up with Haru, after all." Saito smirked.

*Yeah, Mitsurugi's training regimen can be a little overzealous.*

"So, how much time do you have before the shoot?" I asked.

"I have other filming I can't miss on the thirteenth, so we'll probably be heading to the dungeon a day or two after that. I've got prep work for a TV show coming up at the end of the month, and I was told the pilot footage would take around three days to shoot, so if we don't get in soon, I won't make it."

"Not great. That only gives us about...five days for training, including today."

"Wait, slow down. You aren't suggesting five whole days of training, are you?! What about lessons? Rehearsals?! I've still got other things scheduled!"

"Can't you cancel?"

"I could, but... Ugh, I'm going to get a reputation for being a flake. And here I am, so cute, wasting all my good looks just to get a rep for being a pain-in-the-ass diva."

As much as I hated to admit it, truth be told I couldn't disagree that she was

cute...at least a little.

*Kei, in the meantime, let's pair her with one of the Arthurs. We can figure out the rest of our plan from there.*

*Kind of last-minute planning, huh?*

*Right? And I thought that was supposed to be your specialty!*

*You know, I've been meaning to bring this up for a while, but I feel like you've got some wrong ideas about me...*

"Still though, three days of shooting. This isn't really my area, but doesn't your manager have to join you too?" I asked.

"Ah, that's all right. I worked that out. They don't need to know."

Apparently she would be taking vacation during the shooting days, just as she had when doing her dungeon training with Mitsurugi. Her manager didn't have a D-Card in the first place, so they couldn't join her even if they'd wanted to.

"Great! It's like the start of an unofficial boot camp!" Miyoshi chimed in. "Should we invite Mitsurugi too?"

"Unfortunately she's busy getting ready for an event in NY," Saito explained. "Unlike me, she never cuts out on appointments."

"'NY'?" Miyoshi and I repeated.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Kei, I'm surprised you haven't heard of it! It's a city in America originally called New Amsterdam," Miyoshi explained.

According to Miyoshi, control had switched from the Dutch to the British, at which point it had been renamed New York, but at some point, it had also come back under Dutch control and spent a year as New Orange.

"I know *that*! I'm asking what the event is!"

"Hm? It's the 2019 fall-winter New York Fashion Week. It starts next month on the seventh," Saito answered.

"Fashion Week? What's Mitsurugi doing there? Isn't she signed with a studio or something?"

“Ah! About that! Around the middle of December, she had an awakening! ‘I feel like I’ve got all this *zeal*!’ she said.”

“‘Zeal’?”

*What, has she unlocked an extra move per turn or something?*<sup>(1)</sup>

“Wait, didn’t she tell you when we were out at Tokyo Midtown?”

*Come to think of it, she did say something strange at the time. I think it was “I’ll consider it a Christmas present.”*

*Kei, her DEX was up to 70. She probably sensed something had changed.*  
Miyoshi signaled me over telepathy.

*Ah, yeah,* I responded. *That’s probably it.*

“I saw one of her lessons around that time. She was practically glowing. She had, like, an aura. Like, ‘aaaah.’” Saito moved her hands in an arc in front of her face and mimicked choir singing.

“What is that?” I asked, stifling a laugh.

“An aura! That’s what it felt like, anyway. So at that point, they said they had nothing left to teach her, so henceforth she could just rely on her own intuition and experience.”

“‘Intuition’?”

“You know, like, for what to wear and how to show it off and that stuff. Anyway, the timing happened to work out, so some bigwig watching her lesson arranged a brand deal for Fashion Week.”

*Just like that? Must be a pretty formidable bigwig.*

“But...don’t people usually say Japanese models are too short for the international scene? No offense.”

Mitsurugi was on the tall side for a woman at a little over 170 centimeters, but that didn’t hold a candle to the giants storming international runways. I’d heard even 180 centimeters wasn’t uncommon among the models for major collections.

“That’s starting to change,” Saito explained. “Besides, while 171 centimeters



might be on the short end, more and more actresses are making the jump into modeling work too, so there are plenty around 173 centimeters or so.”

“’S that so?”

“Plus, they’re trying to diversify a bit. You know, after all that bad press about models being too thin and too one-size and that stuff.”

“Yeah...”

If they took that line of thinking too far, they might wind up with selection processes that had nothing to do with models’ abilities at all, but... *That’s a problem for another time.*

“There are people calling Gisele Bündchen the last true supermodel, you know,” Saito added.

“Well, in the meantime, it sounds like a good deal for Mitsurugi!” I replied.

“Yeah! Be sure to offer her your congratulations before she takes off for the event!”

“Will do! By the way, when does she get back?”

Saito promptly rattled off scheduling details. “She’s heading out at the end of the month, but if she does the whole Fashion Week tour, she’d be in London the fifteenth through the nineteenth of February, then in Milan the nineteenth through the twenty-fifth. After that, Paris the twenty-fifth through the fifth of March. So around then? But if she gets to put in one appearance, she might be back earlier. I’m not sure.”

“Whoa. That’s pretty intensive.”

“No rest for the weary, they say.”

Then again, Saito was no slouch herself. *Although no need to tell her that now. Don’t need her getting a big head.*

Still, judging from Saito’s experience, Mitsurugi should also have six or seven SP built up. *I should probably meet with her once before she takes off and distribute them.*

“Kei, about our unofficial boot camp plans,” Miyoshi prodded.

“Ah, right. Back to the topic at hand. For right now you can room with Miyoshi, and we’ll have you get started bright and early tomorrow.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Time is of the essence, right?”

“I know, but... Ugh. I’m just supposed to cancel all my lessons and only show up for shoots? It’s going to look like I’m slacking off for five whole days even though I’m not slacking off at all. And I won’t even be at home... Oh, I can just see all the rumors that are going to spread. That I’m cavorting with some man, or that I think I’m too good for other appointments... Oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Seeing Saito cradle her head in distress, I half-heartedly suggested she simply say she was going away for special training she could only do for the next five days.

She looked up with a serious expression. “Really? I’ll be happy to do that! As long as you’re comfortable with the crowd of curious onlookers who’ll gather outside your office when I do.”

*Uh, why does that feel like a threat?*

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After Saito had temporarily left our office to contact all the relevant parties about her training schedule, Miyoshi walked back into the room with a stack of papers in hand.

“So I know we’re already dealing with a lot right now, but I’ve recently made a discovery we might want to check out.”

“‘A discovery’? What?”

“I’ve pinpointed a dungeon with small floor sizes we can use for experiments.”

Miyoshi held out a list of the estimated floor sizes across all dungeons in Japan. Outside of the country, there were plenty of dungeons with small floors, but there’d be no way we could use those.

“Here,” she declared. “Yokohama.”

“Yokohama?”

Yokohama Dungeon had once had a brief flash of popularity as the “Loot Box Dungeon.” I’d never been, but I was still familiar with it.

“The one built under that shopping complex? I heard it took over the space originally designed for an underground parking garage, so it should still be pretty large. Although nothing compared to Yoyogi.”

If the still generously proportioned Yokohama were truly the smallest we could find, maybe a dungeon small enough for respawn-tracking experiments just didn’t exist in Japan.

“Kei, don’t rush to conclusions. The monsters in Yokohama are all unusually strong, right?”

“So I’ve heard. Even the JSDF had to turn back at the third floor. Apparently no one’s made it beyond that?”

“That’s right. It’s one of the few super difficult dungeons with JDA entry restrictions. Even still, there are people who think something’s fishy about the dungeon and have continued investigating.”

“‘Something fishy’? You mean why its monsters are so strong?”

“Precisely.”

“Are we talking credible researchers or just a bunch of nutjobs?”

The overwhelming consensus was that differences in monster strength between dungeons was a matter of random variance. If there were people that dedicated to proving otherwise, they were either off their rockers or had seriously compelling evidence.

“Norihiro Kunai, age thirty-one. Or, as he’s also known, Loot Box Dungeon Master Tenko.”

I unwittingly furrowed my brow upon hearing the name. “Is there *anyone* in the exploring world without an alias these days?”

“In this case he chose it himself, but it caught on with his fans.”

“Chose it himself? So we’re dealing with a showboat.”



“Anyway, he has a theory that each of the steps leading into the dungeon is actually its own separate floor.”

“What? But that means—”

According to the Building Standards Act, indoor staircases had to be constructed with steps of a maximum height of twenty-three centimeters and a minimum depth of fifteen centimeters.

Parking garages tended to have low ceilings, but allowing space for beams and the thickness of the flooring itself, each floor should still have been around three meters high. Figuring each step for twenty centimeters, that would mean fifteen steps per floor of the parking garage.

If there were one floor of the parking garage every fifteen steps, that would mean each of what we considered a Yokohama “dungeon floor” should effectively have its floor numbering increased by a factor of sixteen.

“Interesting theory,” I responded, “but aren’t the monsters on each floor actually a little too weak for that?”

“There are still plenty of ways of rationalizing it. Like that there’s some kind of strength cap because each floor is so small, or that there’s only a new floor every two steps, or some other unique factor of the dungeon.”

“If we’re taking ‘other unique factors of the dungeon’ into account, you could justify almost any theory.”

“Let’s not get too hung up on that. The thing is, after about a year of keeping an eye out, he finally spotted a monster outside of the main basement floors. Or so he claims.”

“You mean on one of those small staircase steps? And the monster couldn’t leave?”

Ordinarily, monsters couldn’t leave the floor upon which they’d spawned.

However, there were three exceptions.

First, right when a dungeon formed, there was a phenomenon of goblins and other weak monsters wandering around just outside of its entrance. It was theorized that this served as a sign to the outside world that a new dungeon

had arrived. Every once in a while, very rarely, first-floor monsters would wander the area just outside of a dungeon's entrance even after it had formed, which was thought to serve a similar function.

The second exception was monsters aggroed over a certain amount following a target up or down a floor. Ordinarily, monsters would let their targets escape at the boundary between floors, as if they'd lost some kind of lock-on. However, repeatedly aggroing a monster and running away, or getting into a particularly fierce battle, would sometimes lead to this pursuit behavior.

The third exception was what were apparently called "stampedes." We only knew of them from translated dungeon inscriptions. A real occurrence was yet to be recorded. Apparently if a dungeon floor were left alone long enough and the monsters on it became overpopulated, they would exit the floor in order to secure more space.

Judging from the fact that it hadn't happened at Yoyogi in all the time its first floor had remained relatively untouched, reaching the population threshold for a stampede must take a considerable amount of time. However, we weren't sure why it hadn't happened yet in an unexplored dungeon somewhere, or why monsters hadn't bubbled up from lower floors that explorers hadn't yet reached in known dungeons. It seemed like it was only a matter of time. Or perhaps there was some other phenomenon keeping monster density in unexplored locations in check. The topic was still in need of research.

"It wasn't on one of the steps. Maybe there aren't enough D-Factors present on each one to support monster spawns. The place he saw it was on a staircase landing. Or to borrow Tenko's wording, the 'landing floor.'"

"'Landing floor'..."

"If he's right, we'd be looking at one of the smallest dungeon floors in the world. No doubt about it."

Well, we wouldn't be able to confirm just by thinking. Seemed like some legwork was in order.

"Should we give it a visit?" I asked.

"I thought you might say that, so I set up an appointment with Tenko."

“What? Is his contact information public?”

“About that. He runs a blog called *Real Dungeon Yokohama*. Naturally he has a YouTube channel too.” Miyoshi brought up his site on her tablet.

“Uh-huh...”

“Hey, it’s not a bad quality to be good at self-promotion, you know.”

“I guess not. But when are we supposed to meet? We also have Saito’s training to get to.”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Strike while the iron’s hot. We can get Saito acquainted with the routine in the morning, then leave her and Aethlem together to keep going in the afternoon.”

“I guess with the two of them together, it should be all right.”

“It’s only the first floor after all.”

*Right. Plus, we’ve already spawned the Manor on the first floor, so there shouldn’t be any danger.*

Nodding at Miyoshi’s response, while still feeling a little uneasy about meeting with someone like Tenko, I resolved to go along with Miyoshi to our meeting at Sakuragicho the next day.

## **Ministry of Defense, Ichigaya**

“And how may I help you today?” The voice on the other end of the line was unusually jovial.

“Saiga, it’s Terasawa. Been a while. I’m calling about yesterday’s orb auction.”

“You mean about the item box orb?”

“It wasn’t included in the list of auction orbs.”

“Don’t tell me you actually had plans to bid on it?”

Terasawa bit his tongue. Saiga knew very well the Ministry wouldn’t allow him



the funds to bid on it.

“There’s just one thing I want you to tell me,” Terasawa said.

“What is it?”

“The capacity—how much does the skill let you hold?”

Even if Type 10 tanks or Type 16 maneuver combat vehicles were out of the question, the ability to bring even a protected mobility vehicle into dungeons would greatly improve the safety of dungeon-bound troops. If they were able to store Apaches, the range of areas they could easily explore would increase several fold.

“Ah yes.” There was a pause from the other end of the line. “Truth be told, we’re not sure yet.”

“Not sure?” Terasawa didn’t follow. Hadn’t Saiga beaten other bidders to the punch and arranged an advanced purchase? If he had, surely someone at the JDA had used the orb by now. “Do you mean you haven’t retrieved the orb yet?”

“There is that, but... Terasawa, let me pose you a question. Say the JSDF got the orb. Who would you have use it?”

“I would—”

Terasawa paused. He wasn’t sure how much the JDA had paid for the orb, but he was sure it was no small sum. In order to use the orb, they would have to bind that exorbitant purchase to a single individual. And it was far easier to bind orbs to individuals than to bind individuals to their jobs.

In modern Japan, where the ability to change work was an inalienable right, who exactly would they entrust with such a valuable item? It was a difficult question.

Terasawa was at a loss.

“Well, there you have it,” Saiga responded. “We can’t confirm the skill’s abilities if we can’t identify a suitable user.”

“But, the orb count—”

“Has been taken care of with a little *ingenuity*.”

“Ingenuity?” Terasawa was left scratching his head at Saiga’s implication.  
“Well, if you learn anything...”

“You’ll be the first person I call. However, I’d like to ask one favor.”

“A favor?”

“If anything happens, I’d like to ask for your cooperation.”

“If *what* happens?”

“*Anything*.”

When it came to the user of this orb, it certainly seemed like any number of problems could arise. However, if all went well, the JSDF might be able to borrow the orb-user’s skills in return. If Terasawa couldn’t decide who in his own organization he would have use the orb, outsourcing the decision while still reaping the benefits seemed like an attractive choice.

“Understood. Seems like there are a number of ways we could be mutually supportive of one another’s efforts moving forward.” Terasawa ended the call.  
“Anything...” he repeated, setting the phone back on its base.

## **January 9, 2019 (Wednesday)**

### **Sakuragicho, Yokohama**

After getting Saito accustomed to her training in the morning, we left her with Aethlem and headed over to Sakuragicho.

It took the same amount of time to get to Yokohama from Yoyogi-Hachiman on the Shonan-Shinjuku Line by way of Shinjuku Station as it did walking to Yoyogi-Koen Station and going to Meiji-Jingumae to catch the F-Liner.

However, the latter route was cheaper by one hundred yen. Still unable to shake the stinginess of our working days, we subconsciously left from Yoyogi-Koen rather than the closer Hachiman.

“Just once, I’d like to hail a cab and tell them to go all the way to Yokohama,” I commented.

“Why?” Miyoshi responded. “Trains are both faster *and* more reliable.”

I couldn’t argue with that. That was pretty typical with traffic in big cities.

Miyoshi gripped the train car handle. Her waist-length black hair swayed back and forth with the rattling of the car.

“Did you really need the costume today?” I asked.

She was wearing the same outfit she’d used at the press conference.

“I told Tenko he was going to meet with Miyoshi of D-Powers. As far as the public knows, this is how Miyoshi from D-Powers looks. But let me flip that around on you. Are you okay going out in your normal clothes?”

“I’ll be fine. You’re the main attraction, after all. I’m just some random guy.”

“Should I tell him I’m having my boyfriend tag along?”

“Now you’re just trying to make me feel awkward! But it might be a good cover. It’s probably not a bad idea considering you’re meeting a strange guy for the first time too.”

“I look forward to your full cooperation. Don’t do anything to embarrass me.”

After about an hour being jostled around on train cars, we arrived at Sakuragicho Station, slipping through the north ticket gates and making our way toward the east exit.

Stepping outside, we were greeted with a deserted, rather run-down public square.

“I heard there was a public square outside the station, but this is more like...just some abandoned space?”

“There’s probably no way around that,” Miyoshi responded. “The space was designed to be rented out for up to four events at a time.”

Rectangular borders inlaid in red brick ran along the ground, perhaps to make each of the four rental areas easier to distinguish.

“That building on the left is the Nouveau Mare. Also known as the Dungeon Building,” Miyoshi explained.

“Seriously? It’s right next to the station?”



Back when the building was under construction, it had a different name—the Something-or-Other Mare. After development had restarted following the formation of a dungeon on its basement floors, the name was updated to the “Nouveau” Mare. Though it had come to be known as the “Dungeon Building” either way.

“We’re meeting him at—let’s see—there! The Tsubakiya Café. You can see it on the second floor. We’re almost late. Let’s hurry!”



At Miyoshi's insistence, we rushed up the steps at the front of the building, heading to the second floor.

The first-floor doors, originally intended to serve as the main entrance to the shopping complex, had been repurposed as the entrance to a JDA on-site branch office. The first and second floors were no longer connected inside.

"Miyoshi! What's up? Back here!" A voice called Miyoshi's name as soon as we entered the café. A man with a pronounced tan waved at us from a booth near the back.

"That him?" I asked.

"Looks like him," Miyoshi responded. "That's Tenko."

The man stood up and engaged Miyoshi in a vice-grip handshake with his right hand. His left clutched a selfie stick, with which he began taking pictures.

*Man, this guy doesn't hold back from the start.*

"Man, so boss of you dudes to come out. I'm Tenko."

*"So boss"? Does anyone talk like that anymore?*

"Um, forgive me for asking, Mr. Kunai?" Miyoshi started. "We heard you were from Kanagawa. Is that right?"

"Aw, c'mon, bros! No need to be so formal. Call me Tenko! All the fans do. Tenkonation! But—ahem—yeah, okay, so the speaking style is a gimmick. But it plays well with the audience, so you'll have to forgive me if I keep it up. I do apologize for maybe coming on a bit too strong."

"What?!"

As if a switch had been flipped, Tenko's mannerisms had reverted to those of an ordinary, somewhat demure Tokyoite. I couldn't contain my shock.

"I can sense your surprise. But look, an ordinary Yokohama boy showcasing its dungeon's nothing special, right? Affecting the west-coast persona helps me stand out. Plus it plays into entertainer culture. Although to be more specific, I'm from Shonan. You know, by the bay." He did seem like the type who might have been a laid-back southern Kanagawa beach-kid before putting on the

abrasive YouTuber act. “Anyway, I’ve been doing the character bit ever since, and brah, like, it just, like, became this whole thing, man, so if you could just be chill with it I’d really appreciate it, bro.” He grinned.

“Ah, er, got it. So anyway, er, Tenko—?”

“What’s shakin’, Mi-yossh? Ask me anything—you *know* Tenko’s got the answer.”

“Er, ah, right. Great.”

Before we could go any further, a waitress in an old-fashioned European maid uniform came by to take our orders. Elsewhere, male staff in modern French garçon-styled outfits scurried about, making for a bit of an inconsistent atmosphere.

Orders placed, Miyoshi got back to the business at hand.

“So I mentioned this in my email, but you had an interesting theory about the ‘landing floor.’”

“That’s right! You believe me? I saw something spawn once from above, just for an instant. Bro, I’m sure of it. But I’ve never seen anything else in that spot.”

“Did you go check it out afterward?”

“Check it out? Oh bro-ther. Read ‘em and frickin’ *weep*, bro.”

Tenko pulled out his WDA license card. A bold letter C was written next to his rank.

“Rank C?!”

“Ya see? Ahem, no pun intended. I can’t even get into the dungeon because o’ their stupid restrictions.”

“Wait, so, you can’t even enter the dungeon. But then how did you see that rogue spawn?”

“About that...”

Yokohama Dungeon was currently closed off to all explorers not registered to a party with at least one member of Rank B or above. However, anyone possessing a WDA license card could at least get as far as the first floor’s

reception area.

While gazing longingly from reception at the staircase down to the first floor, Tenko had seen, just for an instant, a monster out of the corner of his eye.

“I got all excited and tried to see what was up, you dig? But I got held back by JDA security.”

“Makes sense.”

“But maaaaan, it sucks. That was the find of the century, you know? And now who’s gonna believe me?”

*Hey Miyoshi, are we sure this guy’s all there upstairs?* I signaled Miyoshi over telepathy.

*Erm, well, I can’t say I’m one hundred percent certain...*

“We’re going to put in a dive,” Miyoshi said to Tenko. “Would you mind showing us exactly which landing it was?”

“What? Whoa, don’t tell me. Are the two of you B Rank?”

“Ah, well, um—”

Before Miyoshi could even answer, Tenko leaned forward across the table.

“I’m the one who discovered it! Me, right?! C’mon, you gotta take me with you! I’m straight beggin’ ya here! It’s my find! You see it my way, right, Miyossh?”

“Er? Well, uh, you’d have to get ready with your gear—”

“Gimme thirty—no, fifteen—minutes! I’ll be right back, I swear!”

“Okay. Got it. We’ll just go check things out in the meantime, so we’ll meet you in thirty minutes at reception.”

“Really? Thank you! Thank you!!! This is huge. You won’t regret it! I’ll be back with my stuff. Don’t you two go anywhere!” Tenko bolted up from his seat and ran toward the café doors.

“That guy...is a pretty strong character.” He’d practically left a trail of dust in his wake.

“I’ll say,” Miyoshi responded. “Plus, he left us with the check.”

Of course he *probably* hadn’t meant to, but he was at risk of being considered a dine-and-dasher.

“Well, *we’re* the ones who called saying we wanted to meet *him*, remember? We’ve made our bed and now we have to lie in it.” I sighed. “Whatever. Let’s go ahead and check out the first floor of the dungeon before he gets back. I don’t want any surprises when we’re down there with a first-time team member.”

“I read you loud and clear.”

We beat feet to the first-floor reception entrance.

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“So this is Yokohama Dungeon?” Having finished our paperwork at reception, I stared down at a dimly lit set of stairs leading to the first basement floor.

The first basement floor of the Yokohama Dungeon Building had originally been designed for grocery stalls and small shops, and still featured the original storefronts and shelving. Perhaps because the layout it had incorporated was unsuited to boss fights, the boss rooms the Loot Box Dungeon was known for started from its second underground floor, which was the top floor of the building’s underground parking garage.

“I wish we knew exactly where the dungeon proper started,” I commented. “Do you think it includes this staircase?”

“Couldn’t you check that with Making, see where the experience intake resets?”

I could enter the dungeon, defeat a monster, come back up different distances, then reenter and see where the experience reset according to Making’s SP tracker. That way we’d know exactly where the dungeon’s boundaries extended. However—

“No good. That’ll include ‘Floor Zero,’ the area slightly outside of the dungeon, above the first floor. It won’t help us figure out exactly where the dungeon’s first floor begins.” We would know how far the dungeon’s influence extended, but it wouldn’t help us resolve the issue of what exactly counted as a



floor. “But maybe with Making and some creative problem-solving, we can find some other way to test it.”

“Well, should we head in?” Miyoshi asked. “No time like the present!”

We were dressed in the same basic explorer gear we used for our trips to Yoyogi. Miyoshi flipped on her helmet-mounted camera and began descending the stairs.

Until Tenko got back, we wouldn’t have to worry about concealing our abilities while exploring. According to reception, there weren’t any other teams currently diving Yokohama’s first floor. Forget underpopulated—we had the whole place to ourselves.

Heading twelve steps down the staircase, we encountered a landing. This was likely the spot Tenko had been speaking about.

We scanned our surroundings to make sure there wasn’t some sort of slime wriggling around, but there didn’t seem to be anything in sight.

“Maybe it was just a trick of the light.” I looked up at the previous steps from the landing. There was almost no light this far in. In the darkness, it would have been easy to light flash off someone’s gear or of a handrail for a monster.

“Or, they might really appear here, and passing explorers have always just taken them out without thinking anything of it.”

There were times when monsters would slip out from the first floor and wander around the dungeon’s immediate outside perimeters. It was one of the few exceptions in which monsters—which otherwise didn’t ordinarily move floors—could move beyond the areas that spawned them. That was part of the reason areas surrounding dungeon entrances were so carefully monitored by the JDA.

Passing explorers might simply have figured any instances of monsters on the landing were examples of that phenomenon—weak monsters wandering around just outside of the dungeon’s bounds—never imagining the monsters had actually spawned there with the landing as their native floor. The possibility wasn’t zero.

Just in case, I’d have to ask at reception afterward if there had been any

reports of monsters appearing on the stairs.

We walked down a further fourteen steps, arriving at the door to the building's first basement floor. To our right was the staircase to the second basement floor, surrounded in inky darkness. It led directly down to the first floor of the underground parking garage and the dungeon's famed boss room floors.

"Kei, let's be careful. The monsters that spawn here are supposed to be the equivalent to the seventh or eighth floor of Yoyogi. That means orc or blood bear class."

"Lots of humanoid beast types, then?"

"No such luck, unfortunately. According to the research I did, the things to watch out for here are the spiders."

"Spiders?"

"Yokohama's home to huge jumping spiders, almost fifty centimeters across. Their official name is—drumroll, please—'jumping spider.'"

"Guess I expected something a little more unique, but at least that's easy to remember. Still though, bug monsters? I'm not afraid or anything, but they still kind of yuck me out."

"Kei, spiders aren't technically 'bugs.' They're—"

"I know! You don't have to correct me on *everything*. Anyway, what else are we dealing with here?"

*Come to think of it, do dungeon monsters have a distinction between insects and arachnids?*

"Giant centipedes and jellyfish."

"Hold on, is there water somewhere on this floor?"

*Don't tell me part of the floor is submerged!*

"Apparently they float in the air. They're called *Cyanea*."

"*'Cyanea'*? I feel like I've heard that be— Ah! 'The Adventure of the Lion's Mane'!"

“Yep! The dungeons really think of everything, don’t they?”

There were only two Sherlock Holmes stories penned by Arthur Conan Doyle not to feature an appearance by the series’s usual narrator Dr. Watson. Both took place when Watson was married and living apart from Holmes, and were told from the perspective of Holmes himself.

One of the two was “The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane.” It featured a giant jellyfish known as *Cyanea capillata*—also known as the “lion’s mane” jellyfish—possessed of a deadly sting. Measuring from the tips of their tentacles, the real specimen could apparently be up to dozens of meters long.

“Um, they’re not *that* long, right?” I asked.

If they were sixty meters long, we wouldn’t be safe anywhere on the floor.

“According to the data, the length of the jellyfish monsters’ tentacles is about a meter,” Miyoshi responded.

“Oh thank god. Then let’s take ’em out without getting too close.”

“Roger.”

“But still, you’d think the dungeons would have dogs and snakes mixed in somewhere too.”

“*The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the ‘Speckled Band’?” Miyoshi asked, using the English titles of other famous Holmes stories.

“The Adventure of the Speckled Band” lost a bit in translation, with the Japanese not quite catching some of the inherent wordplay. Reading it outside of English, you might not understand why Doyle considered it his favorite Holmes short.

“Yep! The guy has a snake he can summon with a whistle, and it enjoys milk too.”

“Unfortunately(?), no snakes or dogs appear on Yokohama’s first floor.”

Amid our Holmesian banter, I opened the door to the first floor.

Inside, it seemed to be an ordinary department store grocery vendor floor. However—

“I can hardly see a thing.”

About the only light sources were the emergency floor lights installed here and there, throwing dim light up from the ground.

“Hold on, does this place have electricity?” I asked.

“Nope.” Miyoshi shook her head.

“Then what’s up with those floor lights?”

“Evidently they’re a dungeon object.”

I narrowed my eyes and stared at a nearby floor light. I half expected it to start moving.

Of course I knew any artificial object in a dungeon would be cleaned up by slimes, so no doubt these were of dungeon origin. But no matter how hard I looked at them, I couldn’t see any differences from the real thing.

“Then all the grocery shelving too?” I asked.

“Apparently it can’t be broken, so yep, I guess that too.”

I knocked on one of the grocery shelves, which gave off a hollow clunk.

“Man, looking at this stuff, it seems like our dungeon 3D printer dream might not be so far-fetched after all,” I commented.

“Sure. If we can just figure out how to set a respawn trigger for inorganic substances.”

Right now the only probable respawn trigger we had a lead on was seed germination. Getting inorganic substances to germinate was, needless to say, beyond our current capabilities.

After taking a quick glance around the immediate area, I switched on my headlamp.

“Well, should we go ahead?” I asked.

“We’d better. If we don’t hurry, we’ll have to meet up with Tenko before we get a chance to explore.”

“Oh, that’s right. Man, this is kind of a pain.”

“Come on, Kei. For what it’s worth, he *is* helping us out. Not all heroes wear capes, and not all explorers are international task force members or S Ranks. Sometimes an—er, ordinary?—explorer can get the job done too.”

“‘Not all heroes wear capes...’ That kind of reminds me of an old tokusatsu hero I saw in a documentary. The show was all about an ordinary guy who summoned the hero every episode instead of transforming. What was his name again...? Ah! Hold on! Something’s coming.”

Life Detection had pinpointed something making its way toward us in quick bursts. It would dash a meter or so forward, then stop, then dash forward again.

“It’s probably a spider,” Miyoshi commented. “Yuck! That seems like their MO.”

“Okay,” I said, buckling down. “Let’s see how they like magic attacks.”

“This one’s all you! Good luck!”

Thinking of that everyman tokusatsu hero whose name I couldn’t recall, I readied a water lance. Under my breath, I mumbled the name of his special attack. He’d used a sky-blue beam, and it somewhat resembled a water lance, after all.

“Gedoshoshin Reihakosen!”

Roughly translated into English, the attack name the hero had used came out something like “evil-illuminating spirit-bursting light ray.”

“Kei... You are unbelievable.” Miyoshi stared at me with a look of pained embarrassment.

I fired off two water lances; both made contact with the spider, which had leaped out toward us from the shadows, midair.

The creature fell to the ground with a thud, then twitched a few times and disintegrated into particles of black light, as dungeon monsters always did. Afterward, I heard the sound of a small object rattling on the ground.

Seeing what lay at my feet, I froze.

“M-Miyoshi...?”

Miyoshi walked over nonchalantly and picked up something tiny and reflective from the ground. In her hands, it refracted the dim glow of the floor lights, sparkling in the dark.

“It’s a round, brilliant-cut blue diamond. It looks like it weighs about two carats,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Th-Thine evil form cannot escape my eye! Reveal yourself, Diamaniac!” I pointed toward the floor where the spider had been, mimicking the trademark phrase from the TV show I’d been thinking about, shouted just before its titular hero forced monsters hiding in society to reveal their true forms.

Miyoshi was in no mood to play along. I couldn’t even get a trademark “Argh, you got me!”—uttered by the villains every episode in response to being uncovered—out of her. Figured.

“Hello, Kei. Back to reality. Do you want to figure out what just happened or not?”

“Of course I do! What the hell’s a jumping spider doing dropping a two-carat diamond?!”

If other people found out about this, Yokohama Dungeon would enjoy its second wind and then some.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because this isn’t actually the ‘first floor.’ It’s deeper than the twentieth. The drops are reacting to Mining.”

“B-But even then...”

“That’s definitely it. Although it’s pretty crazy that the drops happened to be diamonds while you were thinking about *Diamond Eye*. But that’s *probably* just a coincidence.”

*Diamond Eye*—the show had stuck around as a bit of a pop-culture meme due to its hero’s slightly goofy appearance and his weirdly memorable delivery of the special technique name I’d quoted earlier. However, that was just the name of the beam he used to reveal the monsters’ true forms. Almost nobody remembered the name of his actual finishing technique. A slightly dubious distinction in the annals of pop-culture fame. There were probably people who thought the name of the revelation technique *was* his finishing technique. Poor



guy.

However, was the drop item *really* just a coincidence? I couldn't help but have my doubts.

"Either way, this is good news, right?" Miyoshi commented. "We get a diamond, and we helped prove Tenko's theory too!"

If this really were equivalent with the twentieth floor or lower, that basically proved that the staircase steps counted as their own floors. Nothing else could explain Mining activating.

"So what do we do now?"

"I'm not sure," she responded. "In light of this, diving with Tenko actually is starting to seem like a bad idea. Say he spots us defeating a monster and diamonds start dropping to the ground? That guy's going to be getting footage of our every move."

"Speaking of, this isn't like most dungeons. It's one that formed inside of a man-made structure. What happens with, like, signal reception in here? Could he stream?"

Yoyogi Dungeon was held to be some sort of subspace, independent from the physical reality around it. Yokohama Dungeon, however, had converted an existing physical structure. If Tenko were able to stream and I got careless during a monster attack, I could kiss my cover as an ordinary explorer, along with any last semblance of privacy I had, goodbye.

Miyoshi took out her phone and held it out near the entrance, checking for signal bars.

"Nothing. Despite all appearances, it looks like this is a totally separate subspace as well."

"Phew. At least that's one less worry."

In my relief, I almost didn't notice something scuttling around in the distance, just barely managing to catch it out of the corner of my eye.

Whatever it was had been perfectly still up until now, so I hadn't paid it much attention. However, it looked like it was drawn toward light. Every time I moved

my head, it scuttled forward, following the headlamp beam.

“Miyoshi! Look out!”

We were staring at a grotesque centipede about the length of a human adult. Dozens of hard-shelled, yellowish legs crisscrossed along the ground, propelling their snakelike owner toward us at an alarming speed.

Before I could even move, Miyoshi—face contorted in anguished disgust—unleashed a flurry of 2.5 centimeter iron balls, flinging them in the monster’s direction. The balls found their target, crushing the giant centipede’s head. Its chitinous exterior caved inward. Even with the creature dead, Miyoshi still looked uneasy. I could understand why.

“Yiiikes.” She let out a sigh.

“I’d hate to think about what would happen if one of those dropped from the ceiling.”

When slimes fell on you, all they did was cling to you and make it hard to get them off. If one of those things landed on your head, the last thing you’d see would probably be the inside of its oversized mandibles.

“Stop! Don’t say that!” Miyoshi cried. She looked up toward the ceiling, illuminating it with her headlamp. Thankfully no giant centipedes lurked overhead.

With the huge centipede vanished, another sparkling gemstone had taken its place.

“I’ve never been more glad monsters don’t leave carcasses,” Miyoshi commented, picking the gem off the ground. “Hm. Looks like we’re finally seeing that three-to-one LUC difference take effect. Mine’s an ordinary white diamond—only around a single carat to boot.”

Round, brilliant-cut diamonds had diameters of 6.5 millimeters at one carat, and 8.2 millimeters at two carats. Even with such a slight difference though, you could tell when you looked up close.

“So, now we’ve confirmed the floor always drops diamonds,” I concluded.

“What’s more, they’re already cut. And they’re not melee diamonds either.”

Melee diamonds were exceptionally small, cut diamonds, usually polished from shavings of other, larger stones during the cutting process. They typically weighed less than 0.2 carats.

“Uh, is De Beers going to be after our heads?”

The De Beers Group was an international diamond consortium, and the de facto policymaker and price-setter for the world’s diamond industry.

We were standing on what was, in essence, the first floor of a dungeon, getting cut diamonds to drop. What’s more, a carat only weighed a measly 0.2 grams. Unlike weighty metal ingots, you could easily carry the tiny diamonds out of the dungeon by the bucketful.

To top things off, this particular diamond mine had no owner. Drop items belonged to whoever found them. There’d be no way to regulate the supply of stones coming out of Yokohama. If more than forty-nine users of Mining ever decided to gather on the first floor to enable mineral drops for everyone, as the dungeon inscriptions told us could happen, forget it—I didn’t even want to think about how frantic diving here could become. It’d be like a real-life version of popular farming locations in MMORPGs, with explorers fighting each other over kills. If the situation kept up, it could even devalue diamond prices the world over.

“Japan imports about 2 to 2.5 million carats of diamonds per year,” Miyoshi said. “I don’t think the output of a single, tiny dungeon floor would be enough to put a dent in that, but—wait, hold on.” She stared off into space for a minute, running calculations in her head. “Okay, no, wait. You’d need to kill two million monsters, so par would be a little over 5,500 monsters per day. You’d need to aim for 234 per hour, right? If you were just aiming for ten percent of total imports, Kei—you could manage that just by yourself.”

If the respawn rates were quick enough, twenty-three kills in an hour would be a cinch. Assuming a standard drop of one carat, Miyoshi’s math checked out.

With an average LUC stat, you might need to allow for the process taking three times as long, but that would still only increase par to seventy kills in an hour. With ten teams all farming the drops, par would be seven kills per team per hour. It all depended on monster respawn rates, but suddenly using the

dungeon to put a major dent into Japan's diamond imports didn't seem so out of the question.

"They might wind up enforcing new restrictions on dungeon diamonds like those on conflict diamonds," I remarked.

"I'm not so sure," Miyoshi responded. "Unlike conflict diamonds, there's no moral imperative. Dungeon diamond restrictions would be...for what? To protect profit margins? I don't think they'll get very far with a justification you wouldn't even normally own up to out loud."

In addition, the drops were already cut. Conflict diamond identification systems like the Kimberly Process were typically applied to raw stones. How would they ever differentiate dungeon diamonds from cut natural gems?

"Maybe at most they'll get a different categorization, like synthetic diamonds," Miyoshi continued. "But in this case, the makeup of the gems will probably show them to be indistinguishable from natural ones."

"Natural, huh...?" I rolled the two-carat blue diamond Miyoshi had picked up around in the palm of my hand.

"Maybe if there were some sort of identifying feature, rare dungeon-drop diamonds might even wind up being more valuable than their natural counterparts."

"Well, whatever. It's not going to do us any good racking our brains over this now. Let's kick it over to Naruse."

*"Got a problem in your way? Kick it over to Naruse." Hey, that has a nice ring to it. Maybe we should make it our new motto.*

I offered up a silent prayer for her sake that she wouldn't get *too* many new wrinkles on her forehead over this.

"Anyway," I said, "now we've got some evidence behind the theory of the landing floor we were thinking about using for our experiments. But how exactly do we go about doing that without getting in the way of other explorers?"

"Well, even though Yokohama has few visitors, it requires strict monitoring,

being in the middle of a population center. My guess is it operates way in the red,” Miyoshi explained. “With that in mind, maybe we could just buy it.”

“Huh?”

*Am I hearing right? Just “buy” a dungeon?*

“Or rent! Look around. We’re the only explorers even visiting this godforsaken place today. It’s basically a money pit for the JDA. And if we’re looking to buy the landing floor, which is a throughline to the rest of the first floor, then we could just rent out the whole first level...”

Which would allow us to sweep the whole diamond problem under the rug for right now, Miyoshi implied with a wink.

“You’re serious.” Still, there were hurdles. There were examples of individuals selling property to the JDA once a dungeon had formed, but none of the reverse. We’d be venturing into uncharted waters. “Say this works. If we could purchase anything, it’d still just be the land around the entrance, right? Dungeon interiors are technically under the jurisdiction of the WDA.”

“Kei, we complained about paying thirty thousand yen for three and a half square meters at Yoyogi, but we still set a precedent. Conservative organizations absolutely *love* precedent.” Miyoshi grinned. “Listen, Yoyogi might be stupid huge, but we know the numbers we’re working with here. We can run the math on a floor. The area for the entire shopping center property runs around eleven thousand square meters. The area for building itself is ninety-four hundred square meters. When the ownership rights changed hands after completion, the entire building sold for 66.5 billion yen.”

“How do you know so much?”

“It was written on a website by someone obsessed with big construction projects. The site’s over fifteen years old, but still getting updates. Incredible, right?”

Apparently Miyoshi had found it while trying to do research on Yokohama in advance of our visit.

“For an asking price, we’d probably be basing our requested portion on the building area of ninety-four hundred square meters, but even if we compromise

and base it on the full eleven-thousand-and-some square meters, one floor shouldn't run us more than one hundred million yen per month."

Our rent on the second floor of Yoyogi had been thirty thousand yen for roughly three and a third square meters. The full 11,032 square-meter space was roughly 3,333 times the space we had at Yoyogi.

Miyoshi had fussed about that being on par with rent for premium office space in areas like Shinjuku's third ward or Roppongi, but with that precedent set, we'd be looking at 99,999,999 yen per month.

"Right now just getting the first stairwell and basement floor should suit our needs, so we're looking at an annual price of 1.2 billion," Miyoshi continued. "We could rent it for a hundred years for 1.2 trillion yen."

Furthermore, given that the floor we'd be renting wasn't very valuable, we could probably haggle the price down, she added with a laugh.

There was no way, based on general public knowledge, that space on the first floor of Yokohama should be worth more than space in Yoyogi. Plus unlike last time, now we had precedent on our side, which left more room for negotiation.

A rattling sound echoed from near Miyoshi's foot. Looking down, her headlamp beam illuminated another small diamond.

"Ah, as long as *that* doesn't get discovered," she remarked.

If the JDA knew diamonds spawned in Yokohama, not only would the price increase, but they might not allow us to rent it at all.

"This has to be a drop from one of the Arthurs, right?" Miyoshi asked.

"Probably," I responded. "Just letting the pups run wild in here every once in a while could set us up for the rest of our lives."

Whenever a summoned creature killed a monster in the dungeon, drop items and experience were awarded to its summoner as if they had killed the monster themselves. Although we had yet to see what would happen with drop items if Miyoshi and the Arthurs were on different floors.

"I might be all right just covering rent that way," Miyoshi commented.

"Yeah, you're right. Can't get too greedy and all that." I didn't want to incur



the wrath of De Beers either. “But even if we rent the first floor, won’t people still need to go through the landing floor in order to go down to the second?”

“Kei,” Miyoshi responded in a disappointed tone. “The reason we’re going through the trouble of asking for the first floor rather than just the staircase landing—well, in addition to the diamonds now—is because the first floor is the only one that *needs* the staircase. If we rent it, there’s no problem with us having exclusive access to the stairs.”

“Huh?”

Miyoshi wagged her index finger back and forth, pointing to the back of the room with her thumb. “There’s another direct entrance to the second basement floor,” she said.

I finally realized what Miyoshi was getting at.

The second floor—in other words, the second basement floor of the building—had originally been designed as an underground parking garage. That meant there had to be a way for cars to get in—an entrance other than the stairs. If the JDA relocated their reception desk for the second floor to the outside car entrance, there would be no problem with our occupation of the first floor.

Of course there would still be the possibility of accessing the first floor by coming up from the second, but no one in their right mind would tell first floor-destined explorers they had to do that. The second floor and below consisted entirely of boss rooms, after all. If we rented out the first floor, it would make more sense to just declare movement to the first floor off-limits. It wasn’t what anyone came to Yokohama Dungeon for anyway.

“But if they need to move the reception area, renting out the floor to us might not save them that much money after all,” I pointed out.

“Don’t be so sure,” Miyoshi responded. “They have to be paying out the nose to maintain operations on the ground floor of an expensive shopping complex. The air conditioning and heating is set by the floor here as well, so they’ve got to be running up quite a utility bill for the whole thing.”

The first floor of the Dungeon Building had originally been intended to serve as the glamorous entrance to a high-end department store. Since the dungeon

conversion had only affected the basement floors, at first the owners had thought they might be able to conduct normal business on the first floor and above.

However, it was decided that they had to be equipped for the possibility of monsters wandering out from the dungeon near the entrance. The potential for no-fault liability claims was too high. Thus, they had arranged for the JDA to take responsibility via a combination of sales and leases. I wasn't sure what exactly the JDA's current contract with the building owners looked like, but however it was structured, paying for 9,400 square meters of premium real estate plus utilities couldn't be cheap.

"Additionally, the first floor of the building here was originally designed to be a department store, so it's got plenty of infrastructure set up. If we could buy that off the JDA too, it might not make a bad lab space," Miyoshi mused.

"'Lab space'?"

"We're thinking about stepping up our experiments, right? Why not use part of this location as home base?"

*Our own lab. It certainly would be convenient.*

"What d'ya think? It can be our own Shinshinan."

"Don't tell me you're ready to start giving thanks to the origins of the cosmos and all that."

Shinshinan was the name of the private villa used by Panasonic founder Konosuke Matsushita for the exploration of his "Peace and Happiness through Prosperity" philosophy. Apparently his beliefs focused on the "power of the origins of the cosmos."

"Doesn't that seem kind of like what the dungeons are?" Miyoshi asked.

"I guess so, when you put it that way."

Setting aside Miyoshi's fantasies, at an hour away from Yoyogi, Yokohama was within our range of conceivable travel distance.

Given how many stairs—each their own floor—led into the dungeon, the odds of a monster spawning on and escaping from the dungeon's first floor seemed

practically nonexistent, so we wouldn't have to worry about the no-fault liability risk either.

"It might not be a bad location," I admitted.

"Then I'll begin talks through our corporation."

"Okay. Let's show Tenko around for a bit and get home as soon as we can."

"You don't have to fight me on that one!"

Returning to reception to wait for Tenko to arrive, we went back and forth further inflating each other's ideas regarding our plans for the space.

## **Yoyogi Dungeon, First Floor**

"Hey, Aethlem. Let's take a rest. My back is killing me." Ryoko Saito stretched, accompanied by a series of loud pops. "Ugh, if anyone catches me doing this old-lady shtick, I can kiss my career goodbye!"

"Rruff?" Aethlem tilted his head sideways.

"Do you get it, Aethlem? No, I suppose not." Ryoko placed a hand on the hellhound's back, speaking to him as if he were a small child. "It's probably different for you—whatever you are..."

The other day when she'd been introduced to Aethlem as her guide, she had admittedly been put off. "Eh?! A dog?!" However, seeing how he seemed to understand all her commands, she'd come to almost want a smart pupper of her own. After just one day together, Ryoko already thought of him as a friend.

For Aethlem's part, he had been wary of the new companion he'd been entrusted to—hearing her go on and on about her pet theories and opinions, her speech like an unending stream of rain on his ears—but it was a hellhound's duty to fulfill their assignments without running or shirking. He would defend his new partner to the end.

"Or...do you get it?" Ryoko asked.

"R-Ruff!" Aethlem bowed his head.

"Man, you guys are so *smart*! I guess I shouldn't be surprised by anything

when dealing with dungeon monsters.”

Aethlem puffed out his chest, dog tag rattling from his collar, and let off a string of small barks.

“Oh, right. ‘Dog’! You’re a dog,” Ryoko corrected herself. “And such a *good boy!*”

Aethlem moved in toward Ryoko and nuzzled her cheek with his nose.

*Weird. Ordinarily a wolf or some kind of big animal would be offended by being compared to a dog, right?* But before Ryoko had time to reflect on Aethlem’s complexes further, he had pressed his nose hard into her side, nudging her to get up. Break time was over.

“Hey! What the heck—” Ryoko looked in front of her, seeing a translucent blue slime wriggling just a little ways ahead.

“Jeez, you’re worse than a drill instructor,” she mumbled. “Can’t a girl get her beauty rest?!”

Crocodile tears in her eyes, Ryoko readied her bottle of benzethonium chloride and spritzed.

## Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Howooooo! That’s a little Wolfman Jack comin’ at you this time, Tenkonation! What’s that? You don’t know Wolfman Jack? I know he’s been dead longer than some of my subscribers have been alive, but don’t let that stop you—he’s a super famous DJ. Look ’im up!”

*That figures.* Wolfman Jack might have been the go-to name in radio disc jockeying back in the twentieth century, but his cameo in *American Graffiti* helped put him on the map. That movie had come out in ’73, so it was only natural that younger viewers wouldn’t know him.

“Bro, this time I’ve got a banger for you, so you’re gonna wanna stick around. And don’t forget to *smash* that ‘like’ button while you’re at it. You’ll never believe who our special guest today is. But first, delivering the scoop as ever is your humble host with the hottest tips and tricks, latest dungeon dirt, the

daring dungeon diver, the Loot Box Dungeon Master, king of the fake Kansai accent, Tenko! Heh, jeez, not to toot my own horn.”

We were sitting back on our sofa, streaming Tenko’s YouTube channel on our TV.

He had already edited and uploaded the footage from this morning. I had to hand it to him. The guy was a serious pro.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen his stuff,” I commented. “I gotta admit, he’s almost got *me* hyped.”

“He definitely lays it on. Although I can’t believe he’s actually kept up his branding as an expert of Yokohama despite being only a C Rank and thus unable to enter the dungeon,” Miyoshi responded.

“No one would ever imagine that the Loot Box Dungeon master couldn’t actually enter the Loot Box Dungeon, right?”

“You can say that again.”

It might seem like a simple solution to just hang around Yoyogi while working on increasing his rank, but ranks in the WDA’s system weren’t so easily gained. Even with all the time he’d spent fighting bosses in Yokohama prior to the entry restrictions, Tenko had only risen to a C. It just showed how out of the ordinary Miyoshi’s sudden promotion to Rank S had truly been.

“Joining us today after that *fire* press conference is the topic of *all* the dungeon talk in Japan—hey, spare some of that attention for me!—the one, the only, the living legend herself, Miyoshi of D-Powers!!!”

“‘Living legend,’ he says.”

“Ugh. Leave me alone. I get it.”

“Now I can hear you all out there,” Tenko continued. “You’re saying no Japanese explorer could ever dethrone our number one, Queen Iori! I’ve got news for you. There’s room for two in town, dungeon fans! But listen, we’re a little YouTube channel. You think I can get a top-ranking JSDF member on here? But bro! Hook me up if you’ve got her deets!”

Tenko’s footage switched over to dramatic close-ups of Miyoshi—her cheeks,

fingers, glasses, earpieces, and—with particular emphasis—bust.

“Now I know what you’re thinking. ‘What’s up with the creeper pics, bro?’ Don’t worry, it’s just for my personal archives. I mean—! Nah, I’m just playing. Listen, Miyoshi is such a big superstar, she wouldn’t let me show her face on film! Said she still wanted to be able to walk around outside without attracting too much attention. Man, I wanna be able to say that just once! That’s such a cool line! Don’t forget to like and subscribe though, since maybe I can get there with *your* help!”

The footage switched to a close-up of Miyoshi handing her WDA license card to reception.

“Y’all see this, guys? Check this out!” The camera zoomed in on the card.

A thick black letter “S” with a pearl overlay sparkled on the card. Her name and other identifying information had been blurred out, but there was enough of the design visible that if someone wanted to use it as reference for an S Rank card forgery, they could.

“Is this really okay?” I asked. “Showing the card, I mean.”

Miyoshi’s S Rank was public information, available by referencing her commercial license, but S Rank cards themselves were hardly ever seen by the general public.

“Now I don’t know about you, but this is the first time I’ve ever seen an S Rank card. So they do exist!”

The video continued into footage of Tenko’s battles with monsters on Yokohama’s first floor, accompanied by his analysis and explanation.

True to his name as the Loot Box Dungeon Master, he seemed to know the monsters’ every move, to the point that it appeared he was hardly in danger at all. Judging from his commentary, he lived up to his reputation as an expert on the dungeon and its ferocious denizens.

Incidentally, the one holding the camera had been me.

He normally used an action camera, but since I happened to be along and seemed to not be doing much of anything, he had me play the cameraman role.



Luckily we were able to avoid having Miyoshi or any of the Arthurs fight. If they'd taken out a monster and caused a diamond drop while we were recording, the whole world would be in an uproar. Instead we'd decided to step back and act as a fawning audience for Tenko.

"So what'd ya think about today's battle footage, Tenkonation? Had to show off a little for my guest Miyoshi, of course. I thought about introducing y'all to today's cameraman too, but it seems like he's shy! Maybe another time!"

"Course there was also the possibility he was just getting nervous being inside the dungeon. I asked him 'bout his dungeon history, and get this—Miyoshi told me her beta buddy Yoshimura's an ordinary G Rank. An ordinary G Rank, in the Loot Box Dungeon?! Either he's out of his mind, or he knows something we don't!"

"Beta buddy?"

"Some weird netslang referring to guys who are passive."

*I see.* It reminded me of software version labeling. But I didn't see how the two were connected.

"Is he just making fun of me, then?"

"Maybe. I have no idea how men on the internet behave now."

"Knowing Tenko, he's just laying it on thick for show."

The comment section under the video was filled with responses like "What the hell, Tenko?!" and "Ask her about Appraisal, dude!!!" It looked like fans were pretty pissed he hadn't spent more time on Miyoshi. YouTubers had it rough too.

That evening when Naruse came by our office, Miyoshi consulted her about our plans for Yokohama.

"What? You want to *buy* Yokohama?" she spluttered.

"Whoa, whoa. You make it sound like I'm going to be wandering around Yokohama planting Cadnium ray devices everywhere."

"Huh? 'Cadnium'? Did you two find some kind of new item?"

“Are you hearing this, Kei?”

“Forget it. You’re talking to the former Miss Keio. She was a college pageant queen. She’s not going to know about old tokusatsu sci-fi series from the ’60s,” I responded unenthusiastically.

“Um...?” Naruse looked between Miyoshi and me.

“How do I explain...? They’re a fictional ray from an old tokusatsu TV show episode. The episode is called ‘I Want to Buy Kyoto,’” I responded.

“They’re super cool. They’re beams that can zap objects to other places! *Kr-zow!*”

“*That’s* enough.”

“Yowch!”

I delivered a playful chop to the top of Miyoshi’s head to get her to cut out the bullshit. “So would that be possible? Purchasing Yokohama, I mean,” I asked Naruse.

“Well, let’s see. As you know, most land surrounding dungeon entrances is public property, so Yokohama is the exception.”

Unlike most dungeons, forming through outside fissures, Yokohama Dungeon had emerged in the basement of an existing private facility and retained the surrounding structure. The entrance wasn’t some hole in the ground, but rather a preexisting basement staircase.

After tense negotiations, the JDA had arranged to buy the first floor—containing the entrance to the dungeon—from the building owners. The national government had been interested in purchasing the area and designating it public land, but butted up against all kinds of red tape trying to only buy the first floor of a building. Ultimately the JDA, enjoying a small amount more freedom as merely a government-affiliated organization, had taken point on the deal.

“With that in mind,” Naruse explained, “we’ll actually need permission from the building owners before the JDA can sell it.”

If a monster ever escaped from the first floor, the value of the floors above

would plummet with public outcry over the potential danger. The reputation of the Dungeon Building hinged on its perceived safety. If the organization purchasing the floor from the JDA wasn't one sufficiently equipped to compensate for potential losses, there was no way the owners would approve.

"Of course, I think D-Powers' financial status should assuage their concerns," Naruse commented. "Are you okay making the inquiry as your corporate entity?"

"Either way," I responded.

"This has basically been a point of consistent revenue loss for the JDA, so depending on the details, I imagine it'll be approved on our end. May I ask what you intend to use the space for?"

"Truth be told, what we're really interested in is renting out the first dungeon floor. But we figured it would be better to have the area in front of the entrance too."

"‘The first dungeon floor.’ You mean *only* the first floor of Yokohama Dungeon?"

"Yeah."

"Not the second?"

"People still use the lower floors, and we don't really need them anyway. No one would let us hear the end of it if we took away access to the Loot Box Dungeon, right?"

Yokohama's first floor couldn't be used for getting people D-Cards for telepathy training or trying to work up toward food drops either. Its monsters were way too strong for it to be a destination for beginners.

"But what exactly are you going to be doing on the floor? If we don't make the use clear, I doubt we'll get permission for the sale."

"Isn't it obvious?" Miyoshi stood up and clenched and unclenched her fists like some sort of maniacal supervillain. "We're going to *take over the worl—*"

"Shut it, dummy. We'd like to use it for some experiments. Ones Yoyogi's floors are too large for."

“Can I ask what kind of experiments?”

I looked at Miyoshi for approval.

“Kei. It’s simple,” she answered in a serene voice. “You just make up any ol’ reason, and add ‘or whatever’ afterward. That’s a little good old-fashioned Osaka wisdom I picked up from our ‘friend’ Tenko.”

*What are you, some Osaka granny? What’s gotten into you today?*

I was pretty sure the only place our application would go if I wrote “or whatever” on it was the trash.

“Wait. By ‘Tenko,’ do you mean Mr. Kunai in Yokohama?” Naruse asked.

“You know him?!”

“Erm, well, he *is* a bit of a celebrity around Yokohama, after all,” Naruse smirked.

Early in their careers, most JDA employees were assigned to attending explorers on-site at different dungeons. For those who belonged to the Management Section at the Ichigaya headquarters, early training included being dispatched to a number of dungeons in the greater Kanto area. Through their dispatch experiences in Yokohama, a certain *unique* character had come to be rather famous among the Management Section team.

“Ask any member of the Management Section which two explorers they most remember, and they’ll either bring up Kunai from Yokohama—aka Tenko—or Hayashida from Yoyogi.”

“Hayashida?”

“You don’t know him? He’s a member of Yoyogi’s top explorer team, Team Shibuya. Otherwise known as ‘Shibu T.’”

“You mean ‘Shibu T.’ wasn’t just one guy’s name?!”

## **Yoyogi Dungeon, Seventeenth Floor**

“Achoo!”

“Hayashida, you catching a cold? You’re really gonna cramp our style.” A tall

and rather burly man teased his partner, a smaller, good-looking man with slightly effeminate features evocative of a member of a boy band.

“Shut it, Kiyan. Don’t be jealous just because there’s some college chicks out there gossiping about yours truly,” Hayashida shot back, making reference to the Japanese superstition that a sneeze was brought on by being talked about behind one’s back.

“I don’t know if I’d be so proud about ‘college chicks.’ Maybe you ought to aim for some actual women for a change.” A small, serious-looking man in glasses quipped back at Hayashida from some distance away.

“Like *you’d* know, Azuma. Not that I can’t get down with a proper *lady* when I want, but keeping up with them is exhausting. Sometimes a young chick’s just more *fun*.”

“Not to mention *cheaper*,” Azuma responded.

“Ha ha, you got that right!”

“Hey, Hayashida! Cut the crap and keep your guard up!” A slender, half-Japanese-looking man at the head of the pack shouted to his teammates behind him.

“Are you kidding? With you on lookout, Dennis, we can screw around all we want.”

“Tch. This is the seventeenth floor, numbnuts. One wrong move and you’re dead.”

“Whoa-hoo! There it is. Serious-mode Dennis,” Hayashida crooned.

“Still, I’m getting pretty fed up with our trips to the eighteenth floor.” A man with a large sword on his back spoke from the back of the team.

“You feel the same way, Daiken? It’s crowded as shit down there,” Hayashida responded.

“But that floor’s blowin’ up right now. It’s the place to be.”

“It is, but something about this—I don’t like it. It’s brought in all these big shot explorers from across the world, and now they’re treating *us* like we’re amateurs. Two-bit weekend divers. Just gets me frickin’ pissed, you know?”

Hayashida complained.

“Don’t go picking fights with the single digits. I mean it. Don’t even joke,” Otate, the man they jokingly called “Daiken,” responded. The characters making up his name could alternately be read as the latter, both the name of a major Japanese construction materials corporation and, suitably enough, a reading that could be interpreted as “big sword.”

“I get that,” Hayashida responded petulantly. “Let’s just get Mining ahead of all those geeks and then get out of there. I’m sick of this whole thing.”

“You can say that again,” Otate responded. “That one we agree on.”

“Right flank, front! Enemy approaching! Looks like a kamaitachi!”

“Dammit. Hate those guys!”

Kamaitachi were fleet-footed monsters. Once they had a group in their sights, it was difficult to dodge their attacks or escape. If spotted, the best bet was to rush it head-on from the front.

Team Shibuya’s members lined up in their usual formation, readying themselves for a fight. From their polished movements, no one would have thought this was the same team from a moment ago.

## **January 10, 2019 (Thursday)**

### **JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya**

### **Conference Room**

“That Cathy. Why does she have to be so serious about everything?” I groaned.

Ever since getting a taste of her stats rising after undergoing the boot camp routine the other day, Cathy had taken every opportunity she could to stop by our office and bother me for more status checks.

Miyoshi, that traitor, would just brew up another pot of Teastruction—that deadly bitter tea drink—and offer me up as a sacrifice. “Oh, of course he wouldn’t mind going with you. He’s not doing anything right now.”

As a result, Cathy was coming pretty far along with her AGI-and STR-focused build.

Name: Catherine Mitchell

HP: 87.90 -> 126.00

MP: 66.70 -> 74.80

STR: 34 -> 61

VIT: 36 -> 42

INT: 35 -> 38

AGI: 35 -> 62

DEX: 36 -> 39

LUC: 12

She still had more than sixty points of SP remaining, but that seemed sufficient for now. I certainly wasn't interested in accompanying her on any more training runs.

She hadn't been solely focused on AGI and STR either. A proper drill instructor, she had made sure to try the full menu of our course's offerings. Thus, she'd bulked up her VIT, INT and DEX each a little as well. I couldn't help but notice that after trying INT's zen meditation and DEX's needle-threading once, she hadn't gone back to them.

At this point her repeated course runs were no longer for sampling, but purely for her own training. Seemed like as good a time as any to cut the cord. I was beginning to understand just how troublesome it was to be forced to put up with a perfectionist's idea of a self-improvement routine. If I didn't switch to just leaving her with an Arthur for pre-stat-measurement contact, I could kiss my last vestiges of freedom goodbye.

So it was that I had arrived at the JDA conference room. We had an orb exchange scheduled for the afternoon, so I was able to escape Cathy's clutches.

"I'll see you later then," she'd said when I took off from the boot camp.

*No way. I will absolutely not see you later. The actual boot camp starts soon. Take a day's rest!*

“Nice to see you!” Miyoshi took one look at my exhausted face as I entered the conference room and greeted me in a performatively chipper tone. “Keeei, I said, ‘Nice to see you’! Good work out there today!”

“Oh, *there* she is,” I muttered. “The *traitor*.”

“Rude. I’m busy managing the company to make sure we’re staying afloat. I don’t have time to spend all day babysitting our drill sergeant like you do.”

“Listen, I—”

“No, you listen. Right now, just for starters, I’m dealing with SMD and D-Card verifier production, getting ready for the Yokohama deal, coming up with a schedule for the bootcamp, checking our agricultural experiment, and juggling a mountain of applications and paperwork for all of the above.”

I had to admit, hearing Miyoshi lay it out like that, even I was surprised by how heavy her workload had gotten.

“Man, you really are swamped, huh?”

“Ahem. Thank you for the recognition. Although for most of it, I’m just laying the groundwork and then passing the rest off to experts, so I’m not in *too* far over my head. Ah, right. There’s also the NY event.”

“‘NY event’? You mean the thing Mitsurugi’s doing?”

“Kei, what business would *we* have in the world of high fashion?” Miyoshi laughed and waved her hand in front of her face like she was swatting away a fly. “No, this is about the thing Naruse told us the other day. Remember? She brought up that whole thing about telepathy allowing users to communicate across languages?”

“Telepathy?”

“Right. Apparently the news blew up, so some message boards started organizing a huge IRL meetup in New York to run all sorts of telepathy tests!”

“Huh. Pretty active for a bunch of message board dwellers.”

“Yeah. But listen, holding an event of that scale without any experience sounds like it’d be pretty hard, right? I feel like there’s a pretty good chance their plans will collapse at this point.”



It wouldn't have been surprising. Amateurs getting a big idea before they have a grasp on the logistics necessary to pull it off was a tale as old as time. Plus, plans had a tendency to balloon on organizers, getting bigger and bigger over time. Comiket, the event we'd attended last month with Asha, was a good example of that, although also one of the rare success stories—it had started as a small-scale enthusiast event.

"Makes sense," I commented. "Wanting to put an event together and having the knowledge to pull it off are two different things after all."

Renting a venue alone took wads of cash. On the other hand, simply holding the event in Central Park or something would limit the number of organized tests they could run.

"So I was thinking our company could become a special collaborator and offer some financial support," Miyoshi said. "Help ensure the event's a success."

"Don't armchair enthusiasts usually despise corporations butting in?"

"Only if they smell the grease on the turning wheels of commercialism. But don't worry—I've got a handle on that."

"You've got some sort of scheme cooked up, eh?"

"A 'scheme'?! That makes it sound *bad*. Look, one of our company's founding tenets is helping support explorers, right? What better way to do so than by helping host an event like this?"

"And your true motive?"

"'True motive' nothing! It's just that with all those people gathered, this is the perfect chance to run a few experiments under different conditions, isn't it? Plus, if we come equipped with a certain measuring device, it's going to be like the doors opening on a new golden age of knowledge—with the event's attendees being the first arrivals into this brave new era! What could be more exciting? We're not going to get another opportunity like this!"

Miyoshi might have protested her intentions a bit too much, but she had a point. We were going to have dozens—maybe hundreds—of willing participants in telepathy and child party experiments, and the chance to gather data on everyone from rank amateurs to pros. If we tried to run a similar event as a

company, I didn't think we'd get even a fraction of the support. And the cost would be much higher too.

"Okay, well then let's make it as exciting an event as we can. I don't want anyone accusing us of ruining a good thing. Uh, money is, needless to say, no object."

"Don't worry. I've got it. I'll just plan out the fun stuff, and leave the boring logistics up to the original hosts. With our financial backing of course."

"Sounds good. Now, how's Saito doing?"

"Never fear. Our company, erm...employs(?) a few hardworking black canines who should be ensuring that's going swimmingly."

They help keep us in the *black*, she attempted as a follow-up joke, but the thrust was that Aethlem was apparently already off accompanying Saito again. That was a relief. After three days of working together, the two were probably thick as thieves.

"And how're her stats looking?"

"I haven't gotten a look at her stats yet, so I can't say for sure, but I'm pretty sure she's killing upward of three hundred per day."

"Wait, how do you know what her kill count is? Have you been training with her?"

I was pretty sure it was still beyond the Arthurs to provide an exact kill count. Or an exact count of anything.

"Who has time for all that? I'm just extrapolating based on the numbers I've seen."

Apparently Miyoshi had accompanied Saito here and there, and estimated the average number of kills per day from the pace she'd observed.

The statistical analysis left some accuracy to be desired, but it gave us a rough estimate of Saito's progress. Even if Saito had tried to slack off when Miyoshi wasn't around, Aethlem would have prodded her in the direction of the next slime whether she liked it or not. I couldn't imagine her pace flagging too much.

"If everything goes well, that should be six points per day," I remarked.

“There are still five days left until the shoot. She can expect another thirty or so points by then.”

The prior year, I had estimated the world’s top explorers to have accumulated anywhere between 80 and 200 points of experience. However, examining Cathy’s stats had shown me that my estimate had been a bit low.

When I first examined her stats, Cathy’s excess SP came to 126.63 points. Assuming fifty percent had been naturally distributed, that meant her net total was over 250.

Cathy’s ranking in the WDARL was number forty-eight. In other words, that was the amount of experience one could expect for an explorer in the mid double digits. Given how frequently the rankings in that area switched, there were plenty of other explorers duking it out for supremacy by differences of single points or fractions thereof.

“But Kei. Have you thought about it? If she keeps up this routine for one month...”

“She won’t reach the single digits, but she could get pretty high into the doubles.”

“Double-digit rankings in a month, and on top of that the ability to min-max stat distribution in a way even the elites can’t manage... Kei, if we wanted to, we could have the strongest explorer group in the world. It wouldn’t even be that hard!”

“Sure, if we have the right people. Mathematically, the numbers are there, but we don’t have the combat experience. We’ve never seen an ally get killed or been seriously injured in battle ourselves. We can produce explorers who look good on paper, but without the kind of mental fortitude born of experience...”

“If you ask me, I think it’s better *not* to have those kinds of experiences.”

“Well, no arguments from me there. I’m just saying, we can grind experience as much as we want, and have all the right stats, and still find it meaningless the first time we get into a real combat situation on one of the lower floors. We just have to be careful about that before sending off any explorers whose stats

we've raised—that's all I'm saying. There's knowing what you're capable of, and then there's what you'll actually do."

"That's true. I remember being scared out of my wits our first time in the manor, for example. And I almost got killed by Ngai before I even knew what was happening. The truth is if it weren't for you and the Arthurs, I'd be a goner by now. For real."

Miyoshi was speaking in a hushed, serious manner, but in a way, it was almost fun to look back on events over the past few months and think about how far we'd come.

"But man, Saito. I can't believe she's kept at it every day without throwing in the towel," I pointed out.

"She's a hard worker when she sets her mind to it," Miyoshi commented. "She's really going at it like her life depends on it."

There was a knock on the conference room door. Naruse and her square-shaped supervisor walked in.

"D-Powers. Always a pleasure to see you," the square-shaped supervisor greeted us in a warm voice.

*I think his name was...Saiga?*

"The pleasure is all ours," Miyoshi shot back.

Saiga smiled. "Well then, since everyone's here, shall we begin?"

"Let's."

Same as the previous times, we began the confirmations and sign-offs necessary for the orb transaction.

"Well then, here it is." Miyoshi presented the titanium-plated orb holding case. The orb in question was Storage. The one and only, real McCoy—the long-theorized item box orb—the first of its kind to change hands anywhere in the world.

With an almost reverent expression, Naruse placed her hand on the orb and confirmed the skill name and orb count displayed on it. She gulped.

“The JDA confirms this to be a Storage orb. It has an orb count of 835.”

Upon hearing the orb count, Saiga cocked an eyebrow.

Thinking rationally, the orb count could tell someone a great deal about where the orb had been obtained. Assuming we’d been delivered the orb as soon as possible aboveground at Yoyogi, it would have been obtained from a dungeon location approximately fourteen hours from the dungeon entrance. Ultimately, this orb count was an arbitrary one I’d left it at to obfuscate its drop location, but ordinarily it’d be a big hint.

“Now then, there’s also your next item,” Miyoshi continued, hauling out one more case and placing it on the table.

The winning bidder on one of the two Mining orbs we’d put up for auction had been the JDA.

“Nope. If it’s all right, I’d like to finish this transaction first,” Saiga responded. He pointed to the Storage orb.

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances, but soon caught on to the JDA’s intent. We nodded. They were planning to buy Mining using the administrative fees acquired from the sale of the Storage orb.

Miyoshi had tried to let the JDA have it, setting the price for Storage at the amount of all the administrative fees we had paid up to that point. Since our administrative fees accounted for the bulk of the JDA’s prior surplus, they shouldn’t have had the funds to toss around at orb auctions. Yet they had bid on Mining shortly after the Storage purchase. That was because they had anticipated getting the administrative fees from the latter at the time both orbs were handed over.

Noticing that we’d caught on, Saiga scratched nervously at his cheek, flashing a sheepish smile. “Well, if we don’t use the funds, they’ll just get taxed at the end of the year anyway.”

He played his response like a joke, but since the orb’s high drop rate wasn’t yet known, what we were selling was the equivalent of a high-grade military weapon. As proof of that fact, our winning bidder on the other Mining orb had been the USDSF.

The United States was incredibly reliant on China for its rare earth elements. In an era when Chinese export restrictions to America were a topic of regular conversation, the Department of the Interior and Department of Commerce must have been champing at the bit to change over to dungeon-produced mineral resources.

“Chief, if you could do the honors.”

Naruse passed Saiga the electronic pin pad to be used for the money transfer. Saiga entered his information, and Miyoshi confirmed the results, finalizing the sale of the Storage orb.

“Now then, on to the next.” Naruse placed a hand on the Mining orb. “The JDA confirms this to be a Mining skill orb. The orb count is...1,124.”

Unfortunately the main location of this orb’s drops was already well-known. It would be possible to count backward from the current orb count to check the entry and exit logs in accordance with how long it would have taken someone to go to and back from the eighteenth floor, greatly narrowing the list of explorers who could have obtained and delivered the orb. To discourage such idle speculation, I’d intentionally let the orb count run high. If someone wanted to, they could have come up much faster, expanding the range of suspects. Of course, this was all in the interest of preserving the ruse that our orbs were delivered to us to meet buyer needs in the first place. In reality, we’d obtained it well before.

Even if the JDA wanted to investigate using the orb count, there was no way to pinpoint exactly when someone had entered a specific floor, and interviewing explorers wouldn’t always lead to accurate testimony. Ultimately the JDA’s best efforts would still only get them so far. There would be plenty of gray area to fill with plausible doubts.

This time Saiga didn’t flinch at the orb count, but continued with the payment paperwork. Soon the second transaction was complete, and Saiga turned to us with a smile.

“Now then. Can we entrust these two orbs to you?” he asked.

*So he remembered after all.* We had a deal to waive the storage fees. I shot a glance over to Miyoshi to see if it was really okay, but she gave me a look that

said there was no use pushing back now.

“Okay,” Miyoshi responded. “Then if you could prepare the paperwork describing the orb’s details using our prescribed form—”

“The form’s already prepared. Just needs a few Ts to be crossed.” Taking out a set of prepared orb storage contracts, he filled in the orb counts while examining his purchases, then handed the sheets to Miyoshi.

“You guys sure are on the ball,” she marveled.

“We pride ourselves on adhering to the principles of smooth and painless paperwork.”

“Just to remind you, in the event the JDA tries to resell the orb, we won’t be able to waive our cut. We’ll still be getting our twenty percent in that case.”

“I understand. We won’t be trying to game the system,” Saiga responded.

With Saiga’s response as her signal, Miyoshi signed the contract. The storage request was settled.

“Well then, we’ll take the orbs in our care. Remember, when you want to retrieve your purchases, please submit the prescribed orb withdrawal form. Now, about that *other* matter—”

“We promise our full support in helping you conceal your use of the Storage orb we’ve just left in your care.”

“Thank you kindly,” Miyoshi responded, handing me the orb.

I put the orb in my bag. Turning to an angle where I was sure my actions wouldn’t be picked up by any cameras, I then transferred the orb into Vault.

“I’m sorry for putting you guys through so much trouble this time. The JDA owes you one,” Siaga said warmly.

“Don’t mention it. We’ll just appreciate your consideration for our Yokohama request,” I responded.

“‘Yokohama request’?”

“Ask Naruse.”

“Ah. R-Right. Will do.”

“Oh, one more thing,” I continued. “We don’t mind storing the orbs for you, but you ought to use Mining as soon as you can.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because there are going to be lots more copies popping up soon.”

“Is that advice based on your managing to pull two copies out of thin air?”

“No, sir. It’s more like...the dungeons’ will.”

“‘The dungeons’ will’?” A crease formed in Saiga’s brow.

“I mean, the dungeons can produce mineral drops, but require an orb to do so. It’d be odd to have those drops in the first place if people weren’t meant to obtain the orb. Furthermore, we know from inscriptions that there’s a function based on forty-nine explorers with Mining entering a dungeon simultaneously. It seems like dungeons almost...*want*...people to obtain Mining.”

If forty-nine explorers with Mining were ever present on a single dungeon floor simultaneously, all explorers on that floor would be able to receive its preset mineral drops, regardless of whether they had Mining. All actual possession of Mining would do at that point would be to provide the ability to trigger mineral drops on new floors that the forty-nine hadn’t visited yet.

“And you’re saying that’s the dungeons’ will?”

“It’s just a feeling I have. Call it my intuition as a greenhorn Rank G explorer.” I gave a self-deprecating smile.

Saiga was silent for a moment, as if contemplating something. “Understood. I’ll take it under consideration.” he said at length. He gave a slight bow—more a nod of his head—then launched into a new topic with a serious look on his face. “Actually, there is one other thing I’d like to ask of D-Powers, on behalf of the JDA.”

“‘On behalf of the JDA’?” Miyoshi and I exchanged glances.

Of course we’d heard the JDA sometimes made specific requests of individual explorers. *Is this one of those times?*

To be more specific, the Commercial Affairs Section—a counterpart of the Dungeon Management Section—maintained a rarely used initiative known as



the Explorer Appointment System. Under this system, customers could submit direct requests to individual explorers. However, most explorers operated anonymously. With the exception of sufficiently famous parties, even if you thought to appoint an explorer to a mission, you wouldn't know most explorers' names to be able to submit the request.

However, in Miyoshi's case, there was the possibility of her being overwhelmed by requests for orb retrievals or uses of Appraisal. As a precaution, the JDA had already notified everyone that all requests naming Miyoshi would be rejected on sight.

After going through all that trouble, was the JDA itself really going to throw a request Miyoshi's way? We looked at Saiga blank-faced.

"What is it?"

"We'd like you to help a certain explorer reach the twenty-first floor."

"You what?" I had been so unprepared for Saiga's answer that all I could do was utter a dumbfounded response.

"Well, it's just that D-Powers are supposed to be experts on providing explorer support. You accepted an even more unlikely request from Mr. Jain in the past."

Saiga went on to explain that the explorer in question was a certain gemological expert. She—the explorer was a woman, apparently—possessed an unusually high motivation for gemological research, but possessed a *relative* lack of experience when it came to braving the obstacles of the lower floors. The JDA wanted to see if we could enroll her in our boot camp to help bring her up to speed.

Given the sudden nature of the request, I couldn't help but wonder if my advice to hurry up and use Mining had played some role in prompting it.

"I'm going to say this up front: even if we take her on, I can't guarantee she'd be able to make it to the twenty-first floor," I responded.

We had virtually no info about our prospective trainee. If she didn't have sufficient SP stockpiled, there wouldn't be anything we could do. Judging from Saiga's description, her prospects seemed dim. I had some doubts about our

ability to even get an average explorer down to where the genomos were.

*What do you think?* I contacted Miyoshi telepathically.

*Right now we only have the four members of Team Simon, so technically we have room, but... If we accept this request, are we just going to have to take anyone the JDA sends us after this?*

If this obligated us to accept all future requests, that would certainly be troublesome.

*However, a minerals expert...*

“We’ll do it.”

“Say what?!” Miyoshi’s eyes went wide.

She had a right to be flustered. We didn’t know the exploration history of our prospective explorer, and our boot camp operated on a principle of redistributing accumulated SP. We were certainly taking on a risk, and the request only held the potential to be a disadvantage for us.

Miyoshi looked at me as if she wanted to say more, but after a moment’s hesitation, simply slumped her shoulders and said, “Well, that’s that. You do you.”

I couldn’t help but notice Naruse giving me a rather concerned look.

“Thank you,” Saiga responded. “We’ll send over the details soon. Naruse will brief you.”

“Understood. Looking forward to it, then.”

After handshakes with Saiga, Miyoshi and I left the room.

“Kei. You really didn’t need to do that, you know.” Miyoshi gave me an earful as we walked down the hall.

“Aw, come on. I’m not sure how many genomos are being wiped out a day down on the eighteenth floor, but it’s basically a given that another Mining’ll drop soon. Selling an orb with a drop rate of one in ten thousand for more than three billion yen didn’t leave a great taste in my mouth. I figured we could do ’em a favor.”

“What are you talking about? The JDA’s going to sell it to the government, and the government’s going to use it as leverage in international diplomacy. No one comes out worse for wear.”

“Speaking of, what happened to our exchange meeting with the DSF?”

We hadn’t heard from our winning bidder on the second Mining orb following contact asking if we’d be okay with a late pickup. I’d have to lodge a complaint with Simon when I saw him at boot camp.

Miyoshi walked on and silently shook her head.

“You think they’re testing us?”

“They know the orb drop location. All they have to do to find our ‘orb contact’ is wait.”

As long as they knew the location of the orb drop, all they would have to do was establish surveillance around the floor the day the exchange was arranged for. Assuming we would have the orb delivered to us from the eighteenth floor on the day of, it would be the perfect chance to uncover our secrets. Multiple organizations had probably figured the same.

“Once we know when it’s scheduled, why don’t we go down to the eighteenth floor the day prior?” I proposed.

“Better yet, why don’t we take Cavall and the others and go visit our wheat field on the second floor?”

“Why?”

“Because we’ll be under surveillance. And they’ll see us having Cavall digging around in the field.”

“Huh?”

“After digging around for a bit—what’s this?!—we’ll find an orb!”

“What is this, ‘Hanasaka Jisan’?!” I scoffed. Miyoshi’s suggestion had reminded me of an old folktale in which an elderly couple’s dog digs up a box of gold in their garden.

“It’s too bad Cavall can’t talk, or we could have him say, ‘Dig here, bow

wow!” Miyoshi responded, in reference to the story.

“You know the whole field would be wrecked the next time we came back to it, right?”

We were renting our wheat field from the JDA. At the present time, it didn’t seem like it was under surveillance. That would change if we were spotted unearthing an orb in the field. The whole plot would probably be torn up by the time we returned.

“Who cares! Let’s sneak the orb in under there and then go back to dig it up. Pretty soon we’ll have people starting farming plots in dungeons the world over, hoping they’ll get an orb! They’ll run our respawn experiments for us!”

“You’re going to use the world’s precious labor resources on a wild-goose chase like that?” I smirked. Internally, though, I was amused by the thought that we might be able to have that kind of influence over global trends.

We walked out the JDA Headquarters’ automatic doors, the bustle of Yasukuni Dori assailing our ears. On the other side of a row of barren trees, murky waters flowed along the outer moat of the former Edo Castle.

“Anyway, right now let’s just head home,” I said.

“You go ahead. I’m going to get in my usual slime-hunting routine.”

A change of heart had come over Miyoshi since the new year. She’d been going slime-hunting using the new Arthur method nearly every day since January first.

“You’re really getting into it, huh?”

“You’re the one who told me I should!”

“Touché.”

“We have Saito’s whole pilot fiasco to worry about too, which got me thinking about my own stats. Of course the real reason I’m so gung ho now is that the new method makes it super easy,” Miyoshi said with a laugh.

*Yeah, definitely.* Our old method, which required running back and forth to the entrance, would put off just about anyone without an immediate goal and strong motivation like Mitsurugi’s. No one would want to gain stats that way

just for stats' sake. In comparison, our new method made grinding out slime experience a walk in the park—or, more literally, a walk in the dungeon.

But still—

“Don’t push yourself too hard. Sometimes you can overdo it.”

“Please. You’re saying that to a paragon of good judgment and common sense.”

“You call someone who serves wasabi-extract-laced drinks a paragon of good judgment and common sense?”

“Welp, look at the time. Gotta be going! See ya!” Miyoshi took off down the street.

*Dummy.* I smirked to myself. We were going to be taking the same train.

## **JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya Dungeon Management Section**

Saiga clutched his head, slumping over his desk, having just been told about the details of the Yokohama request by Miharuru Naruse.

“This time they want to rent *Yokohama*?”

“We do owe them a bit of debt for the information leaks. Incidentally, they’d like to purchase the whole first floor of the Yokohama Dungeon Building if they can. The JDA does own the whole floor, right?”

“That’s right. Building management was worried about no-fault liability if a monster ever got loose. They foisted the whole first floor, kit and caboodle, over to the JDA on the cheap. Only stipulation was that they still maintained the surface rights.”

“‘Foisted’?”

“What else would you call it? I don’t think it even ran us one hundred million.” Saiga pulled up Yokohama Dungeon’s information on the tablet in front of him. “There. Looks like the cost was eighty-seven million.”

“Given the location and building, that’s basically rent.”

Seeing Miharu's eyes go wide, Saiga shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I guess. Now, if you recall, the Dungeon Building used to be bustling, but it's become a bit of a ghost town ever since we had to implement the dungeon entry restrictions. Plenty of businesses shuttered." Saiga folded his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "So, D-Powers. Are they planning on getting the Loot Box Dungeon to themselves?"

"It doesn't seem like that's their goal. They haven't asked for anything below the first dungeon floor."

"Really? But they want the first floor of the building?"

Although few in number, a handful of dedicated civilian explorers did still dive the lower floors of the famed Loot Box Dungeon. *However, with D-Powers occupying the first floor of the building, how are those explorers supposed to enter—wait.* A thought struck Saiga. There was another entrance into Yokohama.

"The parking garage entrance?"

"That's correct. They'd like to ask that the JDA relocate its reception facilities to the parking garage entry side."

"Then the first dungeon floor?"

"They'd like exclusive access to it."

The second dungeon floor could be entered through the parking garage entrance, but there was no entrance to the first dungeon floor except the building's indoor staircase. Of course, explorers who truly wanted to visit the first floor could also go up the staircase from the second, but surely no one would brave the second floor's bosses just to get to the first floor. If D-Powers didn't want people coming through the first building floor, it seemed a natural consequence that they should also reserve access to the first floor of the dungeon as well.

At this point, virtually all of the few remaining civilian users of Yokohama were explorers heading to the second floor. The entire dungeon's nickname *was* the Loot Box Dungeon after all. Exploring the first floor wasn't worth the opportunity cost for anyone who could handle the second, and for everyone

lower in skill, the first floor's monsters were too strong. The first floor was stuck in the problem zone of having exactly no demographic.

Due to its inaccessibility, the first floor also provided little advantage as a location for the telepathy or food-drop explorer registration rushes. Its management fees per explorer were also exceedingly high, with the JDA taking a loss. If they could downsize to a small registration desk in front of the parking garage entrance to the second floor, the deal was entirely to the JDA's advantage.

Entirely to their advantage, except—

“The request is coming from D-Powers, so I'm guessing there's some sort of catch.”

“Are you sure you aren't overthinking things?” Miharuru offered a reserved smile.

Saiga leaned forward over his desk and looked up with a serious expression. “Ever heard the phrase ‘You can't open an umbrella that's stuck up your ass’?”

“Um, I can't say I have, sir. That's...rather colorful.”

“It's a Turkish idiom. It means it's too late for regrets once things have already gone south.”

“Why Turkish?”

“I heard it somewhere before and it just came to mind. It seemed like the right kind of vulgar idiom for just how jacked up this deal could get.”

*The chief's having a rough time of it too*, Miharuru sympathized. But much like the unfortunate Turkish umbrella-owner in the phrase, she was in too deep for regrets. Or perhaps in this case *she* was the umbrella.

There was nothing to do now but to get Saiga to comply with the request. The Interpreter would have to ply her skills of persuasion.

“D-Powers have a corporate entity and they're flush with capital,” Saiga continued, pondering the situation. “The building owners will also probably give their blessing. But what are they planning on doing with that money pit, really?” He looked at Miharuru, appealing for further explanation.

“I don’t know, sir, really. They said that Yoyogi was too big, so they’d like a smaller dungeon floor to use for some sort of experiments.”

“‘Too big’? For some kind of experiments? What the hell kind of Frankenstein shit are they planning?”

“I tried asking, but they said they didn’t want to give too much away before they’d submitted their application for a dungeon patent.”

“‘Dungeon patent’? What *else* have they got up their sleeves?”

Thinking of dungeon patents related to D-Powers, the stat-measurement devices came to mind, but those didn’t seem like they’d have anything to do with experiments D-Powers might run at Yokohama. In addition, the patent application for the devices was already completed. They even had fully functioning models.

Saiga’s stomach hurt just thinking about what else D-Powers might be working on. However, idle speculation now wouldn’t solve his current problem.

“Got it,” Saiga responded. “I’ll talk to the other departments. Where there are financial resources, there’s probably a way. The other parties involved will likely be all too happy to sign.” He sighed. “I’m fairly sure the request will go through, but until we know for sure, please refrain from telling D-Powers anything.”

“I read you loud and clear, sir.”

“At the same time, if you hear anything more about their plans, report them to me on the double. If anything goes wrong with their experiments or whatever they’re planning, truth be told, I’m not sure we’ll have the resources to wipe their asses for them this time.”

Miharu let a small giggle escape at Saiga’s wording and nodded.

**January 11, 2019 (Friday)**  
**JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya**  
**Dungeon Management Section**

“Saiga, may I speak with you?”



Saiga looked up from his desk to find an unusual visitor at his door.

A woman in a trim designer suit walked in. It was Michiyo Tachibana, the Dungeon Management Department director.

“Director. If you’d let me know you wanted to meet, I would have gone over to your office instead.” Saiga hastily stood up. He directed Tachibana to the conference table by his desk, requesting a round of tea from a nearby staff member.

Tachibana seated herself on the couch opposite of Saiga’s, on the other end of the small table.

“So, to what do I owe the honor?” Saiga asked.

“I thought I might ask you about the forty-five-billion-yen payment your section authorized yesterday.” Tachibana took out the transaction papers, upon which “skill orb” was written at the top without elaboration. “Knowing you, I don’t suspect anything improper, but you have to understand my interest in investigating exactly which orb demanded such a high price.”

None of the orbs which had appeared on the recent public auction list seemed like they would be targets for such an outrageous sum.

Due to the ephemeral nature of orbs, a certain amount of permission regarding purchases had been ceded to the chief of the Dungeon Management Section, but even JDA board members—who would normally be responsible for approval of large purchases—would have had trouble clearing an expenditure that large.

To less forgiving eyes, the exact amount might even have made it look like the Dungeon Management Section chief had brokered a back-end deal to return all the margins the JDA had received from a certain party to their original owner. Of course, anyone brazen enough to engage in that kind of transparent scheme could never have risen up the ranks to become Dungeon Management Section chief in the first place. There had to be something else going on. Tachibana just wasn’t sure what it was.

“Ah. I’m in the middle of drafting an explanatory report right now, but I might as well tell you now that you’re here...”

Tachibana listened to Saiga's explanation wide-eyed.

"An *item box orb*? 'Storage'? So it really exists?"

"Forgive my impertinence. Time was of the essence."

He explained that he'd sent advance information to the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defense, but hadn't received any responses.

"I see," Tachibana responded. "But considering the circumstances, you did well to arrange an advance sale at that price."

"That's all thanks to the efforts of the staff member I have in contact with the sellers."

"That 'dedicated supervisor' of yours?"

"The same."

"At first I thought you'd locked someone into a dead-end position with that role, but they seem to be thriving."

"What do you take me for?" Saiga smiled.

"But what do you plan to do with the orb?" Tachibana asked.

"Now *that's* a sticky problem."

Saiga explained all the complications involved in the purchase of the orb and its potential use cases.

According to the Ministry of Defense, the current deepest floor being charted in Yoyogi was the twenty-ninth. If the tablet inscriptions were correct, a safe zone lay just ahead.

"If there truly is a safe zone, that Storage orb could be useful in establishing a permanent base," Tachibana pointed out.

"That is true. Although to be honest, I'm not sure if that alone would help us recoup our costs," Saiga admitted.

Although this year had happened to see the JDA flush with resources, forty-five billion was still a substantial sum. Whether that would be matched by the potential costs of traditional equipment transport down to the thirty-second floor, where the first safe zone was rumored to be, remained to be seen.

“Additionally, I’m not sure whom we should have use it,” Saiga continued.

“What? You mean you haven’t used it yet?” Tachibana asked.

Skill orbs were supposed to disappear one day after being discovered. Usually, they had to be used right away. Tachibana had been intending to ask who the orb-user had been.

“In the meantime, we’ve turned it over to D-Powers for storage,” Saiga explained.

“‘Storage’? Then the contents of that contract...they were serious?”

Tachibana had caught wind of a service request for orb storage being signed off, but she had figured it was some kind of formality. On the face of it, it was an impossible contract to fulfill.

“Of course,” Saiga answered.

“So do you really believe that party’s claims? That as soon as the orb is necessary, they can just run out and acquire a new one? Who ever heard of such a thing?”

*Well, it’s only natural to doubt.* If he hadn’t gotten used to D-Powers defying common logic, Saiga would have been thinking the same thing.

“Now, if we’re thinking of selling the orb, I do have some potential buyers in mind,” Tachibana continued.

“‘Buyers’?”

“Think about it. A field in which managing weight load is important, and that’s *plenty flush with cash.*” Tachibana pointed overhead. Saiga got where she was going.

“Aerospace.”

Certainly, size and weight were major factors in planning space expeditions.

“But I’ve heard it costs around ten billion yen just to launch the H2A rocket one time,” Saiga continued. The Storage orb transaction alone had cost 4.5 times as much. He couldn’t imagine the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) had the funds to spend on a resale.

“Sure, maybe JAXA is out of the running,” Tachibana responded. “Their national budget is only a bit over 150 billion yen. But the ESA has a budget of *66 billion euros*, and America’s NASA has more than *200 billion dollars* to spend. If we add in the US military budget, that number rises to *4 trillion dollars*.”

Using Storage would allow aerospace agencies to solve all their payload problems in one fell swoop. In fact, if they could arrange for easy one-man trips, they could even begin establishing moon and Mars bases with a single personnel.

“Although I imagine the first use would be in relation to the International Space Station.”

Storage would allow easy transport of materials up to the ISS, expansion of the station itself—anything would be on the table. The management costs of the station would probably greatly decrease. There would be no further weight restrictions affecting the amount of equipment and supplies that could be brought up at one time. Other than construction costs, the bulk of the station’s expenditures currently lay in the transport of items and personnel.

The US’s space shuttle program had cost 209 billion dollars. With Storage, it might have decreased to half—or even one-tenth—that amount. If they could sell the orb for half the former space shuttle program budget, they would be looking at a total profit of 94 billion dollars, and even a further halving of the price would still be approximately one hundred times what the JDA had paid.

“And who truly knows how much that orb could be worth,” Tachibana concluded.

“Of course, if you can do all that, getting weapons up into low orbit will be child’s play too,” Saiga smirked.

“Would it kill you to not be such a pessimist?”

“It’s not that. It’s just... Anyway, this all depends on the orb’s capacity.”

“The fact that you signed over the orb for ‘storage’ means there’ll be at least one current user, right?” Tachibana raised an eyebrow. “Someone has to use the copy they had on hand at the exchange. If we have a user, we can start running tests.”

“Part of our contract was to not stick our nose into that.”

“So have that ‘dedicated supervisor’ of yours stick *hers* in.”

Skill details were supposed to be reported to the WDA database, but—wanting to protect their own interests—many professional explorers never logged their details. There was likely plenty of information missing from the current records.

“Even if moon bases are out of the question,” she continued, “we might be able to bring heavy artillery into dungeons.”

“Indeed. First we’ll want the details on the orb’s capabilities, right?”

“That...for a start.” Tachibana raised her tea to her lips and took a perfunctory sip. She flashed Saiga a grin that reminded him of a vicious carnivore sizing up its prey, and stood up. “Regardless of what its capabilities are—whether we sell it to a moon crew or decide to use it in-house—I think we’ll get our money’s worth.”

“We’ll...certainly extend our best efforts.” Still reeling from Tachibana’s grin, Saiga gave his best politician’s response.

“See that you do.” Tachibana wheeled around on her way out. “Ah, I don’t like the thought of what kind of ideas Executive Director Makabe would get if this information reaches him, so I leave the decision of whether we use or resell the orb up to you, along with who we have use it if we decide to use it in-house.” Her lips curled into a tight grin, and Saiga could see why she had been called a financially minded femme fatale.

While internally lamenting that every difficult decision regarding the orb use had been pushed onto him, Saiga offered one polite, clipped response. “Understood.”

**January 12, 2019 (Saturday)**

**Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office**

It was the first day of our dungeon boot camp.

When I came down to the dining room, I noticed Miyoshi was already in the

kitchen making breakfast.

“Morning. Thanks for the grub.”

“Thought I might as well! Today’s finally the day.”

“I just wish it wasn’t so gloomy.” I peeked out the blind slats toward the overcast sky outside. *I wonder if the Arthurs get cold.*

There were Japanese nursery rhymes about dogs being thrilled with the first snow of the season, but I wasn’t sure that applied to hellhounds. *Are they really going to be okay?*

“Then again, I guess if they were really uncomfortable, they’d just teleport themselves inside,” I decided.

“What are you mumbling to yourself about?” Miyoshi called. “Anyway, it’s not going to be raining inside the dungeon. It doesn’t matter what the weather’s like outside.”

“Ah, that’s true.” I took a pitcher out of the fridge, poured myself a cup of water, and sat down at the dining room table.

“By the way, Kei. We should probably take a trip down to the tenth floor soon.” Miyoshi placed a few eggs, still in their shells, into a shallow, water-filled pot on the burner, then wiped off her hands.

“Thinking about barghest hunting? Snagging another one of their orbs?” The barghest dropped useful orbs such as Darkness Magic VI and Otherworldly Language Comprehension.

“That’s part of it. But, more than that—doesn’t it feel like there are more and more times we have all of the Arthurs lent out recently?”

Right now Saito was diving with Aethlem on the first floor of Yoyogi. If she was sticking to her training schedule, the two should have been out since early morning.

“Sure,” I replied.

“And starting soon we’ll have one paired with Cathy most days for boot camp management, then one at the office, one with you, one with me, and that doesn’t leave any in reserve. We’re only able to lend one out to Saito today

because Cathy doesn't need hers with the two of us at the boot camp ourselves. Otherwise we'd be out of luck."

We absolutely needed one Arthur with each of myself and Miyoshi, and one stationed at the office. We'd even had snipers fire on us, after all. We couldn't be too careful. *Speaking of, I wonder whatever happened to that guy who shot at us.*

Secret Agent Tanaka's conspicuously inconspicuous face floated up in my mind's eye, and I shuddered. *On second thought, maybe better not to know!*

"So, I'm thinking we summon two extra hounds," Miyoshi concluded.

After the fight with Ngai, Miyoshi should have had an INT stat of around 50. That would be good enough to summon up to twelve Arthurs, and she could do so any time. However, according to what we'd been able to ascertain from our...talks...with Cavall, the Arthurs' strength roughly correlated to their summoner's MP, and we weren't sure if dividing that MP among more hounds would result in weaker Arthurs. In other words, we risked diminishing the MP coefficient.

That was one reason we'd held off on extra summoning. The other was that more mouths chewing through more magic crystals—which we used as treats—would be a strain on our time and resources. Our concerns were half theoretical, half practical.

However, the fact that we needed more hounds was at this juncture undeniable.

"Why not just summon more here?" I asked. "Why do we have to go down to the tenth floor?"

"Kei. The Arthurs started out pretty strong, right?"

"Sure." As soon as the Arthurs had been summoned, they were able to run amok on the tenth floor. At this point they could easily destroy a skeleton with a single swipe of their paws.

"So I've been wondering if that didn't have something to do with where they were spawned. Remember the time with Asha?"

“Ah, you mean how we theorized that the presence of D-Factors increased the potency of her Super Recovery skill? That it was better to use the orb in a dungeon?”

“Yeah. I feel like maybe the same thing is true with summoning.”

There was still a lot to learn about summoning magic.

For example, if it called forth creatures from an existing location, that meant there was someplace the hellhounds were actually from. Maybe some hellish planet, or deep in a dungeon somewhere, or maybe the hell of some religion really existed, and that’s where they’d called home. I wasn’t ruling out anything.

However, the more plausible theory was that summons were created at the moment of summoning—making them a “summon” in name only—coalesced from environmental D-Factors. The latter theory would better explain why so many of the dungeons’ monsters so perfectly resembled creatures from human folklore too—monsters made to order rather than all of them existing and being transported in from somewhere. In that case, the location of the summon might well have an effect on the summoned monster’s strength.

“Why not try summoning on an even lower floor?” I asked.

“Worth a try, but... Listen, you know how the Arthurs trade places with each other?”

“You mean the shadow pit swapping routine?”

“Right. That thing where they transport themselves through the shadows, er...shadow gates, or...ugh, this stuff gets way too hard to talk about when we don’t have specific names.”

Unlike with skills or items, to which the dungeons assigned names, we were left to our own devices when it came to the Arthurs’ abilities.

“Since they dive into the shadows and sneak around in them, what about something cool like ‘Shadow Sneak’? Er, ‘Crouching Shadow, Hidden Hound’?”

Come to think of it, they’d used shadows for hiding and movement long before they’d started doing the location switching.

“Well, call it whatever you want, they can switch places with each other,”



Miyoshi said. “Maybe it doesn’t matter, but just in case, I’d like to keep the summoning conditions the same for the new batch.”

I thought about pointing out that Miyoshi herself was a different variable in the equation—her stats had gone way up since she’d summoned the first group—but if anything that would only result in stronger hellhounds from the start, so I decided not to press it.

“It’d be a shame if the new ones couldn’t trade places with the original group just because the summoning conditions were different. Not to mention it would defeat our purpose in summoning them,” I responded. “Anyway, why don’t you come with me the day I’m keeping lookout for Saito’s pilot? We’ll probably have some downtime, and we need more magic crystals. I’d like to try getting some more orbs off the barghest too.”

However, settling on that course of action, I decided we’d better buff Miyoshi’s stats up first.

“Hey, Miyoshi, you ought to have plenty of SP, right? Mind if I distribute some of it?”

“Be my guest!”

I pulled up Miyoshi’s stats on Making.

Name: Azusa Miyoshi  
SP: 33.936  
HP: 28.70  
MP: 91.10 (136.65)  
STR: [-] 10 [+]  
VIT: [-] 11 [+]  
INT: [-] 52 [+]  
AGI: [-] 22 [+] [33]  
DEX: [-] 23 [+]  
LUC: [-] 10 [ +]

It seemed like some of her SP acquired since I’d last adjusted her stats following our battle with Ngai had already been naturally distributed. Most of

the points she'd acquired through her new slime regimen had gone into DEX and AGI.

"So, where do you want 'em?" I asked Miyoshi, passing her a piece of notebook paper with her stats hastily scribbled on it.

"Let's min-max INT. All in, baby."

"Huh?"

"You don't know the thrill of having a min-maxed character? Trying to break the system with your one and only boundary-busting stat!"

"You...know this *is* real life, don't you?"

Though at the rate Miyoshi was accumulating experience, if the need ever came for a more balanced distribution, she should have more than enough SP built up. Unlike a game, the amount of experience needed to reach each new level didn't go up.

Just as she'd asked, I poured all her remaining SP into INT.

"There. You're all min-maxed in INT like you wanted. More or less."

"More or less'?"

Name: Azusa Miyoshi

SP: 0.936

HP: 29.15

MP: 136.75 (205.125)

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 11 [+]

INT: [-] 80 [+]

AGI: [-] 25 [+] [37.5]

DEX: [-] 25 [+]

LUC: [-] 10 [+]

"I put a little into AGI. If you're going to be exploring with me, you've got to be able to run fast enough to keep up."

I couldn't carry Miyoshi around forever after all.

"Fair enough. I'll pass on repeating the suitcase act," she responded, seeming to recall our misadventure at Shinjuku Gyoen, when I'd had to sling her under my arm for a mad dash. She watched as I jotted down her stats.

"Here you go."

"Whoa, my bonus multipliers put my MP up over two hundred! The Arthurs will probably be stronger too...right?"

"Probably." Although they were already strong enough to take out monsters on the tenth floor with one swing, so we wouldn't know for sure until we visited lower floors. "Well then, how about we eat up and head over to Yoyogi?"

Miyoshi had forgotten all about the eggs in the pot, which were no doubt hard-boiled by now—as if they too were bracing themselves for what was to come.

## **Yoyogi Dungeon Boot Camp Room**

We reviewed the plans for the day while walking up to the entrance to Yoyogi.

Given all the...practice (?)...she'd done, Cathy likely would have been okay on her own, but we figured we should at least be present for the first day. From there, as long as I'd formed a party with Cathy, I could rely on Making to distribute stats for members of her child and grandchild parties, using an Arthur swap as a signal. I was finally going to be free again. All I'd have to do was make sure I stayed partied up with Cathy, and make sure she formed parties with all of the new enrollees.

Without caps on child and grandchild party members, our only limit would be the size of our aboveground boot camp room. Given how smooth Making made things, higher member counts per boot camp session were entirely to our benefit.

In addition, we had ultimately decided to forgo stat measurements after each

individual round. It was a pain having to adjust everyone's stats each and every time they completed a round of training. Plus, it would keep me on duty throughout the day, which was exactly what we'd wanted to avoid by entrusting explorer training to a boot camp instructor. This way, I could just adjust everyone's stats once.

Also, Cathy had been worried about trainees' motivation. There might be variance in experience gain between individuals, which might discourage those who hadn't gained as many stat points between rounds. She'd asked if we could save the measurement for the end of the day, which suited us just fine.

That took care of the big stuff, and if any need for additional troubleshooting or logistics management came up, we could always hire Cathy an assistant.

*"Hey! Yoshimura!"* Simon called my name as soon as I entered the Yoyogi lobby.

*"Morning, Simon. I hope the boot camp treats you we—"*

Before I could even finish speaking, Simon slung his arm around my shoulder, all buddy-buddy. *"Whaaat? Don't act like such a stranger. And what's up with 'hoping' it treats me well? You're the one running it, amigo!"* His face suddenly grew serious, and he leaned in, speaking in a hushed voice. *"Listen, after Cathy got back yesterday, she and Mason arm wrestled."*

*"Huh?"*

*"Every time she comes around picking challenges, Mason offers to arm wrestle. It's their fixed competition. You know, like your rock-paper-scissors routine. Well yesterday, Cathy finally won."*

*"Isn't Mason's left arm injured?"*

*"It was, but he's basically all healed up now. He's even diving on the eighteenth floor."*

*"That's good news."*

*"Nothin' good about it! Even I can't beat Mason at arm wrestling. So I asked Cathy what the hell she'd done, and she said she'd just been running through your course."*

*“Ah. She did try our entire curriculum. She’s probably really upped her game as a drill instructor.”*

*“That’s not what I’m talking about! Listen, my authority’s on the line here! Cathy’s gonna pick fights with us one after another until she’s satisfied. I need you to give us the strength to win!”*

Simon took his arm off my shoulder, and we walked along together toward the reception. The boot camp started in a scant few minutes.

*“Don’t look at me,”* I responded. *“Why are you a four-person team in the first place? The dungeon party system can include up to eight. Couldn’t you just add Cathy as a fifth full-time member?”*

*“Party wipe contingency. The DSF doesn’t want to lose all of its explorers at once if things go fubar,”* Simon responded dryly.

*“What?!”*

*“Joking. Okay, real answer. When the DSF was first formed for the rescue operation at The Ring, most of our rules were set in accordance with our deployment base at the time.”*

*“Which was?”*

*“Area 51 is an Air Force installation. Air Force units are usually two-to four-member teams.”*

*But that’s surely so they can break off into pairs for piloting and copiloting,* I thought. *There was no reason the DSF couldn’t switch to five-member teams at this point.*

*“Well, at any rate, precedent’s been set, and DSF teams have traditionally been four members and one reserve. Seems like it’s been pretty effective, so brass hasn’t seen a reason to change.”*

According to Simon, six-and eight-member teams had been tested early on, but in the tight, cramped spaces of dungeons, the increased numbers had become a hindrance to movement. Ultimately, the parties had a tendency to split into two teams of three or four members regardless, so the decision was made to stick to smaller units and send in multiple teams simultaneously for

large operations.

*“Incidentally, did you tell the rest of your team about the conversation we had the other day?”*

*“Not yet. I will if we ever have to enter the Manor, but I figure right now it’s best to keep that one close to the chest. We’ve got some pretty hotheaded guys and girls. Don’t need them getting their wires crossed on what our mission is.”*

We passed through the entry gate and headed to the conference room. Opening the door, I was startled by a sudden greeting.

*“Hi, Yoshimura!”* Cathy came up to me, beaming, the second she saw me walk in.

*Wow. She certainly seems to be in a good mood tod—*

*“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”*

Turning serious in a heartbeat, Cathy thrust me into another round of our favorite competition. She chose scissors; I went with rock.

*“Guh!”*

*“Better luck next time, Grasshopper.”*

Only slightly bitter, Cathy passed me a handful of materials concerning our first batch of trainees. We’d had everyone fill out entry sheets documenting their stat goals for the course.

*Hm. Simon’s focused on speed and strength.*

“We’ve got a lot of requests for agility,” Miyoshi, who had looked over the material earlier, commented.

For the other three, Joshua had requested speed and dexterity, Mason had gone with strength and vitality, and Natalie speed and magical firepower.

“Maybe all the monsters who gave them a tough time on the lower floors of Evans were speedsters.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I’d be dead right now if not for Aethlem. I couldn’t even see the attack that one time.”

*She probably means the fight with Ngai, I thought. Even I had hardly keep up*

with his movements with my 100 AGI.

“But there’s no way there are *Ngais* running around on the thirtieth floor. Right?” I asked. If lower floors were crawling with former boss-tier monsters, I couldn’t imagine anyone sticking around to try to finish off the capture.

“Did you two run into some kind of strong monster?” Cathy cut in, speaking Japanese. So she’d been listening to our conversation.

*“N-No! We were just wondering if you all encountered some kind of fast monsters on the twenty-ninth floor and lower in Evans,”* I frantically replied.

*“Apparently,”* Cathy responded. *“I was team backup, so I was always waiting a floor up, but the final boss was some incredibly fast giant insect called a death mantis. That’s how Mason’s arm got cut up.”*

*“‘Cut up’?”*

*“Nearly severed. Thankfully a potion we had on hand held it together, but he couldn’t move it after that.”*

So the potion hadn’t healed it completely.

*“I’ve read about the death mantis. It’s supposed to have pretty sharp claws. I can’t believe it wouldn’t take the whole arm off if it were aiming for him. Did you use a third-rank potion and reattach it?”*

Surely they’d had some extra third-rank potions on hand.

*“He got thrown off-balance by its rush attack, and tried to stop it from biting down with his left arm.”*

Ah. That’d do it. In that case, they might have used a fourth-or fifth-rank potion. Either way, they were lucky they’d been able to heal him.

*“That’s why Simon was so dead set on getting the Physical Resistance orb you two were auctioning. Apparently Mason’s pretty pleased with the results,”* Cathy added.

*“Glad to hear it.”*

There was another knock on the door, and our final trainee walked in. She was a petite woman who it was hard to believe was in the back half of her

twenties.

“Um...Komugi Rokujo?”

“That’s me!”

This was the explorer Saiga had yesterday requested we accompany down to the twenty-first floor. Although she didn’t look like any explorer I’d ever seen.

“Are you okay with English?”

*“Don’t worry. That’s no problem,”* she replied without missing a beat.

*“The other trainees today are all native English-speakers, so if you could go along with that, it’d be a big help. If there’s anything you don’t understand, our drill instructor also speaks Japanese.”*

*“Thank you.”*

She’d done studies abroad, so it was no wonder she was fluent. According to the profile we’d received from Naruse, she was a fellow of the Gemological Association of Great Britain, as well as a graduate gemologist of the Gemological Institute of America.

For the sake of the smoothness of the class, it was best that we be able to provide all the instruction in one language. If we had more applicants from different linguistic backgrounds, we could switch over to telepathy, but unintended thought-leakage would be a risk.

“All right, maggots! Line up! (*Man, what a great group!*)”

*Yeah, accidental telepathy could really ruin the effect.*

Cathy clapped to gather everyone’s attention.

*“Liiiiiiiine up!”*

Team Simon got into formation in front of Cathy immediately. Sure enough, they were soldiers to the bone. Komugi alone took a bit of time getting to her spot.

*“You are the proud, the chosen members of the inaugural course of the dungeon boot camp! Don’t forget it!”*

*Wow! She really is a drill instructor!*



The secret was to whittle down their confidence on the first day, then slowly build it back— *Wait, our boot camp program only lasts one day. Shoot!*

*“Certain parts of this program might seem strange. They might make you question whether the hosts’ heads are screwed on straight. Well, I won’t accept any questions. If you have doubts, you save them until after you’ve been through the training. Do I make myself clear?”*

*Hold on, Cathy! No need to roast us that hard!* Hearing her, I felt like I just might fall over out of embarrassment.

*“Now, we’ll begin with a stat-measurement. It’s important that we know everyone’s current condition in order to gauge the results,”* Cathy explained. *“I’m sure I don’t need to repeat this to a group of eager young recruits like yourselves, but I’ll remind you that you all signed an NDA contract as part of your application forms. That includes not only the contents of the course, but the stats of other trainees, so keep this information to yourself! There are to be no exceptions, do you hear me?”*

*“Cathy, hurry up and get to the measurements.”* Simon was raring to go. I thought that seeing fire in someone’s eyes was just a phrase, but with him it almost seemed true.

Cathy walked up to Simon with a severe look on her face, standing directly in front of him.

*“What was that, rookie? I didn’t give you permission to speak.”*

As if remembering all of a sudden that Cathy was the drill instructor, Simon straightened his posture. *“Forgive me, ma’am!”*

*“Listen, the only words I want to hear out of you are ‘Aye, ma’am.’ Is that clear?”*

*“Aye, ma’am!”* Simon replied, standing at attention.

*“Wow! It’s just like watching real army training!”* Miyoshi commented, awestruck, from the corner of the room.

*That might be true, I thought, but hold on, we’re not an army!*

The remaining three members of Team Simon did their best to stifle their

laughter at the exchange.

*“Now then, let the measurements commence. We’ll have you step up one after another to this disc platform.”*

The first member to step up to the SMD-PRO disc that Cathy had pointed out was none other than Simon himself.



*“Beginning measurements,”* Cathy announced, operating the device. *“Aaaaand finished. Next!”* she called out a moment later.

*“What? But I didn’t even feel anything,”* Simon complained. *“No beam or zap or whistles, no magic sigil on the floor. No nothing! It feels kind of underwhelming, right?”*

*“What words did I permit you to say?”* Cathy answered, glowering. However, perhaps remembering her own, similar reaction to the measurements, she didn’t press the issue further.

Miyoshi fought back laughter while retrieving the printout of Simon’s stats from the machine, jotting down his name on it, and handing it over to Cathy.

Name: Simon  
HP: 113.80  
MP: 82.80  
STR: 45  
VIT: 46  
INT: 43  
AGI: 44  
DEX: 48  
LUC: 13

Natalie cast a sidelong glance at the printout. *“So those are what stats look like. Would you say those run high or low?”*

*“We’ve calibrated the system so that the average adult man should read around a ten in all stats,”* Miyoshi replied. Then she gave the team the same explanation she’d given Cathy the other day. *“But an average adult woman reads around an eight or nine in most of the physical attributes, so even one point makes a difference. At two points of difference, you really notice a change. Olympic athletes should be around the twenties, so forty is exceptional, and unheard of among nonexplorers. You could say it makes you a variety of superhuman.”*

*“‘Superhuman.’ Heh, me,”* Simon boasted, gazing proudly at his stats.

*“Well then, I guess I’ll be up next.”* Joshua took his place on the disc.  
Afterward, Cathy measured Mason and Natalie, in that order.

Name: Joshua

HP: 97.40

MP: 76.80

STR: 39

VIT: 38

INT: 38

AGI: 52

DEX: 54

LUC: 13

Name: Mason

HP: 139.80

MP: 62.80

STR: 55

VIT: 58

INT: 32

AGI: 36

DEX: 40

LUC: 12

Name: Natalie

HP: 91.40

MP: 104.40

STR: 35

VIT: 38

INT: 58

AGI: 32

DEX: 42

LUC: 13

While Team Simon looked over the results, discussing their scores with one another, Komugi stepped up to the platform.

Name: Komugi  
HP: 21.00  
MP: 27.40  
STR: 9  
VIT: 8  
INT: 15  
AGI: 8  
DEX: 13  
LUC: 41

“Wait, what?” Miyoshi let slip while viewing the results.

Komugi asked if something was wrong.

“No, it’s just that...ordinarily I don’t see LUC stats this high.”

“‘LUC’? Is that ‘luck’?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah. Come to think of it, whenever we go out on digs, I do tend to find more gemstones and fossils than most people. You mean like that?”

“Er, yeah,” Miyoshi stammered. “Like that.”

Komugi’s LUC stat was high enough that she might have had the highest natural number of anyone on Earth. On the other hand, the rest of her stats made it look like she hadn’t been exploring at all.

“Could you perhaps...tell us a little bit about your dungeon diving history?” Miyoshi asked.

“‘History’? Well, I just got my D-Card the other day.”

Miyoshi and I exchanged nervous glances. In other words, Komugi hadn’t gone dungeon diving at all.

We told Komugi to wait, and went into the staff room to discuss. Since I’d

already formed a party with Cathy, we couldn't use telepathy.

"Damn it. Now I get why that square-looking guy wouldn't tell us about her experience."

"Right. We never would have taken her on if we'd known."

Naruse's supervisor had probably known we would have just laughed in his face if he'd told us she was a rank amateur. No one on earth would have signed the contract we had knowing how out of their depth the prospective trainee was. Well, except shady organizations luring unsuspecting marks into dungeons to pass hits off as exploration "accidents," maybe. If any such groups existed.

"So what do we do?" I asked.

"Don't look at me. You're the one who signed her on."

"That's true, but I thought... The JDA section chief guy said she was *relatively* inexperienced. Does that look 'relative' to you?!"

"Maybe like a second cousin twice removed. Do you think he is on to our methods?"

"Nah. She might be a probe, though. A way of seeing what we do when given a subintermediate explorer."

It definitely seemed like she'd been sent in at least *partially* to see how we'd respond.

"So...what? Do we turn her down?" Miyoshi asked.

"At this point?"

"The JDA deliberately withheld information. We could say our contract is void on those grounds."

I took a moment, sifting through my own thoughts.

"Kei?" Miyoshi peered at me as I stood there arms crossed and head tilted.

It's not that I didn't understand where Miyoshi was coming from. Ordinarily in this situation, I'd send Komugi packing without a second thought too.

"Let's not be too hasty," I responded. "She might be useful."

“‘Useful’?”

I moved over to a nearby chair and sat down. “You know how we haven’t been down to the lower floors in a little while?”

“Well, yeah. That’s because they’re crawling with high-ranking explorers,” Miyoshi answered.

“That’s part of it. Another reason I’ve held off on going is because we both have Mining.”

“Huh?” Miyoshi looked at me as if I were crazy.

“Remember the inscription on Mining Naruse translated? The fiftieth floor drops gold, but the others all drop some kind of unspecified, predetermined mineral.”

“Right...”

“And those drops might vary between dungeons, even on the same floor number.”

“Naturally. Where are you going with this?”

“So... What determines those drops?”

“‘What determines the’ — It’s the dungeons, right? What you called their ‘will’ or whatever.”

“See, I’m not so sure about that.”

“What’s your evidence?” Miyoshi asked. “Just your gut?”

“Well, when you put it like that...” I smiled, then churned my hands through the air fumbling for an explanation. “At this point I don’t really have much to go on. But when we went down to the twentieth floor, we got a vanadium drop.”

“Right.”

“There are a ton of minerals between metals and nonmetals. It could have been anything. But why *vanadium*? Furthermore, it was a perfect ingot.”

“What do you mean ‘why’? Just random chance, right?”

The inscription had read “infinite mineral resources.” “Mineral resources”



normally referred to mineral deposits buried deep in the earth that could be extracted and used as resources by humans. Given that wording, you'd expect most of the drops to be some kind of raw ore, not polished metal ingots.

“‘Random chance’? Maybe. Ordinarily I'd think so too. But when I saw that vanadium ingot, my heart skipped a beat.”

To be more precise, I'd felt something reach out and *seize* my heart for a moment—as if the will of the dungeon had had a grip on the inside of my chest.

“What are you getting at? Was there something special about vanadium?”

“You remember that incident I had to apologize for, back at our last company?”

“The one you finally quit over?”

*Well, the real reason I quit was suddenly becoming Rank 1, but—close enough. Both played a part.*

“Yeah. That incident was related to a project involving vanadium.”

“Wha?”

“So when I saw the vanadium drop at Yoyogi, I started thinking maybe what determined the mineral drop on each new floor was the first person to cause a drop there with Mining.”

“Like a wave function collapse.”

“Something like that. Like quantum decoherence. The unlimited possibilities of the drop decreasing to a single one via interaction with some external factor, in this case the Mining skill-holder. Uh... What d'ya think? Sound plausible?”

Miyoshi sighed. “Not at all.”

“Shoot. You got me there.”

*No mercy.* But I knew that if I heard the same explanation, that's exactly what I'd say.

“And yet I have the strange feeling some part of it might be true. Just a whisper. I hear it in my ghost,” Miyoshi added with a smile. “So that's why we turned back before going down to the twenty-first floor that time, huh? You

didn't want to set the next drop?"

"That was one reason."

The other was that I was afraid of encountering all the other top-ranking explorers running around, and figured we'd better get back quickly.

"So you're saying that each dungeon floor able to produce drops could produce any mineral, and the factor to narrow that down into its fixed drop type is whichever explorer causes the first drop to happen? Then how do you explain the diamonds at Yokohama?"

"Think about it. Doesn't that also seem way too convenient?" I'd been thinking about a certain *diamond-themed tokusatsu hero*, and the drops were polished diamonds. "So I was thinking, the best person to set the mineral drops on future floors would be an expert in the field."

Thinking of valuable mineral drops not often found naturally in Japan, we might want to eye nickel, cobalt, and bauxite—a source of aluminum. After that there were a number of nonmetals not needed in large amounts, but indispensable to certain fields...

"I see where you're going. There's no way you or I could keep all that in mind while tangling with dungeon monsters."

"Right. We could try forcing the thought right before the item dropped, but we don't know how deeply into your mental state the dungeon...er, forces...read. It'd be better to have someone with genuine interest in the subject. After all, as far as we know, there are no redos."

"Okay, so say we manage to get Ms. Gemstone all the way down to the lower floors. She still has to defeat a monster in order for the drops to trigger."

"Yeah. There's the rub."

To get someone a D-Card, you could just have them shoot a weak monster with a gun from some distance away. However, our targets would be monsters on the twenty-first floor and beyond, whose hides ordinary firearms wouldn't penetrate. We couldn't exactly trust an amateur with heavy-duty artillery, to say nothing of the impossibility of getting our hands on high-caliber weapons in Japan. If all Komugi had to do was strike the final blow, it was possible we could

manage something, but since experience was divided for cooperative kills, we had no guarantee the awareness used for determining drops wouldn't be divided in the same way.

"This is way harder than that time we helped Asha." Miyoshi crossed her arms. All that had taken was one Benzetho-Blast. This time we would have to force our explorer into a real combat scenario. "Anyway, I thought something was funny when you agreed to take on an extra unproven explorer's training. You normally avoid extra work."

"I know. But I figured if I brought this conversation up the other day, you'd just think I was crazy."

"Well, it's too late for *that*," Miyoshi responded.

"Hey..."

"But still, if your theory is correct and ordinary explorers start getting their hands on Mining, nine times out of ten, the drops for lower floors will be set to..."

"Iron. Yeah, almost definitely."

Ask an ordinary person to think of a mineral resource, and they'd probably think of a metal. In that case the first metal to come to mind, based on everyday proximity, would be either iron or steel. Steel itself was actually an iron alloy, which meant the Mining drops would be set to iron either way.

"Yoyogi has at most sixty Mining-capable floors," I pointed out. Mid-depth dungeons, of which Yoyogi was one, only went up to eighty, and Mining drops only started after the twentieth. "What are we going to do if all of them wind up being iron?"

If we had Komugi play her part, we could get a far greater drop variety—although she'd no doubt set the first one to some kind of gem. From what we'd heard, she was possessed of an inordinate love for all minerals and gemstones, so it seemed like she'd tackle the mission for us with zeal. The only hurdles were...all of the practical ones.

"Then, as long as our auction winner for the second Mining hasn't contacted us about a date yet, do you think...?"

“Might as well make the most of the situation. If they want to pick it up soon and seem like they’re going to try to use it in Yoyogi, I’m thinking of giving the orb to Komugi instead and rushing her down to the twenty-first floor to set the drop item before the exchange.”

I wasn’t sure exactly how Komugi would defeat a twenty-first-floor monster at this point, but I’d think about that later.

“I see. But Kei, wouldn’t it be better to just run your theory by the JDA?”

“It might be. But I don’t have any evidence right now... They could just brush the vanadium off as a specious argument.”

“And the diamonds? Although if we bring those up at this point, we might lose out on the deal for renting Yokohama.”

“That’s how it is. However, if I can get Komugi down to the twenty-first floor and use her to set the next drop, my theory will have a lot more weight behind it.”

“What happens if another Mining drops while we’re waiting? People are hunting genomos on the eighteenth floor every day.”

“I know. Just in case, I’ll ready a report to hand in if there’s any news of a drop. So, Miyoshi, any ideas for getting Komugi ready to fight past the twentieth floor?”

“Huh? Don’t look at me! Um, even with some high-firepower weapon, it doesn’t mean a thing if you can’t hit the broad side of a barn, and I don’t think she has any firearms training. Maybe we could make her a summoner, like me?”

“In that case, we’ll have to raise her INT. That can be our focus for now.”

“She already had an INT of fifteen, so if we raise it one more point, she should be able to summon four hounds.”

“Do you think that alone would get her past the twentieth floor?”

“Maybe... At this point the Arthurs are all right.”

*That’s true.* They hadn’t had any problem down there on our recent trip when I’d picked up the vanadium.

“The Arthurs have gotten a lot stronger from when they were first summoned though. Besides, what if she hates dogs?”

“Then we’re outta luck.”

“We could give her some offensive magic too.”

“We won’t be able to get her sufficient MP in time. She might run out of it before even getting to the lower floors.”

“So we have her go with a party, and save up MP until she hits the twenty-first.”

“I don’t think any party capable of reaching the twenty-first floor is going to accept a rank amateur in its midst, but good luck.”

*Yeah...* The kind of party who *would* accept a rank amateur would probably have ulterior motives in mind.

“Looks like that’s it, then. Our shortest route is the longest. We’ll have to have her hunt slimes for three months and raise her stats the old-fashioned way. Well, the somewhat old-fashioned way.”

If she did a serious daily regimen using our new method, even killing just a hundred slimes a day would net her 180 points in three months. And at this point, three hundred kills a day wasn’t out of the question. She could be up past 100 SP in a month, at which point we could entrust her with offensive magic and head to the twenty-first floor.

*Hold on, am I taking the lower floors too lightly?*

“Even if it’s just a slime regimen, she should probably have one other person with her,” Miyoshi pointed out. “Saito still has Aethlem out for today.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “We should find someone to pair her up with, if we can.”

“It’s precisely at a time like this that I wish we had one more Arthur,” Miyoshi grumbled.

The Arthurs were currently split between myself, Miyoshi, Saito, and office guard duty. And I was stuck keeping an eye on the bootcamp all day.

“If we don’t summon more Arthurs when we go down to the tenth floor for Saito’s shoot, you’re going to find yourself without any free time. That is, when the regular boot camps start up.”

Our original plan was to leave one Arthur at boot camp and have it swap places with one attached to me for contact. That way, I would know to distribute all the members’ experience before the end-of-day measurement took place. As far as my free time was concerned, our ability to loan out one more Arthur was a matter of life and death.

“Shoot. This is tough. We’ve got to think of something to do with Komugi in the meantime.”

*Cathy, can you hear me?* I contacted our drill instructor telepathically.

*Wha? Ah, I hear you.*

*Komugi’s going to be doing a different training course. Let her know, will you? We’ll take care of her program today.*

*What? Is there something even more efficient the rest of us don’t know about?*

I grimaced. Of course this training maniac would want to sample any new training offerings herself. I should have seen that one coming.

*It’s not like that. It’s just that we don’t think she can keep up with the same course as the DSF members. We’ll run a gentler program with her so she doesn’t get in the way,* I responded.

*Ah, I see. Copy that. I’ll let her know.*

It was then that I realized we had completely made up our minds to train her. Even though, looking back on it, we had absolutely no obligation to do so. There was the matter of Mining, but we could have worked out something else.

Maybe that was just the start of Komugi’s tremendous LUC stat taking effect.

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“Now that the measurements are over, we’ll be forming parties. In the event any members have already formed a party with each other, a single representative will suffice to join mine.”

Cathy took out her D-Card, held it up Simon's and admitted him to her party. With the rest of Team Simon having already formed a party, that only left Rokujo. Mimicking Simon, she extended her D-Card. However, Cathy extended her hand and shook her head.

*"Komugi."*

*"Yes?"*

*"You'll be undergoing a special training program. Please follow Miyoshi and Yoshimura's instructions."*

*"Understood."* Rokujo looked over at us and gave a little bow.

Without a day of training in her life, it'd be meaningless to run her ragged on the dungeon's second floor. What she needed now was SP accumulation, and that meant killing slimes on the first.

*"Well then, everyone, to the second floor! On the double!"* Cathy shouted, and with that our military members dashed out of the room.

*"Is running on the premises allowed?"* I asked.

*"Who knows? That exit leads directly outside, though, so it shouldn't be a problem. Anyway, let's get going too."*

By the time we got to the second floor, Cathy had lined up her trainees in the same spot she'd started from during pre-boot camp practice.

*"For your first dungeon section, you'll be running the 31.4-kilometer perimeter of the dungeon's second floor. Now get moving!"*

Cathy took off at the front of the party at an incredible pace. Behind her and the DSF, a number of other explorers trailed the party, trying not to attract too much attention.

*"There she goes."*

*"You think those guys following them are reporters?"* I asked.

*"We didn't announce today as the start date, so I don't want to think so, but if they're not reporters, there's someone else who wants the details on our course."*

The other day Naruse had told us about a little...incident...in which one of our dogs had caused a stir in Yoyogi during one of Cathy's training runs. Apparently that had gotten a number of Yoyogi regulars curious.

"You think an ordinary explorer can keep up with Cathy?" I asked.

"There's no way I could!" Miyoshi answered. "And I'm confident about that!"

"That's a pretty sad form of confidence." Cathy and Team Simon were running at a pace even faster than what Cathy had shown us the other day. "What if they veer off course? They don't have an Arthur along for guidance."

"I wanted to give them Glessic, but he's still on office guard duty. Still, Cathy should know her way around the course well enough by now. She's certainly run it enough."

"We've really got to hurry up with summoning those extra Arthurs."

"Um, excuse me," Rokujo spoke up from behind us. "What exactly should I be doing?"

"Ah, we'll get to your special training in a minute. Miyoshi, I can go with her. Do you have another way to kill time for a while?"

"I thought I'd go visit the garden."

"If you get done early, come up to the first floor and look us up with 'find.'"

"Okay. Remember that if you use Drudwyn for Komugi's training, you'll be unguarded, so don't get too cocky until I come up to meet you."

I did have 100 VIT, so I had a hunch that even a gunshot might feel like a minor sting, but...I wasn't willing to find out.

"Got it," I responded. "In that case, Rokujo, follow me."

"Yes, sir!"

She didn't even have an entire single point of SP, so if we were going to train, we needed to train seriously from the start. I knew I'd be having her do some kind of slime regimen, but she didn't have any disguise, which put us in a bit of a pinch. The Mitsurugi method would draw too much attention. The new Arthur method would be best. I would rather have avoided entrusting its secrets to an



unknown quantity like Rokujo, but time was of the essence.

Poring over my options as we walked, I noticed Drudwyn's tail popping out of a shadow in front of us, wagging back and forth.

He'd gotten fond of pranks like this recently. Probably because Miyoshi kept reinforcing this behavior by telling him how cute he was. The tail was wagging just out of Rokujo's sight.

At least that meant there was no one nearby. Saito hadn't been caught doing her training either, so the Arthurs probably came equipped with a function similar to Life Detection. We headed even deeper into the already-deserted first floor, to a spot where it looked like no people would come.

"Rokujo."

"Yes?"

"First—don't question it—just take these." I handed her a hammer and the spray bottle we used for Benzetho-Blasts. "You got an explanation about the NDA, right?"

"Yes."

"Then remember it applies to what I'm about to show you next. Not a word even to other trainees."

"Understood." Rokujo gulped.

"Drudwyn!" I called our designated Arthur out of the shadows.

Upon seeing a huge hound emerge from the darkness, rather than being startled, Rokujo's eyes widened with excitement. "Awww! What a big fluffer!"

"Huh? You mean you're not scared?"

"Should I be?"

"Never mind. This is Drudwyn."

"Ah. Clever name. The only hound who could hunt the Twrch Trwyth."[\(2\)](#)

*Huh?*

What the hell was she talking about—Twitch Twhat now? What did that even

mean? Was it a real word? The only thing I understood was that it was something to be hunted. All I knew about Drudwyn's name was that it had been taken from one of King Arthur's hounds. I felt like Miyoshi had told me more about their lore at some point, but it completely escaped me...

But was Drudwyn's legend really that famous? *Maybe I should read it sometime...*

"Er, that's right..." I answered vaguely and smiled. "Anyway, he'll be accompanying you during your training today."

I patted Drudwyn on the back, and he dived into Rokujo's shadow, tail poking out of the darkness and wagging back and forth again.

"Aw! Cuuute!"

*This girl knows no fear.*

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or even more worried, but in the meantime I put my feelings aside and set about showing her how to use the spray bottle and hammer.

"That out of the way," I said, getting ready to introduce the most essential part of the training, "each time you defeat a slime, you'll notice a brief moment of darkness. That's normal. It'll only last a second, so don't pay it any mind and just continue with the training."

"I don't really get it, but if it's part of the training..."

"Don't worry. It is. Just give it a try."

Rokujo turned toward the first slime she saw and raised the spray bottle in anticipation. She pulled the trigger, and the slime burst into wet chunks.

"Oh, wow!"

I wondered if she meant the way the slime had exploded, but before I knew it she had picked up its core.

"I've never seen any stone like this before!" She held the core up to the light. "What an amazing schiller. The transparency's too low for it to be rainbow quartz. Perhaps like peristerite?"

“‘Peristerite’?”

“It’s a feldspar mineral! Feldspar minerals are made up mainly of orthoclase, anorthite, and albite. Peristerite is composed primarily of albite.”

*Uh, I feel like I’ve experienced this somewhere before.*

“Wow, and it’s so iridescent. Almost like a soap bubble,” Rokujo continued dreamily.

“‘Iridescent’?” I asked timidly.

“Feldspars are made up of thin layers of other minerals. In peristerite’s case, albite and oligoclase can—”

*Ah! It’s just like when Miyoshi talks about wine!*

I was too afraid to ask the difference between orthoclase and oligoclase, but at any rate, it seemed like iridescence was caused by optical interference between different layers in the lamellar structure. Or something.

“But the refractive index is a bit too high for peristerite...” Rokujo added disappointedly.

*Hello! That’s because it’s a slime core! Not a gem! If you don’t hurry up and smash it, the slime’s just going to reform!*

“Er, Rokujo, that’s because it’s a slime core. You have to smash it to—”

“You want me to *destroy* a beautiful gem like this?!”

“Well, I mean...yeah?”

“Can’t I just...take it home?”

“No can do.”

“Whaaaa?!”

Pouting, Rokujo set the core on the ground and, despite seeming to resist with all her might, crouched and brought the hammer down on it—but not without giving it one last, longing look.

For all her reticence, her hammer strike had some oomph. Apparently she’d spent quite a bit of time taking part in fossil digs.

“I’m more into minerals than fossils, but my father was a bona fide fossil maniac,” she explained. “He used to take me on digs all the time. I never thought those skills would come in handy in dungeon exploration.”

Discreetly checking her experience, I noted it had gone up by 0.02.

“Okay, get ready for it to go dark for a second.”

“Got it. Ready for it to go dark for a secoyyyyype!”

Drudwyn dropped Rokujo into the shadow pit, and she returned a moment later, on the other side of a small yelp.

“How’d it go?” I asked.

Rokujo blinked, cocking her head to the side in confusion. “Erm, it felt like I was sinking for a second. Then everything just went black, and I was right back here.”

That was similar to how Miyoshi had described it—a minor sinking feeling, but something you could get used to quickly. *Although at least Miyoshi had understood what was happening.*

“All right. Take out the next slime the same way. If you walk in the direction that tail points to, you’ll find one soon enough.”

Drudwyn’s tail emerged from Rokujo’s shadow near her feet and pointed forward, his way of indicating that there was a slime nearby. Although the first floor was a dark cavern, shadows still danced in the light of luminous moss and gems adorning the walls, providing plenty of places for the Arthurs to hide.

“Ah, there’s one now! Er, euuugh! Take that!” Rokujo shouted from a little way ahead. The slime burst, and she smashed its core with a hammer—not without hesitation.

Her SP intake was once again 0.02.

“Perfect,” I smiled. “Keep up that routine.”

“That’s all?” Rokujo looked at me dubiously. Apparently she’d been expecting something more physically taxing from the words “special training.”

“Right now you’re starting from basically zero. We just need to focus on

getting you experience.”

“Understood. Then how long before I’m ready to go to the twenty-first floor?”

*How long? Uh...*

“Let’s see. If you kill one hundred slimes a day, we can probably get you down there in three months.”

“So only nine thousand slimes, then!” she said cheerfully.

*Wait, hold on, that’s still a lot!*

“Ah, by the way. Don’t do this training when there’s anyone else around, okay? Drudwyn should alert you when there are other people nearby.”

“Huh? Ah, right. Secrets. Got it.”

We had already gone public with a dungeon support company, so perhaps there wasn’t much point in keeping our Arthur method under wraps at this point, but it would still mean more trouble for us if too many new discoveries got out too quickly. There was a time and place for releasing earth-shattering information. *If only we knew what those times and places were!*

“Okay, Drudwyn. Be on your best behavior too.”

“Ruff!”

“If you get lost and can’t find your way back, just ask Drudwyn. He’ll set you straight,” I told Rokujo.

“Noted!”

Giving a peppy response, Rokujo returned to her work, following Drudwyn and spraying down the next slime. It seemed like having a numerical goal had increased her motivation.

She was saving plenty of time by not having to run back and forth to the dungeon entrance. Fatigue hadn’t set in yet, but she was killing a slime every ten to twelve seconds, around four per minute. Even that pace would mean 240 in an hour, for 4.8 skill points. If she kept up that pace for ten hours a day, she could have her goal completed in as little as four days.

We’d already spawned the Manor via killing slimes, so that danger had

passed, and even if it hadn't, the new training method counted as a trip outside the dungeon and an experience reset—I doubted it could lead to fulfilling the Manor's spawn criteria anyway.

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"There you two are!"

Looking backward toward the direction of the voice that had called out, I saw Miyoshi running toward us and waving. That explained why Drudwyn hadn't alerted us to another person being present.

"Is it already time for Cathy and the others to head back up to the surface?" I asked.

"I think so. Also, Cathy's been through all our courses, right?"

"And then some." I shuddered just thinking about how much time I'd been asked to spend upping her stats after each practice run recently.

"Then I was thinking we can just let her run the whole rest of the training up to the end of the round without us. No need to get back right away."

"Although I do want to see how Simon and the others react... How was the field?"

"We have a few new sprouts."

"Nice! That was fast. Any slime damage?"

Miyoshi shook her head serenely. "Not a scratch. Everything was good as new."

"So that proves it."

"Probably. I did cut one of the stalks just in case, but..."

"'But'?"

"Remember that stalk I cut last time too?"

"That's right. You did do that."

"That one was the same as it had been. No growth."

Apparently it had been noticeably smaller than the other stalks around it.

“Hmmm...” Based on our findings so far, it appeared as though there were three steps necessary for the plants to dungeonize:

The seeds bathing in a sufficient amount of D-Factors

Sprouting put a flag on the plants

A further event trigger causing any damaged or missing plants with a flag on them to respawn

Hearing my summary, Miyoshi scratched her head. “Just one problem, Kei. The undungeonized seeds and the dungeonized seeds spent the same amount of time in the dungeon.”

That was true. The difference, I suspected, lay in when they’d been planted.

“The time it takes from planting to sprouting must be less than the time it takes to absorb ample D-Factors. In that case, the undungeonized group would have sprouted before Step 1 was completed, missing the flag in Step 2.”

“That’s a problem,” Miyoshi responded. “To test that, we’ll have to bring in more seeds and try planting them in intervals, certain lengths of time apart.”

Despite all appearances, it didn’t seem like an experiment easily completed with one or two people alone. The experiment could only be conducted in a dungeon, and that meant having guards around twenty-four seven to be on slime lookout. At any rate, we were shorthanded for our next round of tests.

“How about attaching a full experiment log to our dungeonizing patent request?” I asked.

“Sure. We’ve just about got our theory in order, so I was intending to put the patent through soon.”

“Great. Then someone’ll read it and want to continue the work.”

There had to be at least tens of thousands of dungeon researchers worldwide—sometimes, depending on news and new discoveries, even more than that. And as researchers they were all true knowledge hounds—“seekers of knowledge” if you will—the kind who couldn’t help themselves from replicating experiments others in their field had conducted, just to put to bed any doubts.

“So it’s passing the difficult parts off onto other people again,” Miyoshi said,

assessing my plan.

“Hey, people can’t live without one another.”

“Don’t pass it off as a philosophy, Kei.”

*Hey, stop looking at me like I don’t know what I’m talking about. That was a really cool line, okay?!*

“Our goal was to figure out how to create plants that could endlessly respawn for instant reharvests,” I commented. “Anything outside of that problem, we’re better off leaving to the experts. We’ve already got enough to deal with in terms of problems only we can tackle.”

“Hm. I suppose that’s true. We’ve got two world-class measurement instruments right now, and we’re the only ones with access to them.”

“I wish you would stop referring to people as instruments.” I smiled. She had no doubt meant Making and Appraisal.

Miyoshi cast a glance over to Rokujo, who was trailing after Drudwyn’s tail and spraying and smashing the next slime. “So, what are your plans after her training today?”

We couldn’t afford to lend her Drudwyn every day moving forward after all.

“Saito and Cavall finish up today, right?”

“Looks like it. She has her movie shoot tomorrow, and then the dungeon program pilot on the fifteenth. Although she might want to sneak in a little more training on the fifteenth.”

Aethlem and Drudwyn still being out would throw a wrench in our plans to start the regular boot camp program next week.

“Plus even if we increase our number of Arthurs, we can’t lend them out indefinitely,” Miyoshi added.

“Hmm...”

We also had Rokujo’s combat past the first twenty floors to consider. I could accompany her for the initial trip, but eventually she would have to be able to go without our supervision.



Higher stats or not, she didn't seem like the type suited for direct combat. Our best bet was probably forming a party around her and putting her on summoning magic, but even that had its hurdles.

"Kei."

"What?"

"I've been meaning to ask... Why are you so dead set on training Komugi? Normally you tend to avoid anything that seems like it might be troublesome. I know you mentioned the Mining drops, but I'm not used to seeing this level of gusto from you."

"Good question."

As far as Rokujo was concerned, simply getting her to the twenty-first floor once would fulfill our contract to the JDA. After that, she wasn't our problem. However...

I wasn't sure I could put it into words, but I felt strangely invested at this point. I decided to give it a go.

"In the beginning..."

"'In the beginning'? What is this, a history documentary?"

"Ahem. In the beginning, we were just out for our own profit through the dungeons, right? Just our own livelihoods. Once those were secured, we could just go diving here and there at our leisure to stock up or as projects interested us. At least that's what I was thinking."

"Me too. Well, plus I was ready to leave that old toxic company behind. Then along came your skill, and I figured I could make bank off it. The ability to quantify data has all sorts of advantages, after all." Perhaps fearing that I'd be offended by the prospect of being exploited, Miyoshi added the last bit with an extra cheerful emphasis.

"Yeah, that about sums it up. Those were our goals at the start." Looking back over the past three or so months, I let out a nostalgic sigh. "But then came the last three months. It's only been *three months*, you know?" I held up three fingers on my right hand for emphasis. "In the past three months, we've dealt

with the tablet inscriptions, the discovery of D-Factors, secrets of the dungeons' origins, America's hidden involvement, as well as the specter of this American researcher who may or may not be dead. We had aspirations of the slow life, but it's like, give us a break already!"

*Some* measure of excitement might have been important for a fulfilling life, but there were limits to everything. *Save some earth-shattering developments for next year for a change! We're exhausted over here!*

"Plus, we got rich," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Yeah, that too. That still hasn't sunk in yet."

We didn't have any super expensive habits, so we'd hardly felt the change in terms of our daily lives, other than no longer having to worry about rent and utility bills. Humans were slow to notice change. Unless something in your immediate surroundings changed all at once, today felt like tomorrow felt like yesterday.

The numbers in our bank accounts had more zeros on them, but since I hardly ever checked my bank account, even that didn't touch me. I'd tended to live only caring about whether I had enough to get by, and if I did I was happy. The change hadn't really registered.

"There are song lyrics that talk about everyone being the protagonist of their own story and stuff, but up until recently, it felt more like we were background characters. Ordinary company workers, ordinary lives. Matters of state, national security, world hunger. All this stuff is beyond us. We aren't cut out for it."

We were normal people who had had our hands full just with the problems on our own plates. We'd had our fun, but all this other stuff went over our heads.

"Don't worry. All this will feel plenty real when tax season hits in the spring," Miyoshi commented.

"I'll bet." I gave a defeated laugh. "Come to think of it, even more's changed for you. You're already like a living legend, among explorers anyway. The JDA's privacy policies protect you somewhat, but you're still putting yourself out there."

“I might have gotten a little carried away during the press conference the other day. But I’d made up my mind to deal with the consequences.”

“And you’ve saved my skin more times than I can count by providing cover for my skill. I owe you. I have to say, it doesn’t feel good being protected by my former mentee all the time.”

“But that’s what our deal was. Manager-managee. I get the cash, you get your anonymity.”

“I know, but still! It doesn’t— It doesn’t feel right somehow. So I felt like I wanted to—” I struggled to find the words.

“You felt like you wanted to give back, but you weren’t sure how.” Miyoshi summed up my emotions succinctly.

“That’s right.” I reflected. “I hadn’t thought of it that way before, but that’s exactly right. But like I said earlier, so much of this stuff is beyond us. At this point I figure all I can do is—”

“Help with dungeon exploration.”

“Exactly.”

And the first dungeon in front of us was none other than the incomprehensibly large Yoyogi. But at its scale and (probable) depth, Miyoshi and I couldn’t go it alone. At some point we would need help, and who would we turn to, then?

“And so you figured that in order to assist with dungeon exploration, you’d need to train more explorers who could spearhead that exploration for you.”

“This is the first time I’ve tried putting it into words like that, but...yeah.”

“Well, that’s perfect, isn’t it? Glad to see you taking our company goals so seriously! That’s exactly what it was founded for, you know?”

“Well, to get to the truth of it, I thought we founded it to *seem* like we were giving back in order to escape controversy.”

“‘Escape controversy’? Kei, I hate to break it to you, but I think it’s a *little* too late for that.” Miyoshi shrugged her shoulders.

*Right.* We'd been thrust into incidents like the tug-of-war over Otherworldly Language Comprehension right away. That had been unexpected—and had gotten us plenty of coverage on TV.

"I've been thinking—we can try to do even more in order to support explorers."

"For helping intermediate explorers and pros, we can just keep going with the boot camp program. But we can also start ramping up our contracted explorer recruitment, outfitting more people with orbs and items, in addition to stat distribution. Before long, we'll have the strongest explorer army in the world. How's that for an idea?"

"Sounds like a plan." I smiled.

Of course I saw all sorts of problems waiting for us down the road, but we could deal with those as they came. For now we had carved our path and had no choice but to keep walking it.

"Plus, I think it's about time for the Phantom to make his debut."

"Oh right." I rolled my eyes. Miyoshi had made me practice poses all week. Was I really supposed to do those in public? In front of other people? "Hrrnng."

"Now that's the face of someone who walked out the front door and immediately stepped in a whole pile of poop."

"Could you please stop saying 'poop'? I thought you were trying to be ladylike."

"Kei, the gender binary is dead. Anyone can say 'poop' if they want."

"Not adults! I'm just saying act your age!"

Rokujo was still blinking in and out of existence behind us.

"At any rate, one thing's for sure," Miyoshi commented. "Based on all our conversations today, another barghest orb is a must."

Barghest orb drops included Darkness Magic VI, the summoning skill for hellhounds.

"Too bad the cooldown timer on those is exactly three days," I responded.

If the cooldown time were shorter, we could hole up on the fifth floor and do some dedicated hunting. If it were longer, I wouldn't feel so guilty not going back to get one very often. Three days fell perfectly in the middle.

"We could get two a week!" Miyoshi declared happily.

I looked at her with a blank expression. "Boss, can I go on strike?"

"Is there such a thing as a strike when you set all your own hours?"

"I guess in that case it wouldn't be much different than just choosing not to come into work."

"Except for the missed deadlines," Miyoshi laughed.

After a little while longer overseeing Rokujo's training, we headed back up to the surface, where the look on her face told us she was just about tuckered out.

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"Finally! I finally found you! I've been looking all over for you!"

Wheeling around at the sound of a voice from behind us just after walking through the dungeon entrance on the way back to the boot camp room, I saw a woman I recognized from...somewhere.

"Uh..." I tilted my head, thinking.

Miyoshi poked me in the side. "Kei! It's that woman from the other month. You know, with the fifth-ranked healing potion!" she hissed.

"Oh! Er... What was her name again?" I took the sheet of paper she'd given me last time out of Vault. "Eri...Mishiro?"

"That's me!" she responded. This was the archer I'd saved some months ago on the tenth floor, when she and her injured brother had been set upon by a pack of hellhounds. "I never heard back from you, so I was wondering what to do when I saw you on TV!"

*TV? She must mean the press conference!* I'd been mostly backstage, but I might have been visible from certain angles. *She has a freaky good eye!*

"I figured you were probably with D-Powers, but your business address wasn't public," Mishiro went on. "Then I saw on Twitter that you were starting your

boot camp today, so...here I am!”

Social media sure was scary. We hadn’t publicly announced the start of our trial boot camp, but word had still gotten out.

“Okay... It’s great that you’re here...” I said, floundering for words, “But, um, what exactly do you want?”

Just then the door to the boot camp sprang open. Simon came lumbering out.

*“Whoa, Yoshimura, you dog,”* he snarked, looking at the group of us. *“You some kind of home-wrecker?”*

*“‘Home-wrecker’?”*

“Is that...Simon Gershwin?” Mishiro asked, unable to contain her surprise.

*“Whoa-hoh, the one and only. Heard of me, miss?”* Responding to his name being called, he clasped his hands around Mishiro’s. *That’s a little aggressive for a handshake, don’t you think?*

“Wh-Wha?”

“He’s asking if you’ve heard of him,” I explained.

“Oh! Oh, of course I have! Um, *honored to meet you!*” Mishiro responded, starstruck.

*“Oooh! What was that? Hey, Yoshimura, mind if I eat this cutie right up?”*

*“Of course I mind!”*

There was a sudden banging sound, and before any of us knew it, Simon was on the floor, the underside of a hard leather boot raised in the air behind where his head had been. Natalie lowered her leg from its kicking pose, a satisfied look on her face.

*“Sorry about that, Yoshimura. You can’t take your eyes off Simon for a second. We’ll try to keep better tabs on him.”*

“Ah, um...yeah, thanks,” I responded. “Noted.”

*And note to self: watch out for Natalie!*

“Ah, by the way, Yoshimura?” Natalie continued. *“What the hell is this game*

*you have us playing?! No human can clear that, right? You're just having a go with us."*

"Miyoshi!" I called. *"Footage."*

"Yes, yes." Miyoshi produced her tablet and began playing the clear video we'd shown Cathy earlier.

*"Whaaat?! Is this person human? Are you serious?!"*

*"See? You can do it too, Natalie. Now go give us one lap and one goblin and come back and try it again."*

*"I got it. Hmph. Well then, Yoshimura, see you later!"* With that, she and Simon took off toward the dungeon. Although not before Simon tossed Mishiro an exaggerated wink. *What a ham!*

"He is Latino, huh? Might be the culture," Miyoshi suggested.

"A regular Don Juan."

"Um, excuse me...?" Rokujo spoke up, as if to remind us she was still there.

"Ah, Rokujo! Sorry! Next you'll be heading into this room to try out the special drink."

"Understood."

"Miyoshi, this is all you."

"The dark task you ask of me shall be performed, sir."

Miyoshi and Rokujo headed into the rental space, leaving me in the hall with Mishiro.

"Now then, Mishiro?"

Starstruck, Mishiro was still looking in the direction Simon had run. Sure enough, she was infatuated. "What? Oh, yes! Sorry!"

"It's okay, but, um...what were you here for again?"

As if she'd just remembered, Mishiro rifled through her backpack and pulled out a thick envelope. "Um, if you could..." she said, extending it forward.

"What is this?" I asked, taking the envelope.

“A token of gratitude for saving us,” she responded. “Of course I’m aware this isn’t enough to repay you for the potion, but I thought, for a start...”

The envelope was filled with what looked to be two rolls of ten-thousand-yen bills. Two million yen in total.

“What is this?”

“I’m sorry! This was all I could scrounge together with my savings. Of course I fully intend to pay back the rest later,” she replied fearfully.

*Huh? What am I supposed to do with this?* To tell the truth, I’d completely forgotten about the incident with the potion until today. There was no reason to pay us back now, and if anything it would be her brother who owed us.

“Well, there’s no point in discussing this out here,” I said. “At the very least, you can come inside.” I held the door to the dungeon boot camp open and ushered her inside.

As soon as we entered, we were greeted by a string of F-bombs from Joshua. Cathy, standing next to the AGI booth, was all smiles.

*“Didn’t that guy pride himself on his refined upbringing?”* I asked.

*“That’s just this game. It’s enough to break anyone.”* Cathy folded her arms and nodded knowingly.

Everyone except Mason had signed up for the AGI course at today’s boot camp, which meant that everyone but him would get to be baptized in the fires of “Anamei.” Prayers be with them.

*“By the way, where’s Rokujo?”*

*“Passed out after Miyoshi’s tea.”*

Glancing over, I saw Rokujo splayed across our guest couch, eyes spinning.

*“That bad, huh?”*

*“And it never gets any better.”*

*“How’d the others take it?”*

*“They haven’t finished their first rounds yet. They’ll get to experience that particular horror in a bit.”*



*“Got it. Well then, until they’re done, just—”*

*“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”*

Before I could even say, “Just feel free to relax,” Cathy had suddenly thrown down another gauntlet. She went with paper. I went with scissors.

*“Grrr.”*

*“Just feel free to relax.”*

There was no letting my guard down around Cathy. I always had to keep my AGI bumped up a bit higher than normal when I knew she’d be around.

Leaving the visibly frustrated Cathy behind, I led Mishiro to our meeting space, a partitioned section in the corner of the rental space with a table and some chairs. Passing by the comatose Rokujo, I was struck by an idea. Almost as if the gears of fate were turning.

“Kei, what is it?” Miyoshi asked, seeing my expression as I walked by.

“Ah. Uh, never mind. I’ll explain in a minute.”

I was beginning to concoct a (by my estimation, anyway) pretty brilliant plan.

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“Sorry for keeping you waiting.”

“Ah, n-no problem.” Sitting across from me at our meeting space table, Mishiro nervously fidgeted with a teacup we’d put out for her.

“Well then, I’ll get right into it. We can’t accept this money.” I slid the envelope containing the two million yen from earlier across the table.

“Huh?”

Mishiro had brought the money as a thank-you for saving her brother, but viewed objectively, it might be recognized as the payment for a fifth-ranked potion sale.

If you used up a dungeon-produced item you had gotten yourself, or, say, had a friend do so, there was no obligation to include the item in taxable earning reports. Even if a small amount of money changed hands in the latter case, it was likely to be overlooked.

However, that was a matter of scale. If money changed hands in relation to a highly valued item like a fifth-ranked potion outside an official transaction, let alone some million yen, we would quickly run up against suspicion of dungeon tax evasion.

Plus, in this case the one who had told them to take the healing potion was me, and I didn't even have a commercial license with which to record a sale.

"Are you aware of the market value of a fifth-ranked healing potion?" I asked.

"I looked it up. Apparently they run in the neighborhood of 120 million," Mishiro responded.

"That's right. And I'm guessing there's no way you can pay that on your own, right? Besides, it shouldn't even be you trying to repay it in the first place."

"Shouldn't' be me?"

"I mean, your brother's an adult, right?"

"What? I mean, yes..."

"Then he should be the one to pay it, if anyone."

"Perhaps, but Shota is..."

"He's not going to pay for it on his own, is he?"

"No..." Mishiro responded timidly.

*Whoa, wait, wait. I'd better change the script. This is starting to seem like I'm some kind of gangster trying to take advantage of a poor sister who can't pay off her no-good brother's debts. Okay, okay. Let's try a friendly approach.*

"Besides, there's no way you can pay off all of it, right? If that's all you've got to start, there'd be no end in sight. How about instead of money, you do a little work for me?"

I said it with a big smile, trying to appear as friendly as possible. Looking at me, she visibly shuddered.

"U-Um... 'work'?"

Oh no. My friendly face had made it even worse.

Behind Mishiro, Miyoshi was looking at the ground, snickering. *Oh no! She's definitely thinking the same thing!*

"Um. Yeah, uh. Ah. Well. Mishiro, what kind of work do you do?"

"Um...I'm technically a pro explorer..."

*Heh heh heh. All right.* That's just what I'd wanted to hear. With a savings of two million yen at her age, she had to be fairly skilled. Judging by the arrow I'd seen her fire at the hellhounds before I intervened, she had a pretty good arm.

The groundwork was laid. At this point I was about one step away from trotting out the "sign a contract with me if you want to become a Magical Girl" routine. We even had the magic gems (orbs). Mishiro could be looking at becoming D-Powers' first contracted explorer. *This should work out right?* She'd dropped into our laps just when we'd needed someone to accompany Rokujo on her training.

"Actually, there's an explorer we'd like you to form a party with and be on bodyguard duty for."

"Huh? An explorer? You want me to be their 'bodyguard'?"

Mishiro cocked her head to the side, seeming to wonder if she'd misunderstood. *Right, that wouldn't make much sense without context.* I was the one making the request, and even I hardly understood!

"Hmmm. It's a little hard to go into detail until we have you sign an NDA. In the meantime, how about signing a contract with us?"

"Wha?" You could practically see a question mark appear over Mishiro's head. *Fair enough.* "Um, me? With D-Powers? Become a contracted explorer? Are you sure?"

"Of course. We can simply waive the fifth-ranked potion as part of your signing fees. Or better yet, just write it off as expenses. Anyway, we can get into detailed talks once you've signed the NDA." Thinking about signing fees in the professional sports world, it wasn't unusual to see players go for 120 million. "Do you have any current party contracts?"

"Ah, no. That won't be a problem."

Apparently the party she'd been with when I'd first met her had disbanded. *Well, what did you expect? I wouldn't want to keep exploring with a group that had left two of its members behind either. That would be super awkward.*

Mishiro thought for a moment, then looked up with a sudden determined expression. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll sign a contract with you."

Wow. That was...pretty enthusiastic for a spur-of-the-moment decision.

"Miyoshi, we have our first contracted explorer!" I called. "Could I have you do the paperwo—"

"Kei, are you serious? I mean, isn't this a little abrupt? Also, do you actually want me to put that 120 million yen signing fee in writing?"

"What? Oh, uh...no. I mean that as just, you know, a gesture!"

Miyoshi looked at Mishiro. "That okay with you, Mishiro?"

"Yes, of course. Thank goodness. Come to think of it, I wouldn't want that reported on my taxes anyway."

If the signing-fee value were put into writing, it would be subject to dungeon taxes, and worse yet maybe counted as part of annual earnings. Far from saving her cash, we would actually wind up costing Mishiro gobs of money.

As for the potion, she could easily pay that back in value through her services. Enthusiasm was worth far more to us at this point than financial contribution.

"Okay. Then please read over these materials and sign when you're ready," Miyoshi said, handing over paperwork she'd prepared in the blink of an eye.

"How'd you get those ready so quickly?"

"Kei, we're a company now. Of course I have all our templates on hand."

While Mishiro read over the paperwork, Miyoshi and I retreated to our staff room. Unlike the meeting space, the staff room was fully partitioned, with a level of soundproofing.

"Kei, are you serious about this?" Miyoshi whispered. "We don't know the first thing about her."



“I mean, she came here willing to repay a debt under no obligation. That seems like a pretty trustworthy person to me.”

“That’s exactly what seems so fishy,” Miyoshi replied.

All right, granted...not a lot of people would go out of their way to seek out their creditors for repayment just on their own goodwill. Plus, although it was still a considerable amount, the two million Mishiro had offered was a small enough portion of the whole value that it could be read as a ploy to get close to us rather than an earnest payment attempt.

“But then, she isn’t the one who asked for work,” I pointed out.

“Could you not? Every time you say ‘work,’ it feels so indecent.” Miyoshi recoiled.

“Are you sure it doesn’t feel that way just because you’ve got a dirty mind?” I shot back.

“I wasn’t the one pitching alternate repayment schemes like some sleazy gangster back there.”

“Ah, shoot. So it did feel that way. I saw you snickering back there. You know, I was trying to be friendly, for the record.”

“Noted. For the record. But Kei, I’m afraid there are some approaches that are reserved for the good-looking.”

“Hmph. You said it.” Smiling, I folded my arms and leaned back against the staff room wall. “But hey, I was thinking...”

“Hm?”

“Even if she is some kind of corporate spy, what’s it really matter to us?”

Spy or no spy, it wasn’t like I had any intention of opening up to contracted explorers about my first-place ranking, or Making, or Vault, or Naruse’s interpretation skill, or any other sensitive matters. Plus, aside from those, the Arthurs were already public, and even if the content of our boot camp program got out, it was no skin off our backs. Even Miyoshi’s Storage was already known to a segment of the JDA.

If the Benzetho-Blast method got out, we could just switch to encouraging and tutoring others in its use. A new info leak wouldn't be without problems, but it wouldn't be *too* big a deal.

"I suppose," Miyoshi responded after pondering. "Although the reason we've kept so many of those things secret for so long is because we don't want to deal with the fallout and the extra problems they'd create. I still don't want info getting out too fast, but it's true that most of our remaining secrets, save the skills, wouldn't be *too* problematic."

Although the issue was exactly what "not *too* problematic" meant.

"See?" I responded. "Worst-case scenario, our chances of being kidnapped or assassinated might go up! What's to worry about?"

"Not very persuasive."

As one of the few contemporary Japanese citizens who could claim the honor(?) of having been shot at, Miyoshi was entitled to her quips.

"At any rate, seems like she'd make a perfect partner for Rokujo," I commented. "And just when we needed one too."

"That's true," Miyoshi responded. "I guess it might work out. But..."

"What?"

"That means we'll need to get Mishiro ready to handle herself past the twentieth floor too."

"Ah! Oh, right. That's true..."

When I'd first met Mishiro, she'd been diving the fifth floor in the hopes of getting the assimilation drug. That meant she had the skills to go at least beyond the tenth floor, which she'd been hoping to secure safe passage through. But I couldn't be sure about her chances below floors eleven or twelve. If she relied on arrows, with their limited capacity, the lower floors would be tough, and even the weight of an extra quiver could prove to be a major hindrance.

Miyoshi sighed, the hopes of our success seeming to slip further and further away.

“By the way, about Komugi. According to Naruse, the JDA’s considering her as a candidate to use Mining if she’s able to get to the twenty-first floor.”

“What?!” Miyoshi’s revelation had truly caught me off guard. I wondered if I hadn’t misheard.

“I said, the JDA’s considering her as a user candidate for Mining,” Miyoshi repeated.

“Even though she’s a total novice?!”

“Weren’t you thinking of having her do the same thing?”

*Er, well, okay...I was.* She was an expert in gemology, and her motivation—even if it leaned a little one-sidedly toward gems—would be useful... She had potential, once she trained, but who would have ever expected the JDA to have been betting on it when they sent her our way?

“According to Naruse, the GIJ request was one thing, but you scaring the JDA the other day also played a role in their decision.”

““Scaring them’? You mean when I said they’d better hurry up and use Mining?”

Even then, hadn’t there been any other good potential users for the orb? *Ah, come to think of it, probably not.* Most of the top explorers in Yoyogi were just out for their own profits, and would have little interest in a noncombat orb like Mining if it meant becoming the JDA’s lapdog.

On the other hand, it wouldn’t do any good to give the orb to a greenhorn explorer without a vested interest in it either, and veteran JDA employees were probably reluctant to volunteer on the basis of the orb’s value indebting them to their employer. The same would be true of Storage.

Thinking about it that way, pretty much the only good candidate would be someone invested in the Mining skill for its own sake. As an additional benefit, Rokujo had just about no interest in anything *else* related to exploring—she would be more than happy to be a one-woman Mining machine. All she needed to do was to be able to get to the twenty-first floor.

“I guess I can see it from the JDA’s perspective,” I conceded. “By the way,



what is this 'GIJ' thing?"

"The Gemological Institute of Japan. The JDA contracts dungeon-produced mineral and gemological analysis out to them. They're where Komugi works."

*Ah, I see.* I couldn't think of a workplace more suited to her.

In that case, the request to lead Rokujo through the dungeon had probably been thrust onto the JDA courtesy of the GIJ. I was starting to see the whole picture.

"Either way, probably a good thing we listened to that little 'whisper in our ghosts' to train her, huh?"

"You think we were possessed by something?" Miyoshi laughed.

"Nah. Although Rokujo might be."

"Yeah. Her, erm, commitment to gemstones is abnormal. Seems like she'd willingly dive to the seventy-ninth floor to use Mining, rather than just the twenty-first."

Given Yoyogi's mid-depth status, it could potentially have Mining floors up through the seventy-ninth, with the eightieth floor being a boss floor.

"Right?"

At any rate, our next move would be to pair up Rokujo with Mishiro and an Arthur. That would buy us some time while we refined our plans for what to do with the two of them next.

"You know, despite the unexpected problems, today's boot camp turned out to be pretty good in a business sense," Miyoshi commented.

"How so?"

"Well, if anyone asks how a total novice like Komugi suddenly got so strong, we can chalk it up to the boot camp's special training! Good advertising!"

"I see."

No matter how dubious the explanation, when desirable results were paired with even the shadow of a reason, people were inclined to believe it.

"As long as you form a party with Cathy and lend her one Arthur, you'll have

your freedom back too,” Miyoshi pointed out.

As long as an Arthur could alert me when it was almost time for stat measurements, Making would allow me to handle SP distribution for all child and grandchild party members. My troubles were indeed at an end. The rest of my involvement in the boot camp could be handled long-distance.

“Right. Now I just need one of those pups to alert me when it’s time for stat measurements.”

“Exactly. Although when the class is aboveground, we could just have Cathy call.”

The benefit of the Arthur method was that they could serve as liaisons when trainees were in the dungeons.

As trainees wrote down their desired stat gains at the beginning of the course, we could just set a policy of not allowing any mid-course changes. In the event of any absences or sudden cancellations, Cathy could just write them down and have an Arthur deliver a note. That way I’d always know what stats to distribute ahead of time.

As the trainees lined up for Teastruction, I could pull up Making and get to work. The final measurement would always occur on the other side of the post-Teastruction break, so that would leave plenty of time. If classes ever increased too much in size, we could also extend the post-Teastruction break time under the guise of the tea needing more time to permeate.

“Well, our schedule’s set for today, so I’ll go ahead and look up as much as we can about Mishiro while the others finish up.”

“Sorry about that. Let me know how it goes,” I responded.

“No problem. Backing you up is my job, after all. I heard that whisper in my bank account, by the way. Not my ghost.” Miyoshi chuckled.

Emerging from the staff room, we found Rokujo awake and guzzling mineral water as if trying to wash away the shock.

“Ah, Komugi, you’re up.”

“Bwha! Thanks, Miyoshi. What the heck was that stuff, by the way?” She regarded the tea dispenser, the contents of which had been poured into a paper cup and handed to her a short while earlier, with the kind of fearful scrutiny of a child scanning the dark corners of their room.

“Ancient traditional secret. Drinking it brings out your hidden power,” Miyoshi claimed. We could hardly get through the explanation with a straight face.

“Ah... Well, it certainly does seem...effective,” Rokujo managed.

“I’d like to ask you one question, Komugi,” Miyoshi continued. “Are you really planning on going to the twenty-first floor?”

“You bet! All sorts of unknown gemstones are beckoning me!”

“But what about work? It’s going to take a while to be able to go down that far. Can you afford to take all that time off?”

“It’s only until I’ve beaten nine thousand slimes, right? We set our own hours at the GIJ, so as long as I’m meeting quotas, I can spend afternoons training.”

*Seriously?* I’d have to clear that one with Naruse just in case. The last thing I wanted was to be accused of poaching talent from the GIJ. “Understood,” I responded. “However, we can’t allow a novice explorer to venture into the dungeon unattended, so we’ve prepared a...er, bodyguard for you. We’ll get the two of you introduced shortly.”

“Really?” she responded. “That’s great!”

We headed back to the meeting space, where Miyoshi looked over Mishiro’s completed paperwork.

“Everything checks out, Kei. Starting tomorrow, Mishiro will be D-Powers’ first contracted explorer! The first soldier in our army!” Miyoshi clenched and unclenched her fists like a maniacal supervillain. A thin layer of sweat formed on Mishiro’s brow, as if she was wondering if she hadn’t just made a mistake.

“Ha ha ha, glad to hear it.” I laughed Miyoshi off. “Thank you for joining us, really. Incidentally, this is Komugi Rokujo, the explorer we told you about earlier.”

“Komugi Rokujo. Nice to meet you,” Rokujo piped up.

“Eri Mishiro. A pleasure. I’ll be acting as your...‘bodyguard’?”

“More than a bodyguard, really. Rokujo here is a total novice. She’ll need someone to show her the ropes, and keep an eye on her while she’s training. You’ll be her bodyguard, her instructor, the works.”

“Ah, right,” Mishiro agreed. “You never know what can happen when you go diving alone.”

“Exactly! Speaking of—Mishiro, any interest in going through our special training along with Rokujo?”

“Absolutely! I-I mean, if that would be all right with everyone.”

Apparently Mishiro had been thinking about applying to the dungeon boot camp, but figured there was no way she’d be selected.

“Don’t worry, it’s a bonus for our contracted explorers!” Miyoshi chimed in. “On the house.”

*Well, why not?* If our mission included supporting explorers, getting more into our training didn’t hurt. Although for the meantime, that would just mean putting Mishiro on the slime-killing regimen. Maybe not as glamorous as what she’d had in mind.

“You’re officially one of us as of tomorrow. You two can work out a schedule and submit a final plan to us. Which one of you wants to be party leader?” I asked.

“I’ll leave that up to Mishiro,” Rokujo replied.

“Mishiro, then. Would you mind forming a party with me? Just for emergency contact.”

“U-Understood!”

Mishiro held out her D-Card and the two of us formed a party. Afterward, Mishiro formed a party with Rokujo.

“You can ask Miyoshi about the details. Otherwise, good luck with your training, whenever you’re ready to start!”

“Thank you!” they replied in unison.

Just then, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Joshua had grabbed me from behind.

*“Hey, Yoshimura, what in the seven hells is this game?! Plus I never want to see another sewing needle in my life! And then that fuckin’ drink!”* He had to pause for breath. *“I swear, if this training isn’t worth it, I’ll haunt you for the rest of your life!”*

Apparently he’d completed his AGI rounds and moved into DEX. The DEX training included threading a copious number of sewing needles. Upon sampling it once, I never wanted to try it again.

After leaving me with a litany of complaints and a rather strange threat—*Haunting me? Is he planning on dying first?*—Joshua slumped his shoulders in defeat and headed off for his goblin kill.

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And so, our tumultuous first day of boot camp came to an end.

Cathy ordered the recruits to line up. *“Gentlemen! Ladies! You have reached the end of a long and arduous training session. I won’t sugarcoat it. It’s been rough. But you’ve given it your all! You’ve dealt with absurd tasks! Demeaning tasks! Tasks that made you swear this was all some kind of joke, or a game, but you’ve overcome them! Take pride.”*

I could sense just a smidgen of her true feelings slipping in there. *C’mon, Cathy, you can sugarcoat it a little bit!*

*“But now the time has come! One final task stands between you and glory. Your nerves will be tested, and then your hard work will bear fruit.”* Cathy gestured to a table where several paper cups were filled to the brim with a suspicious-looking liquid. *“You will each down one of these ‘special’ drinks. I won’t lie. It will make the ones you had earlier seem like child’s play. But those who endure can take heart! Once the drink has run its course, you will see your efforts reflected in the end-of-day stat measurement.”*

*“‘Those who endure’?”* Joshua made a face like he had just peeled back his sheets to find a live snake in his bed. His brow creased upward into rows of deep, wavelike V’s. Cathy took note of his expression, but no smile crossed her lips. *“I’ve got—”*

*“A bad feeling about this,”* Simon finished.

The trainees raised the end-of-day “special drink”—Teastruction—cups to their mouths, hesitating. Suddenly—

“Buuweeech!” Mason, who had tried to down the whole cup at once, spat out the dark liquid in a shadowy rain. He bent over dry heaving, clear strands of mucus running from his nose. The special wasabi extract—the *pièce de résistance*—had claimed its first victim.

The others watched in trepidation, cups stopped just short of their lips.

*“We’re not gonna die if we drink this, right?”* Simon asked, watching as Rokujo, who had tried holding her nose as she downed it, collapsed to the floor.

*“Don’t worry. I nearly fainted the first time too, and I’m still here!”* Cathy gave a sage-like nod.

*“Some pretty cold comfort there, Cath.”*

Joshua, who considered his palette to be rather more refined than others’, was still trembling with the drink in his hand.

Seeing his hesitation, Cathy moved in for the kill. *“You know they say if you don’t drink it quickly, its effect diminishes.”*

That was all the fire he needed. He downed the drink in gulp. Natalie and Simon followed suit.

Mason, having spit out the bulk of his, was handed another cup. He took it with the look of a child who had just picked a fight with his older brother and realized he couldn’t win.

The conference room was a storm of gags and splutters. When the smoke cleared, all five of our trainees were lying on the floor.

*“And this brings the inaugural boot camp to a close. We will begin the end-of-training measurements following a five-minute break.”* Cathy was fighting back laughter. A weak chorus of “Aye, ma’am,” arose from the ground.

Miyoshi and I headed for the staff room and locked the door behind us. We pulled out the day’s records and prepared for stat allocation.

“Wow. They got in eight rounds of training today,” Miyoshi commented.

That meant four rounds and twelve points for each stat, if we kept consistent with the growth rates we’d given Cathy.

“How many SP did everyone have piled up?” Miyoshi asked.

“Around 150 per person.”

“Kei, these guys are high-profile. You can’t afford to go all loosey-goosey like you did with Mitsurugi. Try a light-handed approach.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll think this through.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Ultimately I raised each training stat twelve to thirteen points apiece. Rokujo had built up 2.97 SP, which wasn’t a bad start. That meant she’d killed 147 slimes, and in a relatively short time frame too. I decided to raise her AGI two points, figuring the extra speed would help in her training to come.

After around five minutes, we walked back into the main room. There we found four military members, fresh-faced, wheeling their arms through the air and jumping up and down.

*“I feel light as a feather! Yoshimura, this is incredible!”* Simon crooned.

*“Looks like the training did its job.”*

*“That quickly?!”*

*“Never underestimate the ancient arts. Anyway, let’s get measuring.”*

*“Right. Let’s do this!”* Simon stepped up to the measurement platform.

Cathy operated the machine and extracted its printout.

Name: Simon Gershwin

HP: 113.80 -> 127.10

MP: 82.80 -> 84.10

STR: 45 -> 57

VIT: 46

INT: 43

AGI: 44 -> 57

DEX: 48

LUC: 13

*"Hold on, seriously? Is this for real?!"* Simon shouted.

*"I'm pretty sure the machine isn't broken or anything,"* I answered.

*"But this means I got close to a year's worth of training in one day!"*

Simon's math checked out. If the average adult human was around a ten in all stats—although I was pretty sure Simon's group had started higher—then his STR had gone up by thirty-five points in three years. Today alone he had raised it one-third that amount.

*"No way. Let me see."* Natalie was left speechless as she pored over the results.

Cathy just kept her arms folded, nodding up and down like a bobblehead. Though if I recalled, she'd been just as floored by her first posttraining measurements.

*"Me next."* Joshua stepped up to the platform. Cathy operated the measurement device again.

Name: Joshua Rich

HP: 97.40 -> 98.60

MP: 76.80 -> 80.40

STR: 39

VIT: 38

INT: 38

AGI: 52 -> 66

DEX: 54 -> 66

LUC: 13

*"Unbelievable. We ought to get the whole DSF in on this."*



Name: Natalie Stewart  
HP: 91.40 -> 92.70  
MP: 104.40 -> 124.90  
STR: 35  
VIT: 38  
INT: 58 -> 70  
AGI: 32 -> 45  
DEX: 42  
LUC: 13

*"If these results are real, I agree. How much does this course cost, by the way?"*

Come to think of it, ever since Simon had forced his way onto the course last year, we hadn't talked about price.

"Isn't the price written in the contract everyone signed?" I asked Miyoshi in Japanese.

"Ah!" she responded. "I forgot!"

*Miyoshiiii...! What kind of Queen of the Merchants are you?!*

"No, no! It's not like I *completely* forgot! I mean, it's just that it was before the price was decided, so I wrote in the contract that the price would be specified in a separate attachment. That would make it easier to adjust in the future, you know?"

"And that attachment?"

"Um... Tee hee!" She gave a cutesy laugh.

"Don't try to weasel your way out of this one!"

"Hold on! Isn't it weird to sign up for something before you know the price too? That's not entirely on us!"

"Good point."

*"Who cares," Natalie responded. "Looking at the results, this'd be a steal even at a hundred grand."*

*"But there's no way an ordinary explorer can pay that much. We'll probably go with a thousand bucks at most."* Miyoshi cocked her head.

Natalie put a hand to the bridge of her nose, as if she were nursing a headache. *"I might regret asking this, but how were you two planning on turning a profit from this endeavor?"*

*A fair question.* We were paying our drill instructor two hundred fifty thousand dollars in annual salary. Usually, the price would be set in accordance with the total costs. At a price of a thousand dollars, we'd have to see 250 trainees just to break even on Cathy's pay. In addition, we had the room rental and maintenance fees. Even hosting the boot camp once a week, we'd still be in the red.

"What do you think?" I asked Miyoshi.

"Well, the boot camp was kind of a charity initiative in the first place—a way of giving back."

*That's right.* Put less generously, it had been one way of avoiding criticism over the ridiculous amounts of money we were raking in and the exclusivity of our auctions.

"Ah, that's true! In that case, who cares about costs?"

"You two really are naive," Natalie cut in, speaking Japanese. *Oh, right! I forgot she was fluent.*

"I mean, we are asking everyone to help us out with Yoyogi exploration too... It's not like we're just giving training away."

"And? What's your cut from that?"

Ordinarily, explorers employed by private companies were required to turn over a percentage of their profits and provide preferential access to any goods they sold, although rates weren't entirely standardized.

"Miyoshi?"

"We don't exactly have a set cut. Although we do require that any inscriptions and tablets our explorers find be turned in to the JDA."

"So your cut is basically nothing," Natalie responded. "The explorers don't

have to do anything for you they wouldn't already normally do."

Considering most of our clientele would be Yoyogi explorers in the first place... *Yeah, she has a point.*

Natalie, having heard we were an LLC, was huffing and fuming about how she'd imagined a proper company, but hey, the only investors were Miyoshi and myself, so who was she to get mad?

*"Now, now. Calm down, Natalie,"* Simon said. *"What's all the fuss about?"*

*"I can't take these guys!"* Natalie shot back. *"It's like dealing with children! They didn't decide on a price for the course, and now they're trying to set it at a thousand dollars!"*

*"A thousand? That's not going to do, you guys. Up the price, Yoshimura."*

*"But there's no way ordinary people will be able to pay more. No one would sign up for the course,"* I protested.

*"Then make two courses. One for military and police personnel, and one for civilians."*

*"Why?"*

Simon let out a sigh. *"Suit yourself. I won't stop you if you want to train a hundred thousand soldiers."*

*"Huh?"*

*"Just how much do you think militaries spend per year keeping their troops in shape?"*

*"Uh..."*

*"Think about it. This program would be worth every bit of those annual costs, in terms of effectiveness."* That was true. We'd just seen everyone gain stats equivalent to about a year's worth of ordinary training. *"Go ahead and set the price at a thousand dollars. Every military on Earth is going to be pounding on your door to let their soldiers into the program. Why not? They'll save half their national budget."*

*"You're serious."*

*"The US will, I can guarantee you that. I would."*

As if to back up Simon's statement, Mason whistled while looking over his own stats. *"No kidding,"* he said. *"Hell, I'd recommend it myself."*

Name: Mason Garcia  
HP: 139.80 -> 170.00  
MP: 62.80  
STR: 55 -> 67  
VIT: 58 -> 71  
INT: 32  
AGI: 36  
DEX: 40  
LUC: 12

*"All right, Cathy. It's rematch time. I'm getting payback for yesterday."*

*"You're on."*

Cathy and Mason headed over to the meeting space, setting their elbows in arm wrestling position on the table.

*"But we have everyone sign an NDA,"* I continued. *"The effects of the training shouldn't get out to all those militaries."*

*"Oh! An NDA,"* Simon mocked. *"Everyone'll figure it out just seeing the people who've been through your training out mowin' through monsters in the field. Plus you've got those stat-reading devices coming out. If nothing else gives it away, those will."* Simon gestured to the SMD-PRO we had installed in the room.

*"Aaaah. I see."*

*"Hey, Azusa. Yoshimura looks like a smart guy, but is he actually kind of dense?"*

*"I can neither confirm nor deny."*

*"Hey!"*

*“Don’t worry, Kei. You’re only human.”*

*“Thrilled to hear it.”*

No sooner had I uttered my response than a shout erupted from the meeting space. “Wraaaaah!!!”

Running over to see what had happened, I arrived to the sight of Mason standing over Cathy with his arms raised. Cathy shook in anger, slumped across the table.

*“What the heck’s going on here?”*

*“You have to ask?”* Simon laughed. *“Looks like Mason just retook his crown as the arm wrestling king.”*

Come to think of it, Simon had mentioned their competitions this morning. Cathy’s STR currently stood at sixty-one. When Mason had been measured this morning, his had only been fifty-five. But after the results of his training course, it’d shot up to sixty-seven. Looked like those minor stat-point differences weren’t just for show.

*“Yoshimura! Please let me go through the training program again!”* Cathy shouted, jerking her head up.

*“Whoa, not now!”* I said. *“Another time.”*

*“Whaaaat?”*

*Is there anyone in this room who isn’t a training maniac?*

*“Anyway, make our training fees fifty thousand dollars. I’m begging you,”* Simon urged us.

*“No, no, no,”* I said. *“Come on. That’s crazy.”*

*“Then thirty thousand. I won’t go lower than that.”*

*“What?”* *Don’t customers usually try to haggle the price down?*

*“Miyoshi?”*

*“Give it up. Let’s just charge thirty thousand this time. We’ll figure out our final prices later.”*

“Thirty thousand dollars for one day?!” Mishiro, who had only heard the last bit in Japanese, asked. “I-I can’t pay that.”

*Hold on, you’re our employee. In your case, we’re the ones paying you!*

“Don’t worry. That’s only for our customers who are military personnel,” I explained. “Civilians pay thirty thousand yen. Although they’ll be subject to an entry raffle.”

That would be enough to deter window shoppers while still ensuring that any serious explorer who wanted could join. It was almost a steal, compared to equipment prices.

“Same number, different currency. Nice and clean,” Miyoshi commented, satisfied.

*“Then we’ll just sign up for the civilian course next time,”* Simon joked. Natalie had translated our last remarks.

*“Sign up for the civilian course if you want civilian results,”* I responded. It’d be bad for business if the cheaper option produced exactly the same results as the more expensive variant.

*“You’re saying you have a way to control the outcome between courses?”* Simon asked.

*Uh-oh.* Had I gone too far?

*“Funny. From what we did today, that doesn’t seem possible, but what do I know? It’s a pretty remarkable course you’ve got here.”* He tossed a dubious glance back at the doored cubicles dotting the room, each one labeled for a different stat.

Fair enough. The kind of training we were running certainly *didn’t* seem like the kind of thing we could adjust the outcomes of.

*“Well, whatever. We’ll be diving the eighteenth floor again tomorrow, trying out our new stat gains. If this program of yours works as well as it looks like it does, you can expect us back two or three times. Wish us luck.”*

*“Fine by us, but just so you know, we’re not running the boot camp more than three times per week.”*

Remotely or not, running the boot camp still took effort, and having to dedicate Arthurs to it impaired our ability to respond in the case of emergencies. For the time being, two or three weekly sessions was our limit.

*“Don’t worry. I can always use my network to leverage a few private sessions.”*

*“You’re joking of course, ha ha ha.”* I brushed Simon’s comment off as a jest, but, uh... *He wasn’t serious, was he?* Oh well, if he was, nothing to do but to go along with it now. *If it’s only occasionally...*

Natalie turned and said something to Miyoshi on her way out. Apparently it was about the stat-measurement devices. American researchers were interested in ordering one, but weren’t sure of the price. Yet another thing we had yet to decide.

Mishiro and Rokujo were in our employ and training, respectively, starting tomorrow, but they pointed out it was Sunday. Apparently given Rokujo’s flextime, weekdays worked even better than weekends.

“You set your own hours with our company, so feel free to dive any time as long as you keep us informed.” Miyoshi responded with the air of a seasoned HR manager, but to me it just seemed like ordinary negligence.

I had some equipment and advice to pass on to them, so I instructed them to stop by our office before their first dive.

It was dark by the time we exited Yoyogi, and the afternoon’s rain showers had let up. Team Simon left in high spirits, pleased with their hard-earned results. All in all, it had been a successful first day of boot camp. About the only mishap was Cathy’s TCD, or training compulsive disorder, flaring up again.

We strolled out of Yoyogi, parted ways with the rest of the group at the entrance, and headed back to the office.

## **Tomigaya, Icchome-dori Avenue (midtrip home)**

“Not bad for a first time, but that took more work than I’d thought,” I commented.

“That’s just because Komugi was there. Team Simon’s training went smoothly.”

“Pretty wild that just when we realized Rokujo needed more training, Mishiro showed up. Maybe the gods favor us after all.”

“If the gods really favored us, we wouldn’t have been in a pinch in the first place.”

Fair. Those who led truly untroubled lives were the last to notice their own fortunes.

We walked around the band shell in Yoyogi Park, past the waving flags of a pastel-colored Dippin’ Dots stand. The strip of land between NHK Hall and Yoyogi Park served as a pathway to the dungeon, intersecting with Inokashira-dori Avenue. By using the path as a shortcut, our office was but a scant ten-minute walk from the dungeon, measured in realtors’ time—one minute for every eighty meters, as I’d learned from our housing search.

“Ah, speaking of Rokujo...” I pulled up her stats on Making.

“Kei, walking and Making is as dangerous as walking and texting, don’t you think?”

“What is this, a citizen’s arrest? Besides, we’re still basically in the park. Ah, check this out! Look, I can still allocate her stats.”

“So Making can still access grandchild party members out of telepathy range, no problem? Good to know.”

“That’s a relief. So all I need to do is make sure I’m linked by party registration, and I’m good to go.”

“Then no need for either of us to come running in from the office. We can leave all of the boot camp and special training work up to the Arthurs.”

As if on cue, a black tail popped out of the shadows in front of us, wagging eagerly back and forth. I wasn’t sure whose tail it was, but—

“He probably wants a reward, huh?”

“Probably,” Miyoshi smiled.



We traipsed our way along Inokashira-dori and turned left at the ENEOS gas station. The gas station's entrance was hidden behind a row of trees making it easy to miss if you didn't know it was coming up.

"By the way, Naruse's coming by tonight," Miyoshi reminded me.

"Yeah, I still have to brief her on Simon's explanation for the last page of *The Book of Wanderers*. You're the one who pushed that on me, remember? If we don't get simpatico with the JDA on that, we'll be looking at trouble down the road."

"It's almost dinner. How about going out somewhere?"

"Not with the kind of confidential conversation we need to have. I was thinking of making something at home."

"Oooh, a night of Kei's culinary delights? Been a while! Should we stop by a grocery store?"

"Nah. We're doing seafood, so I bought the ingredients yesterday."

If we walked just a little farther, there was a pedestrian overpass with a spiral staircase that would take us right by Seijo Ishii, a slightly upper-class grocery chain. Unfortunately, maybe due to the area, none of the Hachiman grocery stores offered much in the way of fresh fish.

"Seafood. Going off of the season...white horsehead tilefish?" Miyoshi was glancing at a small store sign with a yellow-colored fish, beneath which "silver white croaker" was written. The colors must have put the question in her mind.

"What kind of high-end restaurant do you think this is? Anyway, white tilefish hardly hit the markets around here. Even if you can find them, they're bite-size, and still take a toll on the wallet."

"If size is a concern, they say red ones are about as tasty, and way bigger. Although red ones are more commonly eaten from late summer to first snow. What about red gurnard?"

"Those are pretty tasty if you can find one big enough to feed two, although they're pretty expensive at that size. I sometimes see them at department store basement fish markets around here. But nope! Not that either."

“Hm...silver pomfret!”

“That one’s an early summer fish, isn’t it? A lot of them get brought in from Setouchi down south. Now you’re losing the seasonality.”

“Seems like they’d be just fine in winter too.”

“Either way, we’re already flush with white fish during the winter months here, so Tokyo stores don’t bring much in.”

“Then what?”

“Mackerel.”

“Mackerel?!”

“You know, the Japanese word sounds a little like a French greeting. ‘Ça va, Saba?’” I joked, using the Japanese word for the fish. [\(3\)](#)

Miyoshi stopped dead in her tracks. “Hold on. You’re cooking for two women and you’re making *mackerel*?”

“What’d you mean? It’s just you and Naruse.”

“Why do I feel insulted? Anyway, I guess it should taste just fine, but it’s not what you’d expect to find in a fancy restaurant entrée.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I am *not* a fancy restaurant.”

“Fair enough. I’m just saying, there’s a reason high-end places won’t serve it. A lot of people would be a little disappointed if they walked into a fancy French or Italian joint and got served mackerel as the main course.”

“High-end mackerel is still high-end fish. Your taste buds won’t know the difference.”

“I suppose.”

Still, winter was supposed to be a season of high-end white fish, so maybe I’d gotten Miyoshi’s hopes up. Around this time, horsehead tilefish, the broadbanded thornyhead fish, and grouper were all popular, slightly spendy choices in Japan.

“Personally I feel like nothing beats a little salted mackerel and white rice,” I

said. “But it’s true you wouldn’t exactly see it outside of a bar or cheap Japanese lunch restaurant.”

“That fatty Norwegian import mackerel is to die for, if you don’t mind your kitchen being polluted with mackerel stink for a week afterward.”

“What’s up with you and ‘pollution’?” I asked, recalling her explanation of D-Factors. Still, I couldn’t deny that mackerel aftermath had a certain...pungency...unique even among other fragrant cooked seafood like eel.

We stopped by Maruman, a reasonably priced grocery store, for a number of extra ingredients, then made our way home.

## **Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office**

“Welcome back.” Naruse was waiting for us when we returned.

“Happy end of the workday,” I said. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet.”

“Then how about staying here for dinner? I was going to get cooking in a minute. Don’t expect too much though.”

“You cook?”

“Kei’s just being modest,” Miyoshi replied. “Despite appearances, he’s actually pretty good!”

“‘Despite appearances...’ I’ll have you know I have a long and storied history of making meals for myself. Unlike *you*, who’s only good at eating them.”

“Oho. Guess you don’t need your occasional breakfast-and coffee-maker, then.”

“No, I need the coffee maker. Leave it here on your way out.”

“You’ve got to work on your *roasts*.”

*And you’ve got to get more drip.*

Naruse patiently watched our verbal sparring, then, seeing a chance, interjected, “Well then, don’t mind if I do.” She took a place at the dining room

table.

The table was attached to the wall, counter-style, looking in on the island kitchen. That made it easy to talk to guests while cooking. Miyoshi had been adamant about the kitchen being easy to use, despite hardly touching it herself. She was strange like that.

I set a stockpot on the burner and retrieved some onions from the pantry.

“Check this out,” I said. “Fresh onions.”

“Kei, fresh onions are only available in spring. It’s still January.”

It was true that restaurants served fresh onion dishes in February at the earliest. Usually after March. However...

“Don’t be so hasty.” I chopped the onions into round slices about a centimeter thick. “Ever heard of Ainancho heart onions from Ehime? They ship in November.”

“Fresh onion dishes in November? That’d be a surprise.”

“Surprise is the most important spice on the rack.”

Of course to Japanese diners, no matter how pleasant the surprise, it would always be a bit disheartening to lose the sense of seasonality. It had been a long time since truffles grown in the southern hemisphere had taken their place in midsummer dishes, but European “summer truffles” still had their own delights.

What’s that? Seasonality doesn’t mean a thing in the age of global imports? Well, I can’t argue.

“Surprise is one thing,” Miyoshi responded, “but are they tasty?”

“You lay them in a casserole pan like so, sprinkle one percent salt water over them, add a dash of olive oil, a little dried oregano, and into the oven they go.” I slide the pan onto an oven rack and shut the door.

“Kei?”

“At least these ones are. They’re Tamabo-brand onions from Aichi. Freshly picked and shipped with the leaves still attached.”

Tamabo onions, an Aichi Prefecture brand, shipped in January. I held up the

leaves I'd chopped off as an example, waving them in front of Miyoshi like a certain spring-onion-loving Vocaloid. While the main amuse-bouche cooked, I served Naruse and Miyoshi a sample of the raw Tamabo onions, diced into small squares on a plate.

"They're sweet!" Naruse exclaimed. "And so mild."

"These are good, Kei, but what about those heart onions you were talking about?"

"I'm sorry to say I've never had them myself." I gave the fuming Miyoshi an apologetic bow.

"Then why'd you even bring them up in the first place?! You got my hopes up."

"Anyway, in dishes calling for Italian red onions, small and slightly sweet, Japanese fresh onions can be substituted fairly easily."

The onions in the oven had turned translucent, proof that they were fully cooked.

I pulled them out, splashed them with another light topping of olive oil and broth, and, as a coup de grâce, plated them with a sprig of Italian parsley.

"That's all?"

"It's an amuse-bouche. Nibble on that until I'm done with the main course."

"It's like a vegetarian pot-au-feu," Miyoshi observed. "Well, if we're going to be enjoying the taste of onions, I know just the thing!" She traipsed off to the cellar.

While prepping for the second course, I turned to Naruse.

"So about *The Book of Wanderers*. That signature on the last page..." I slowly revealed the story Simon had told me, leaving out only bits he had mumbled to himself.

She took a sip of the wine Miyoshi had brought back, a sweet Australian white with a bit of a honey tinge imparted by its barrel—I had expected that Miyoshi would want to pair a red with the onions, but perhaps she'd been thinking of the next course—and responded with a simple "Interesting."

“So you can see why we’re a little reluctant to publish the translation now.”

“No one would believe us,” Miyoshi stated, pouring me a glass of wine. “We’d be called frauds for sure.”

A taste of the wine made me wish we’d had some salted roe to pair with the onions as well. I moved some rinsed clams into a saucepan, added some water, and put the pan on the burner. Kujukuri Beach clams were said to be particularly delectable from late winter to early spring. It was close enough to the season, I figured.

I cooked the clams over a low flame, removing them from their shells when they opened, and returned half to the pot with some kelp in order to make dashi, a broth ubiquitous in Japanese cuisine.

“Anyway, Miyoshi and I were thinking we should hold off on releasing the info, but what do you prefer, Naruse?”

“I was the one who questioned whether we should publish it in the first place,” she responded. “This decision suits me just fine.”

“Phew, good to hear.”

I added some salt to the boiling water in the stockpot I’d started earlier. About a one percent salt ratio was best for making pasta, or so it was said. There were many reasons salt was said to help, but more than anything, it brought out the flavor of the wheat.

“Ah, by the way, what’s the deal with that Rokujo lady?” I asked, retrieving a box of Voiello No. 103 spaghetti from the pantry. Rokujo’s first name, Komugi, was the Japanese word for wheat, which is probably what had put the question in my mind. “I know she’s an employee of the GIJ, but what’s the story on how the JDA wound up recommending her?” I eyed the No. 103 noodles, rethinking how a porous bronze-cut pasta would pair with tonight’s sauce, and returned them to the pantry in favor of Buitoni No. 71, which I added to the pan.<sup>(4)</sup>

In my mind, there were two brands that ruled the home-meal pasta heap—the smooth Buitoni, and the rough and porous De Cecco. Ever since Nestle Japan’s cessation of direct-market sales of Buitoni, the former had been hard to come by, which had put De Cecco on top, as it was both tasty and cheap.

“Well, she has an FGA diploma from the Gemological Association of Great Britain and a Graduate Gemologist degree from the Gemological Institute of America. She’s supposedly a gifted appraiser.”<sup>(5)</sup>

*Right, that was written on her profile too.*

The organization she belonged to, the Gemological Institute of Japan, or GIJ, was held to be both the foremost in the country when it came to colored-stone appraisal and the largest domestic appraisal organization in general. The runners-up—the CGL, the Central Gem Laboratory, and the Association of Japan Gem Trust’s AGT Laboratory—focused mainly on diamonds.

“Although among certain unmannered employees, she’s known as a maniac.”

“Maniac?” That wasn’t a very nice thing to call your coworker.

Although seeing how absorbed she’d been in the idea of going to the twenty-first floor and below, I felt like I could understand.

“The GIJ is a subcontractor of the JDA, handling dungeon stone appraisals, and the other day we got a message—or, really more of a request—from them.”

“Huh...”

“The message was to the effect of ‘Our best employee isn’t doing any work. She’s just wandering around with her head in the clouds all day.’”

“Why complain about that to the JDA?”

“Because apparently she kept mumbling, ‘dungeon...dungeon...’”

*Yikes!* It was like a horror movie. I could just see the title *Terror! The Girl Possessed by the Dungeons* fading onto the screen.

“Eventually they got it out of her that she wanted to go to the dungeons and find mineral drops. She kept asking if anyone could teach her how to dive.”

“They say it’s good to have goals, but...”

“Well, there you have it.”

“So why’s she at the top of your list for Mining-user candidates?” I splashed some olive oil and added garlic into a frying pan, along with a few hot chili

peppers, and set the pan over a low flame. After a minute, when the garlic juices had formed a fragrant mix with the olive oil, I retrieved the peppers.

“Mining is a skill used to retrieve mineral drops from dungeons, but we can’t do any serious mining with only one orb.” Serious mining would have to wait until forty-nine individual Mining users existed, who could be sent en masse to each floor. “At first there was talk of passing the orb to a high-end explorer and having them explore deeper floors with the orb.”

“That makes sense.”

“But in this case, the JDA was worried that the average high-ranking explorer, without any academic interest in the minerals, would hole up on the first floor with valuable drops to do dedicated farming, never moving beyond it.” Naruse’s proposed scenario wasn’t hard to imagine. After taking a pass through several floors, the Mining user would be likely to stay on the one with the most valuable drop and farm, never making further progress. Most high-ranking explorers were mainly interested in making money, after all. “Then someone had the idea of sending in a mineral expert, so we could conduct further study.”

“That makes sense too.”

But apparently no mineralogist explorers turned up. It was then that the JDA received a fortuitous request from the GIJ, asking for one of its employees to be let into the dungeon boot camp.

I added some sunflower oil to the pan, along with the pasta and some lightly boiled canola flowers, and finally the dashi, stirring vigorously until the oils formed a smooth mixture. The sunflower oil added practically no taste or fragrance, but it helped the sauces emulsify. With sunflower oil, even a novice cook can emulsify sauces reliably, so take notes... Not like there’ll be a test.

“But still, bringing a total novice to us...” I commented, separating the pasta onto three plates.

“Well, it’s your fault,” Naruse responded. “The whole thing that set her off was that benitoite you brought in.”

“Seriously?”

Naruse twisted some pasta around her fork, bringing it to her mouth with a



smile. “Well, wherever the responsibility lies, you’re the only explorer-training organization around.”

“So the JDA just happened to have the perfect opportunity for making Komugi useful while also fulfilling its responsibility to the GIJ,” Miyoshi summarized, prodding at her plate.

I took my own bite of pasta. The flavors of the clams and wheat danced together, spurred on by the aroma of the canola. The combination couldn’t be beat.

“Hmm, Kei. A sake would pair well with this too.”

“At least choose a wine.”

“Why? Without the garlic juices doing work in here, you could pass this off for simple Japanese food.”

“You got me.”

The spaghetti noodles were smooth, in the vein of Japanese ones, and the flavor combination wasn’t too far off from what you might find in a Japanese noodle shop.

“So what of Rokujo?” Naruse asked. “How did her training go?”

“Ah. She definitely has a fire lit under her. Her dedication might even beat out the military recruits’.”

“So she’s living up to her maniac name.”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day, but we’ve decided to oversee her training for a while, with the aim of making her one of our contracted explorers.”

“Contracted explorers?”

We explained to Naruse our intent to put even more resources into explorer training and development than we’d originally figured.

“So you’ll basically be growing your own army.”

“Well, I mean, if we find good personnel.”

“And explorer training was supposed to be the JDA’s job...” The alcohol seemed to be running its course, and Naruse was becoming more talkative than

usual. She began to subject us to a litany of complaints concerning JDA personnel.

I tossed the final dish—mackerel fillets coated with fennel-infused breading—onto a skillet. After heating one side, I coated the fillets with a blood orange sauce and red wine. The final step was adding a blood orange marmalade and salt and pepper, creating a faux meunière.

“Anise and fennel sure are popular abroad, but they don’t play too well with Japanese diners, huh?” Miyoshi commented.

“Fennel is a staple of blue-backed fish dishes in Italy though,” I responded.

“The main flavor compound in fennel and anise is called anethole,” Miyoshi offered, unprompted.

“Okay...”

“It sounds kind of dirty on its own, but write it out. ‘I want to get in Annette’s...’”

I karate-chopped Miyoshi on the top of her head again.

“Ouch!”

“That’s enough vulgar talk! We have a guest.” I looked at Naruse apologetically.

“What are you, my mom?”

“And for all that complaining about fennel and anise flavor, you went and brought up an ouzo.” [\(6\)](#)

“It’s not bad when you cut it with tonic...”

“Tonic over seltzer?”

“Why don’t we try it with both and find out?!” Sure enough, Naruse was halfway to sloshed.

And so we whiled away the hours of our first post-boot camp evening, surrounded by drink, fine food, and friends.

**January 13, 2019 (Sunday)**

## **Hikarigaoka, Nerima City**

Ryoko Saito stepped onto grass at Hikarigaoka Park. She was to attend an archery tournament as part of her movie shoot. The timing of the tournament had been coincidental, but beneficial to the film.

“So I hear you’re a bit of an archer too, Saito,” her director said.

“Sort of...although I’ve never been in a competition.”

“You’re trying to hit a target either way, right? What’s the difference?”

*Plenty*, she thought. For starters, the bow-hunting she’d done in dungeons was usually conducted from distances around thirty meters. Although trying to land a headshot on a moving monster presented its own difficulty and today’s targets were stationary, their distance of seventy meters was enough to shake Ryoko’s confidence.

“They’re different enough, all right,” she responded.

“S that so? Well, either way, we want to get some footage of Kumashiro shooting a bow. We don’t know whether or not it’ll make the final cut, but it doesn’t hurt to have.” Kumashiro, Ryoko’s character in the film, was an archer. The nearby tournament had proved too good an opportunity to pass up. “They’ll let us get some footage of you shooting during lunch, so don’t be late.”

“During lunch? So all the competitors will be watching?”

“What’s an actress so worried about being watched for? We could aim for the end of the day, but then the light’ll be bad.”

Of course. Waiting until the tournament was over wouldn’t allow them to get consistent footage. Ryoko understood that, but still, nerves were nerves...

“Understood,” she said at length. “Is there a bow I can use?”

“Not a worry. They’ve got us covered. They said they have a standard bow for women. Hold on.” The director called over a crew member with the bow they’d prepared and showed it to Ryoko.

“A barebow?”

“What’s the matter? I asked for a bow that’d be good for someone who did most of their archery in the dungeons. Doesn’t a simple bow seem cooler?”

“I do most of my dungeon hunting with a compound bow,” Ryoko explained nervously. “Kumashiro makes a long-distance shot using a compact bow in the climax too. And everyone at the competition today is using a recurve...”

“C’mon. Variety is the spice of life. Besides, a bow’s a bow, right?”

All bows amounted to a long piece in front and various extra bells and whistles, the director wanted to say. Ryoko tilted her head dubiously but answered, “Well, I guess so...”

She’d only ever used the compound bow Yoshimura had given her. She wasn’t really sure what the differences between the varieties were.

Never one to succumb to social fear, she traipsed over to a male archer who’d been watching from some distance away, and asked the difference between firing compound bows and barebows.

“Huh. They’re pretty different then,” she said when he’d finished his explanation.

“Yeah, but if you just pay attention on release, you should get the hang of it soon enough.”

“Understood. Thank you very much for your help!”

Thoroughly cajoled by Ryoko’s smile, the competitor called after her, blushing—no! cheeks red with fiery determination!—and asked if she’d take a picture with him.

“Um...if you wouldn’t mind...” he added.

“I’d be happy to! My director over there will be on camera duty.”

“Me? O-Okay. Is this going to be okay with your agents?”

“They’ll forgive me if it’s for an adoring fan. You...are a fan, right?”

“Ah! Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“Thank you very much. Anyway, it’s just a picture with one of my adoring fans.”

“Well, if it’s all right with you...”

“Ah. Use this please.”

The competitor handed the director his cell phone, opened the camera app, and took his spot next to Ryoko.

“Ah! Mr. Director! One more shot please,” Ryoko called after the first had been taken. “Let’s make this a little more energetic. Raise your hands in the air like ‘Yeaaah!’ A victory pose.”

“Huh?”

“Like this. ‘Yeaaah!’”

“Y-Yeaaaah!”

Both of them raised their hands in the air, shouting in mock victory, and Ryoko wound up with the perfect picture to show how sporty she was if it made its way around social media. The athlete seemed pleased, thanking Ryoko profusely.

“You have a way with the less graceful sex.”

“Do I?” Ryoko teased.

“You’ll go far in this industry. Ah. It’s almost lunch.”

“Then it’s almost time for me to get ready.”

Ryoko picked up her bow and beat feet to the archery range, where her circular targets stared her down.

“Seventy meters... Not a distance I’m used to, but, well, here goes nothing!”

She nocked an arrow and fired her first shot. The arrow traced a line through the air, sailing gracefully toward the 122-centimeter target and...

“Aw...”

...landed with a thunk in the ground far in front of it. If Ryoko were in the competition, her score card would be marked with an “M.”<sup>(7)</sup>

A handful of snickers rose up from the gallery.

“Ugh. Super cringe. But can’t pay that any mind now. I think I’ve just about

got it.” Ryoko nocked the next arrow.

Using information she’d acquired from her first shot, Ryoko fired the second. This time it landed to the right of the bull’s-eye, in the outer blue ring. Five points.

“Well, that’s the vertical taken.”

She took aim and fired once again, this time sinking the arrow cleanly into the bull’s-eye.

“All right!” she shouted.

A wave of cheers erupted from the gallery.

By the time Ryoko had finished her first “end”—or group of six shots—with staff walking onto the field in order to retrieve her arrows, the range was awash in hushed murmurs.

“Did you see that? Is that a barebow?”

“No way. Her final four shots were all bull’s-eyes. She wound up with forty-five points.”

“Who *is* she?”

Paying the surrounding chatter no mind, Ryoko waved to her director to ask whether she should continue. “Hey, Mr. Director! Want me to keep going?”

“What? A-Ah, yeah... Just a little longer. Why not do a full tournament round?”

The director’s long years of experience allowed him to sense that something unusual was happening. Better to get it on film. That was all he had in mind when he urged Ryoko to keep going.

He had no way of knowing just *how* unusual, and how troublesome, an event it would be.

“A full round? Eleven more ends? Are we okay on time?”

There were only forty minutes in the lunch break. She’d heard it usually took around four minutes to fire six arrows.

“Just hurry up and we’ll get in as many as we can.”

By the time thirty more minutes had elapsed, the archery range was silent but for the sounds of Ryoko's arrows *shlunking* into the target. By the time she landed her last arrow, square in the center once again, the area was once again blanketed by awed chatter.

"I-Incredible! What the hell?"

"Wh-Wha?! But...that's a world record, isn't it?"

The director turned to a nearby competitor.

"Was something unusual about Saito's performance out there?"

"'Unusual' nothing. She just scored *seven hundred* points. That's a world record for seventy-meter targets!" [\(8\)](#)

"Seven hundred points?"

"Outside of her first two shots, every one was a bull's-eye. She totaled 705 points."

"And that's really a world record?"

"Yeah. Although it'll probably remain unofficial."

"Of course. I'm not a member of the archery federation or even any local archery associations," Ryoko said, walking back back toward the director, bow in hand. "But these barebows are pretty accurate, huh!"

"No way! That's the first time I've ever seen someone shoot that well!"

"Really? I feel like there are lots of explorers who could score that much."

"Seriously?!"

*Well, at least I'm pretty sure Haruka could,* she thought. "Yep," she responded.

Ryoko was all smiles as the other competitors gathered around to hear her talk.

## Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Good morning!"

“Huh? Cathy?!”

Bright and early on a Sunday morning, we were greeted by none other than Cathy outside our front door.

*Didn't we agree to no more training while we got ready for general boot camp applications?*

“Cathy can't sit tight without a schedule ready before she goes on break. I asked her to come over today,” Miyoshi explained, going to the door to greet her.

“Ah, fair... Plus we have to publish our new price scheme before we begin recruitment. We won't be able to start right away.”

“Exactly. That's why I told her she could go back to Team Simon for a bit.”

“A dispatch worker being dispatched back to her original dispatcher?” I summarized. “Confusing.”

“Anyway, apparently Team Simon is experimenting with a five-member party, so she'll have her hands full with them for a while. They were pretty impressed with her performance against Mason the other day.”

*“Oh yeah? Hey, Cathy, congratulations!”*

*“Thank you, but, er, I don't feel like I've done that much work for you two yet,”* she said abashedly.

“C'mon! That's nothing to worry about. We wouldn't want you heading back to the DSF full time, but this is the perfect opportunity to test out all those new stats while we get ready for the next boot camp! Enjoy it!”

*“Thank you.”*

“But you didn't have Cathy come out all the way over here just to talk about that, right?” I said to Miyoshi.

“Of course not. Cathy's a valued team member, wouldn't you say?”

“I-I would.”

“And we'd be in a real pinch if anything happened to her or the other members of Team Simon.”



“No need to tempt fate.”

“So I thought I’d give Cathy a little gift to see her on her way.”

*Ah! I got it.*

Team Simon’s standard formation put Mason, a sturdy tank, in the front, maintained ample firepower in back via Simon, and utilized Joshua and Natalie as agile tactical fighters to fill in the gaps. They had their bases covered.

With their five-member makeup, Cathy could—depending on the situation—either join Joshua on offense or back up Mason on defense; she could even swap places with Mason entirely in order to give him a break.

While those were versatile roles, having a little something extra to add to the team would help Cathy cement an extra niche. Unfortunately, the most useful support skill—some sort of party healing ability—had yet to be discovered, but a little more offensive magic wouldn’t hurt.

*“So, Cathy, did you decide on what kind of magic you want to use?”*

*“I thought about it. Natalie uses fire, so maybe Water Magic would be good. It would let us reduce our supply weight as well.”*

*“Got it.”*

I went to the room where we kept our titanium cases, slipped a Water Magic from Vault into one, and handed it to Miyoshi.

*“Cathy, here’s a present from us. Or rather, an employee benefit.”*

Cathy took the box and opened it, eyes growing wide.

*“Um, this—I—h-how did...?”*

“How did you get it?” she probably wanted to ask. We’d intentionally let the orb count tick up on a number of our recent acquisitions. If they were all under sixty, it would have just raised more eyebrows. Going off the count on the orb we’d just handed over, we would have had to have acquired it during yesterday’s boot camp.

*“Never mind the small details! It’s yours!”*

*“‘Small details’...?”*

*“Anyway, we’ll also be asking for your help here and there in exploring Yoyogi moving forward.”*

*“U-Understood.”*

Seeming to have given up on getting more information, Cathy put her hand on the orb.

“Ah! First!” Seeing Cathy about to use her new present, Miyoshi interjected in Japanese. “We have a tradition around here. There’s a certain phrase you have to say.”

“‘A certain phrase’?”

“You have to say, ‘I reject my humanity!’ Got it?”

*“For reals?”*

Miyoshi nodded solemnly.

*What is this, some kind of dark ritual? Oh, wait, I was the one who started it...*

Cathy placed her hand on the orb and stood up, lifting it diagonally over her head in a triumphant pose. “I reject my humanity!”

“Whoa!” Miyoshi cried, awestruck.

*Wait, why does Cathy know the pose too?*

A light sprang forth from the orb, enveloping Cathy before retreating into her body. “I will surpass humankind!” she continued.

“Why do you know the next line?!”

Cathy flashed a smile. “I used to watch *Heroes*.”

“But I thought only *JoJo: Part 3* was out in English...” [\(9-10\)](#)

“Enough goofing around here.” Miyoshi turned to Cathy. “So? How’s it feel?”

“Um...kind of like I’m a sponge, and a bunch of water’s seeped into me?”

“The unnumbered magic orbs can be powerful, but take practice to get used to. Better give it some trial runs on the earlier floors.”

“Cathy, you currently have seventy-four MP,” I observed. “That should let you

fire off seventy-four basic attacks, like water lances. Your INT was thirty-eight, which means you'll regain thirty-eight points every hour. So you could shoot once every two minutes and never run out of MP."

"You certainly do know a lot," Cathy responded.

"We, uh, learned a lot working on the SMD," I said, brushing her off.

"Very well. I'll go try my new skill out against some goblins on the second or third floor."

"That'd probably be best."

Bowing to me and Miyoshi, Cathy took off for Yoyogi like an excited child who had just received a new toy.

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"Now then, Kei."

"What's with that face? I've got a bad feeling."

"Heh, heh, heh. Whether it's bad or not is up to you." *No, no. Anytime someone uses that phrase, it's definitely not up to the listener.* "The thing is—it's done."

"You're quitting?"

"The costume is done, Kei! The costume!"

"‘Costume’?"

"The phantom costume, you dummy!"

"Wait. You seriously *made* that thing?!"

"Of course. I wouldn't joke about something this fu—*fundamentally* important."

"You were about to say ‘funny.’"

"I was not! Besides, aren't you the one always saying laughter is the best medicine?"

"Am I?"

*It sounds like something I'd say, but...*

“Whatever. Get ready! Queen Shi’ll be here soon!”

“Wha?”

Queen Shi was Miyoshi’s cosplay friend from her college days, Shiori Orihara. But she was an ordinary citizen! Should we really be having her come over here? *Although, hey, we’re ordinary civilians too.*

“We have all those eyes on us from the neighboring apartment complexes. You really want to drag someone else into this?”

If any of the surveillance teams saw her, they’d track her down in an instant.

“What are you talking about? She’s not coming here.”

“Is your head on straight?” *You’re the one who said she’d be here soon!*

“Ah, my bad! Come on upstairs! I’ll explain in a minute.”

Miyoshi dragged me up to her room.

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“Azusa. What’s up? Been a while.” The face of Queen Shi shone forth from Miyoshi’s screen. We were surrounded by boxes the cosplay monarch had sent, and I had donned a rather extravagant-looking tux.

*So “be over soon” meant “be online.” Of course.* An encrypted video call would be a lot safer than having her come over in person.

Queen Shi’s aura was totally different from our previous meeting at Ariake. She was wearing normal clothes, for one. For some reason I’d expected her to be more like...a cosplayer...even in her daily life.

“*Tch, tch, tch.* My poor boy,” Queen Shi admonished when I’d voiced my surprise. “Cosplay moves us because it’s a *retreat* from the ordinary humdrum. Only a freak would go around dressed up like a character outside of an event.”

“But *I’m* supposed to go around dressed like this.”

“Hm? You’re going to be wearing that getup around?” Queen Shi asked from the video call.

*Uh-oh.* My reputation was tanking in a hurry. N-No, I was *totally* going to wear it for an...event, I hastily explained. *Well, if I had to say one way or the other, I*

*guess you could call it an “event.”*

Shi cocked an eyebrow. “You’re not going to use this for some kind of bank robbery, are you?”

“Of course not!” Was there even a criminal alive stupid enough to try to pull off a bank heist dressed like a crazed *The Phantom of the Opera* fanatic? This wasn’t a manga! I wasn’t going to go around stealing jewels in a tux!

“Well, none of my business. Mine is to comply with commissions, not to ask.” The privacy of the customer was paramount to business, she added mildly. “Now, the most important thing is the fit. I used the twenty-fifth anniversary showing as the base, just like Azusa asked.”

Apparently my phantom costume was based on the quarter-centennial performance of *The Phantom of the Opera*, performed at Royal Albert Hall in London.

“Mm-hm, mm-hm. Satin, shawl-collar jacket. Black waistcoat despite the white tie.” Miyoshi circled me, noting the costume’s features. “Winged collar, double-cuff shirt. Black enamel shoes. All topped off with a fedora instead of the traditional top hat.”

“The lady knows her stuff,” Queen Shi said admiringly.

“As do you. Doesn’t look like we’ll need any fixes. You can expect your payment via the usual channels.”

“Oooh! I feel like I’m working for some sort of black ops organization.”

“Erm... It’s just going to be a bank transfer.”

It turned out bank transfers offered a surprising degree of anonymity, as long as you were careful about cameras stationed above ATMs. Once the money was in the other party’s account, they had no way of looking up further details on the account that had made the transfer.

Thanks to special fraud schemes using bank transfers, per-transfer limits had been enacted, such that you couldn’t send more than one hundred thousand yen at once, but in those cases all you would have to do would be to break the transfer up into two payments. It was a mostly meaningless imposition.

“Well then, I’ve got to get running to a textile fair, so I’ll be off. Till next time, darlings.” The call blipped off.

“She seems almost as busy as we are. But, hold on, wait. ‘Textile fair’?” As far as I knew, “textiles” referred to fabrics used in interior design. It brought to mind old-timey looms and tapestries.

“Cosplay uses all kinds of fabrics, including ones you wouldn’t ordinarily find in clothing. Also, the word ‘textiles’ can be used to refer to ordinary fabrics for clothes too.”

“Aaah. Gotcha.” *True, there would be certain materials useful in cosplay that you couldn’t find on normal clothing racks—things like thick drape fabric, etc.*

“Good thing you don’t have any weird moles on your chin,” Miyoshi said, returning to the costume and examining the mask’s open jawline.

I shrugged. “I could always wear a fake beard if I had to.”

“But look at how distinguished the whole thing is! Subtle accents of red, gold, and white! I was worried it was going to come out looking like a gaudy *FGO* character costume, knowing Shi.”[\(11\)](#)

“‘Subtle’? What’s with this red trim running along the collar? It defeats the point of going white tie.” I turned this way and that, examining myself in Miyoshi’s standing mirror.

The collar was the part of the tuxedo jacket wrapping around the neck. Lapels, a term sometimes used synonymously with “collar,” technically referred to the triangular pieces of fabric extending to the sides and below the collar on certain jacket designs.

“Come on. A glint of burning red emerging from the darkness—heralding the coming of *the Phantom*! It’ll be cool! Roll with it!”

“*Will* it be cool?” I asked dubiously.

“It will. Plus, don’t worry. She didn’t add accents to the mask or anything, so it’s as plain and boring as you are.”

“Ouch.”

“So, how’s it feel? Shi said she added some extra tucks and pleats to make it

easier to move in. Though it should look like ordinary formal wear from afar.”

True, it wasn’t as constricting as I’d expected. *Leave it to Shi...*

“Cosplayers put a lot of work into keeping costumes flexible to let them strike various poses in their photos. It takes some real crafty ingenuity.”

“Huh.”

Miyoshi had introduced Queen Shi as her fujoshi friend, but listening to her talk made me realize I still didn’t have a firm grasp on her social circles. She was pretty well-versed in cosplay herself.

“And finally! The pièce de résistance!” Miyoshi retrieved a large, black cape from a box. The main material was matte, but its inner lining showed a shadow stripe pattern where it caught the light. “No phantom is complete without his spooky cape.”

“That’s perfect, because I’m no phantom. Am I really supposed to fight with this on? It’s so unwieldy.”

“Just practice taking it in and out of Vault. Then you can use it to make escapes.”

““Make escapes’?”

“Yep. You wrap yourself in your cape, then fade away into the shadows and disappear, leaving no trace but—what’s this?—your cape on the ground. Proof that the Phantom was here. It’ll be your calling card. Although in actuality, you’ll just be dropping into a shadow pit and getting rid of part of your costume like a streaker.”

“So the cape is a *single-use item*? That’s a shame. It looks expensive too.”

“It’s made from pretty ordinary materials, so it doesn’t run us too much. Also, if it were *too* cheap, it’d ruin the effect.”

“If you’re so in love with drama, why don’t *you* play the Phantom?”

“Whaaaat? Me? You’re not going to catch me dead in a cringey outfit like that.”

*Miyoshiii...* “Hey!”

“Hey now, hey now. Come on. Give us some swooshes! Swooooooshes.”

Even though I knew she was trying to get me to ignore her insult, I gave in and tried waving my cape around dramatically in the mirror. Dealing with all that surface area, it was rough going.

“I’m going to have to watch out for flame attacks while I’m wearing this,” I observed. “One spark and I’m going up like a bonfire.” I had no intention of becoming a charbroiled phantom.

“The material is *somewhat* fire-retardant, but it’s still cosplay-grade, so I wouldn’t get crazy. If it ever *does* catch fire, you could store it in Vault and take it out in a safe place later.”

“‘Cosplay-grade,’ as in, I shouldn’t expect much in the way of defense.”

“You...might as well be wearing paper.”

“Guh! You could’ve at least included some kevlar, or some proper fire-resistant material!”

“That would’ve just led to us being tracked down via purchase history!”

“I suppose.”

“Plus, then we couldn’t leave parts of your costume behind if it came to it in battle.”

“That again...”

“Anyway, you’re the one who spent ages going exploring in ordinary street clothes! I don’t see what difference switching to cosplay makes in terms of protection. As long as no Ngai-level threats rear their heads, you should probably be fine.”

“You got me there.” If an Ngai *did* show up, it probably wouldn’t matter what I was wearing. I’d just have to make like a little Char Aznable and focus on dodging hits instead of taking them.

I tried swooshing my cape around in front of the mirror some more and tested a few more poses. “I look like a cut-rate Bela Lugosi.”

“Come to think of it, Lugosi’s Dracula used a white-tie costume too! Although



he had the proper white vest to go with it.”

After playing Dracula in Universal’s 1931 film, Lugosi had continued to perform as the character through a subsequent Broadway stage run, cementing the character’s trademark Hungarian-accented English. The stagelike theatricality of his performance, though in keeping with the time, would probably register as silly to most new audiences now—particularly his overly dramatic cape flourishes.

“Practice makes perfect, right?” Miyoshi suggested.

“Guess I should at least work on the victory pose.”

“Oh? Could there be a cosplayer in you yet?”

It wasn’t that. It was just, if we were going to do it, I felt like we should go all the way. The only thing more embarrassing than wearing a phantom costume into dungeons was wearing a phantom costume into dungeons and only half committing to the bit. As Shi had said, confidence made all the difference.

“We’ll want some props,” Miyoshi continued. “At the very least, some kind of cane.”

“Just carrying an ordinary stick around isn’t going to do much good. How about something like *this*?” I whipped the Scimitar of Deserts out of Vault.

“Hm. It’s pretty narrow for a scimitar, so it could work. Plus, we know from when those two boneheads used it at the Manor that it packs a wallop. But if you’re going to be wearing it around your waist, you’re going to need a scabbard.”

“Not if I’m just pulling it out of Vault.”

“Pulling a sword straight out of the shadows from your cape... I can see it!”

“Pretty cool, right?”

“Just as long as you don’t accidentally cut your cape with it or grab it by the blade.”

“What kind of klutz do you think I— No, actually, wait, better practice.” I had no experience with swordplay, and the blade had been collecting dust in Vault since we found it. Now wasn’t the time to get overconfident. “Come to think of

it, I wish I had a shield too.”

*Actually, if it came to it, I’d rather have a shield.*

“No go. A shield would ruin the image. Way too busy. Maybe something like a pair of gauntlets that could be hidden under the jacket. Then again, your VIT’s pretty high. You’d probably be fine without them.”

“If you say so. Still, I don’t love the idea of eating attacks head-on. Can you whip something up?”

“I’ll look into it.” Miyoshi took one more pass around me, admiring Shi’s handiwork. “Now, about the timing of your debut...”

“‘Debut’?”

*Wait, wait, wait. No one ever said anything about planning a debut. Of course, Miyoshi had used that word, but I thought she meant figuratively!*

“Something truly uproarious,” she said.

“‘Uproarious’?”

“I mean outrageous! It’ll have everyone in an uproar.”

“You did that on purpose...”

“But still, we’ll need an audience. Maybe Saito’s team could get into a pinch...”

“Don’t wish for other people’s endangerment just to satisfy your own lust for drama!”

Someone had to put the brakes on Miyoshi, and fast. I couldn’t help imagining all the ways this could go wrong.

## **Sawkill Road, Kingston, New York**

Mid-January was the coldest time of the year in New York.

On the second floor of a home next to St. Ann’s Cemetery along Sawkill Road, partway between Lake Katrine by the Hudson River and the neighboring town of Woodstock, Dean McNamara’s PC harddisk whirred to life.

He had been wanting to switch to an SSD, and was just thinking about that when a Skype message arrived on his desktop.

*“Dean! Big news!”*

It was a message from Paul, another member of the planning committee for the IRL New York D-Card testing event.

Dean grabbed his Jabra Evolve 80 headset and switched to video call. He had purchased the headset because he was enthralled by its active noise-canceling capabilities, but around his family’s home in Kingston, there was hardly much noise to cancel. About all it was good for was covering up the sounds of his air conditioner or computer fan, and music alone would drown those out. Still, he rather liked the headset, including the busy light, currently reflected in the window and visible only to him.

*“What’s up?”* Dean asked.

*“You’ll never believe the email I just got.”*

*“Oh really? Who’s it from?”*

*“Brace yourself.”*

*“Just spill it already! Don’t keep me waiting!”*

*“The Wiseman. Azusa Miyoshi herself.”*

Dean unconsciously squeezed his mouse. *“Whaaat?! The Wiseman?! Is she coming to the meetup?!”*

*“No such luck.”* Paul shook his head. *“Unfortunately that wouldn’t work out.”* She did live all the way in Japan, and was probably busy with her domestic business.

*“Aw. That’s too bad. But then spill it—what’d she want?”*

*“She was interested in the event and wanted to know if she could help out with the venue, if it looked like it’d be a big event.”*

*“Huh? Why?”*

*“Beats me. She wasn’t sure exactly what size we were picturing, but asked if the Javits Center would work, even though it’s a little far from Breezy Point. It*

*looked like she should be able to book it for the final weekend of February, on the twenty-third and twenty-fourth."*

*"The Javits Center?!"* The Javits Center was only the biggest convention center in New York. In nerdier circles, it was best known as the venue for New York Comic Con, America's preeminent comics-and-pop-culture event. Originally a parallel to Comiket, it had recently grown so large that it had even been exported to Japan, scheduled for November 12 through 14, in Halls 9 through 11 at Makuhari Messe. The event's Silicon Valley offshoot was even hosted by Steve Wozniak, an attempt to bring in the computer enthusiast crowd. That was how big the event had grown.

*"Hard to beat that,"* Dean continued. *"Did she have any conditions as a sponsor?"*

*"No promotion demands or anything like that. However, she said she'd lend us some equipment, and asked that we make use of it."*

*"Some equipment"? You don't mean...the stat-measuring devices?!"* Dean stood up in shock, cut off in the video frame at the shoulders.

The whole internet had seen D-Powers' press conference on January 6. It hadn't taken a day for an English-subtitled version of the conference to hit the web. Fansubbers worked fast.

Paul watched Dean pacing anxiously back and forth on his screen and smiled awkwardly. Ever the gamer, Dean still used wired headphones. He couldn't move around that much.

*"Seems like it. That'd make us the first group outside the company to have access to the tech,"* Paul answered.

Dean leaned in toward the camera, sticking out his pointer finger and thumb, bringing up the concern that had just struck him. *"Hold on. The devices aren't even on the market. Aren't they concerned about tech poaching?"*

*"We'll probably need to sign an NDA. And I'm guessing they'll send over some staff to help keep an eye on things."*

Dean seemed to accept Paul's answer, returning to his seat. *"Make sense. But man, how are you not more pumped? I can't wait to see my own stats."*

*“Don’t get me wrong. I’m champing at the bit too. Oh, right. Since we’ll be gathering tons of people, she also requested we have people run back through a gate-mounted scanner every time they change party members and stuff.”*

*“Like, to see if party composition affects stats?”*

*“Something like that. At any rate, they want as many reference points under different conditions as they can get. Ah, and since it’ll be a pain to write in all the context later, Miyoshi’s offering to pay the hotel fee of anyone who volunteers to help record their own results.”*

*“Seriously? Hotel fees in New York? I have a hard time believing any data’s that valuable. Doesn’t this seem fishy?”* Dean folded his arms, creases forming in his brow.

*“She runs a dungeon support company. Seems like this is within her purview. Apparently they’re planning on getting involved in even more events in the future.”*

Dean maintained his dubious expression. *“Does that even make sense from a business perspective?”* He couldn’t see D-Powers’ bottom line.

*“Maybe it’s more branding than business. Plus they’ve been working with Team Simon. Maybe they just feel like giving back to the US?”*

*“Huh? Wait, I did hear Team Simon is in Yoyogi right now...”*

*“Not just Team Simon. All the top explorer teams are there now. Private celebrity ones too, like King Salmon and the Witch of Campbell. I’d like to go too,”* Paul joked, but it wasn’t in the cards.

*“All of this is great, but...they’re at least going to want some usable results, huh?”*

*“Miyoshi said not to worry about that. Results be what they may, we should just enjoy the event.”*

Dean was momentarily dumbstruck. *“I don’t get what they’re thinking at all,”* he concluded.

*“It’s not for us to get. This is the Wiseman, after all.”*

*“Shoot. I just realized we’ll probably be up to our necks in applications if*

*everyone's hotel fees get covered. Plus, how do we handle private info?"*

Reporting test results was a given, and people who would have paid their own way to get to the event regardless would probably be all too happy to provide any necessary info in exchange for D-Powers footing the hotel bill.

What worried Dean was stat readings. Sharing someone's stats might be tantamount to sharing medical records. This was the land of lawsuits, after all.

*"Don't worry," Paul responded. "According to the email, stat readings don't need to be tied to individuals."*

*"That's good. I guess as long as they know that two readings are from the same person, it doesn't matter who exactly that person is."*

*"That's probably the thinking."*

*"But how will they know it's the same person?"*

*"According to Miyoshi, they'll send over tags, and we'll have people wear them when going through the scanner."*

*"Nice! That way we can pinpoint shared readings without disclosing any names. And the number of tags they send over for volunteers would also be the number of hotel rooms they'd reimburse?"*

*"Yep. And she said up to one thousand should be no problem, so the more the merrier."*

*"For real?!"*

*"Though if it's a suite at the Mandarin or something...they might be on their own. Wiseman's words, not mine." Paul smiled.*

*"Okay, obviously. Wait...so, does that mean if it's not a suite at the Mandarin, it's okay?"*

*"Uh...even a normal room there's going to run eight hundred dollars at a minimum..."*

New York's property prices were outrageous even at comparatively cheaper venues. High-end hotels ran a minimum of six hundred dollars per night, and that was only if you were willing to take a hit on amenities.

*“Let’s...just not mention anything. If we submit a thousand single rooms at the Waldorf Astoria or the Four Seasons or NY Palace or something, Wiseman’s going to have our heads.”*

So it was settled. Anyone who wanted to tempt fate by booking a luxury hotel could do so at their own risk. The hosts would make no guarantees.

*“Sounds good.”*

*“Okay. Then we’d better hurry up recruiting volunteers. They’ll be on their own for travel expenses, but we can advertise that Wiseman is paying for the venue and lodging.”*

*“She’ll wire over the money as soon as the basic plan’s figured out, so we should send her a quote as soon as we have one prepared.”*

*“Got it. Aw, man. We’ve only got a little over a month. We’re gonna have to haul ass. Gonna be an exciting next few weeks.”*

*“You can say that again.”*

Dean ended the call, took off his headset, and moved over to the window, trying to calm his nerves.

At first they’d been thinking of renting an office space via WeWork, and were wondering how they were going to narrow their list of participants. With the move to the Javits, they could suddenly take over a thousand.

He looked out over the cemetery, gravestones tinted orange in the light of the setting sun, and began thinking of tests to run.

**January 14, 2019 (Monday)**

**Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office**

*“Morning!”*

*“Naruse? You’re here early.”*

It was a little past nine, and Naruse was already at our office, grinning suspiciously as she removed her coat and extracted some documents from her bag, spreading them over the table.

“All the paperwork is here for Yokohama. I’ll just need Miyoshi’s signature.”

“Oh, wow! Many thanks.”

Even with the amount of documents that had been digitized these days, important agreements were still mostly signed on paper. Once Miyoshi signed off, the first floors of both the Yokohama Dungeon and the building above would be ours.

“This one is the contract for the first building floor,” Naruse explained, sliding a document forward.

“So you got permission from the owners from the transfer?”

“Your funds checked out; you’re well equipped to handle any no-fault liability claims. There was nothing to worry about. And here’s the contract for the dungeon floor.” Naruse slid another document forward.

This contract gave us the first dungeon floor inclusive of the staircase up from the second. If it didn’t, someone could enter the first floor from the second after coming in through the parking garage entrance.

“I hope you know the extent of the blood, sweat, and tears that went into this,” Naruse commented. “You kept our Legal Affairs Department up all night. Although apparently they were grateful.” We’d had some precedent for dungeon rental via our 3.3-meter plot in Yoyogi, but precedent only went so far.

“Grateful for an all-nighter? Why?”

“Because now we have the details ironed out before we have to deal with a safe zone,” she explained.

“Ah...”

According to dungeon inscriptions, safe zones lay just ahead of where frontline teams were currently exploring Yoyogi. Assuming they really existed, once they were discovered, all sorts of legal questions would arise over use of the land and establishment of businesses on it.

If there were only one safe area on Earth, perhaps some sort of collaborative solution like the International Space Station could have worked, but with safe zones and floors in each dungeon, management would be at the discretion of



each country's dungeon association. The JDA had a vested interest in making sure it was up to the task. Despite the use of safe zones requiring new legal framework, as a nonurgent—in fact, a theoretical—problem, the required work had a tendency to be pushed to the back burner without something like our request forcing them to address the matter.

Finally getting an opportunity to sit down and tackle all the required prepwork in advance was apparently the source of the legal department's gratitude.

"Then...just this and this and I'm good, right?" Miyoshi asked, signing the papers. She affixed her stamp to them, attached proof of seal, and passed them back to Naruse before setting about making the necessary transfers.

*Dang, slow down for a second!*

"A-Ah, yes. Everything seems to be in order. Thank you very much," Naruse responded, slightly taken aback.

"Looks like we'll have our work cut out for us for a little while too, Kei!"

"What *exactly* are your plans for Yokohama again?" Naruse asked fearfully.

"Why, converting it into a dungeon research facility, of course! Our own Shinshinan!"

I burst out laughing. "You were serious about using that name?"

"Of course. I've even ordered a sign and everything."

*You have got to be joking. Panasonic's going to be coming after us.*

"Shinshinan? Wasn't that the name of Konosuke Matsushita's retreat?"

"Totally different. That was to study the powers of the cosmos. We're not out to do anything that, erm...bold."

The "powers of the cosmos" Matsushita had studied included the idea of powers distilled from the cosmos inside each and every blade of grass, which could be observed and cultivated with a pure heart and harmonious mindset, willing any and everything to go well. In other words, the kind of theory that would have gotten the ordinary person laughed at. Push come to shove, one might even have said the tech company founder's philosophies smacked a little

of a cult.

“Right. If we started peddling ideas like that, people would just think we were crazy,” Miyoshi concluded.

“Well, that’s the charm of Matsushita for you, I guess,” Naruse shrugged. “Not that I ever knew him.”

“That’s the economic power of Matsushita, anyway. Not that I knew him either.”

But come to think of it, D-Factors might not have been so different in essence from that theoretical cosmic power. Miyoshi might have sensed that when she decided on the name.

“Our ‘Shinshinan’ will use different kanji,” Miyoshi explained. The “an” would be the same in both—coming from “retreat.” However, Matsushita’s “shin” had come from “truth,” while ours would be plucked from the familiar expression “kyomi-shinshin,” meaning “deep curiosity.”

“Certainly the kind of name that makes you expect a wealth of new discoveries,” Naruse commented diplomatically.

“That’s right! We’re gonna keep ya busy at the JDA!” Miyoshi threatened.

Naruse smiled wearily. “Please go easy on us!”

*It’s almost impossible to imagine you keeping us any busier* was her implication. Unfortunately, Naruse was about to learn that her plea would fall on deaf ears.

“So...actually,” I started.

“Oh no...” Sensing that I had something I was reluctant to talk about, Naruse’s whole body tensed.

“About the first floor of Yokohama. That contract just now signed it over to D-Powers for ten years, correct?”

“Right...”

“Then there’s something about Yokohama I’d like to discuss.”

“‘Discuss’?” Naruse scrunched her brow.

“I’ll go get some coffee,” Miyoshi said. Naruse followed her with her eyes and, seeming to sense this would be a long conversation, sank further into her seat.

“So, erm...what...was it you wanted to talk about?”

“I don’t quite know how to say this...”

Naruse’s lips curled into a forced smile, beads of sweat forming on her brow. “May I be excused from the rest of this conversation?”

“For the good of the JDA, and as D-Powers’ dedicated supervisor, it’s probably best that you hear it. Better to know ahead of time than to be caught off guard if any problems come up.”

“Why does that feel like a threat...?”

“First of all, the ‘first’ floor of Yokohama isn’t really the first floor of Yokohama.”

“What?” I could practically see a giant question mark form above Naruse’s head.

I explained the staircase floor theory.

“I remember seeing on Kunai’s—er, Tenko’s—YouTube channel that there was a theory that a certain staircase landing was actually a dungeon floor,” she responded.

“Right! It sounds crazy, but it’s actually true. We don’t have an exact way of knowing how deep what’s currently thought to be the first floor is, but we do know it’s at least as deep as twenty.”

“Then I suppose you have some sort of evidence.”

*Okay, here we go.*

“The thing is—we got a drop.”

“‘A drop’? You mean...?”

Bringing up drops associated with the twentieth floor or lower could only have meant one thing. I nodded.

“Now for right now this is only theoretical,” I began. And so I launched into my full theory about how initial Mining drops were determined. We had to

bring it up sometime, and this seemed as good a time as any. It would also help explain exactly what kind of drop we'd gotten at Yokohama.

"So the Mining drops can be consciously selected?" Naruse looked at me in disbelief.

"Well, possibly. The probability seems high."

Right now our sample size was lacking. However, in my mind it was basically proven. If we waited until we had more empirical evidence, it might already be too late.

"What's the mineral people interact with most often in their daily lives? The one most likely to subconsciously be on an explorer's mind?"

"I don't know. Iron?"

"Exactly. So if I'm right, we've got to act fast."

When Mining-users caused their first drop, unless they were deliberately thinking of another mineral, they would likely set the floor to iron.

"So each floor isn't a different mineral?"

"We initially assumed they would be too. But that isn't promised anywhere in the inscription."

Apparently most people had assumed there was a hidden drop already set on each floor, which Mining was needed to uncover.

"Then if we aren't careful—"

"Yep. We'll wind up with a dungeon full of iron," I said.

Miyoshi returned with the coffee.

"Ah. Thanks."

Chewing over my explanation with her eyebrows turned upward like an upside-down V, Naruse brought up one point that seemed to be bothering her. "I understand where you're coming from, but then we'd need to have a mineralogist kill a monster on each floor twenty and below."

"That...is a problem." Just getting someone a D-Card could be achieved with the Asha method, but tackling monsters farther down posed a different set of

challenges. We were already struggling with how to get Komugi ready. “Right now we’re planning on seeing if Rokujo can do it, but—”

“Forgive my asking, but is that even possible?”

*Nope, if you think about it normally, totally impossible.*

However, we weren’t exactly normal. If we could just get our hands on a second Darkness Magic (VI)...

“I think we’ll be able to work something out within the month.”

“Ridiculous...” Naruse couldn’t contain her shock.

*Hey, you’re the one who pushed her on us! As the client, you’re supposed to be thrilled!* I gave Naruse an apologetic smile.

“Are you sure it’s okay to promise that, Kei?”

“Don’t worry. Rokujo’s got a fire under her. I’m sure she’ll tough out the training. At her pace, forget three weeks, she might be ready in just two.”

“Even still, we have to worry about her ability to support at least two Arthurs on her MP.”

Snapping back to her senses, Naruse spoke up. “Let me get this straight. You have a method of preparing total novices, without even any athletics background, to dive lower than the twentieth floor—in a *month*?!”

“Er, something like that.”

“Utterly unbelievable. How?”

“Luckily for us, we just happened to find a onetime secret method that would work just this once. Talk about serendipitous timing! Totally irreplicable. Ha, ha, ha.” I laughed off my own half-hearted pretense.

Miyoshi smiled awkwardly, but hey, it wasn’t exactly a lie. No matter how high we raised Rokujo’s stats, without obtaining another Darkness Magic (VI) orb, our plan would be for naught. “A-Anyway, if we let one of the explorers on the eighteenth floor right now get Mining and use it on one of the lower floors, what they might intend as a little test could wind up screwing over other dungeon divers permanently.”

All the world's best divers were on the eighteenth floor right now, but it was unlikely there was a mineralogist among them. Thinking of who you'd want to use Mining if your group obtained it, it would ordinarily be a young and talented explorer. With most people figuring the mineral drops on each floor were random, you'd want someone who could work for a long time to check the drops on as many floors as possible.

And the kind of metal a majority of young, promising explorers especially would most be in contact with? The probability that all the dungeon's drops would be set to iron only rose.

"Understood," Naruse responded. "But if word gets around, it's likely Mining users will just try to practice their drop-setting in other countries' public dungeons before returning to their own."

"'Likely' nothing. That'd be the best strategy. And Yoyogi's a public dungeon, with floors you could test Mining on just a few down from where the orb drops. If the JDA's going to impose any entry restrictions, now's the time."

"I'll bring it up. My section chief will probably believe us, but it'll be hard to get outside departments on board without more evidence." Naruse scrawled down a series of notes, packed up her documents, and creased her brow. "By the way, I'm terribly thankful for the information, but how does Yokohama factor into all this again?"

I downed the last, bitter dregs of my coffee and set my cup on the table.

"Um, if we try to sell the drop we got there, we might have to have you—or rather, the JDA—negotiate on our behalf with De Beers."

Naruse blinked. "You couldn't mean... You're not serious..."

"Um...diamonds."

"Argh, you said it!" Naruse's shoulders slumped as if her arms had been pulled down by bricks.

De Beers might have disbanded its cartel in 2000, with its Central Selling Organization rebranded into The Diamond Trading Company, but it wasn't hard to imagine someone from the company taking issue with the way our drops would affect value if the number we collected was high enough. Brexit looked

to be relaxing certain regulations, but even then...

I took out the three diamonds we'd gotten from Yokohama and set them in front of Naruse.

"What? These look like they're stellar quality. And they're cut! They aren't rough stones! Why...?"

"I thought it was just the first floor. When I got this drop, the only thing I was thinking of was diamonds, which had happened to come up in conversation."

"You were only thinking of diamonds..." Naruse repeated. "And this was the result?"

"See for yourself." I pointed to the three diamonds. "So that's what persuaded me of the theory that what the Mining user is thinking of sets the floor's drop."

"I see."

"If we can, we'd like to sell the diamond drops to the JDA. That seems easiest. But if we start turning over too many, it might present some complications, so I wanted to warn you in advance."

If worse came to worst, the WDA might even be accused of becoming a diamond-laundering front.

Naruse rolled one of the diamonds around with the tip of her pen. "You understand this might be a problem for your lease agreement, right?"

Of course if it looked like we'd requested to lease the first floor knowing diamonds dropped there, it would have meant trouble for us. We could argue that hadn't been the case, but who would believe us?

Miyoshi put her cup and saucer down and gave Naruse a stern look. "Don't worry. We'll be holding off on finding drops for a while. When we finally do, we'll be plenty surprised."

"Huh?"

"We'll be so lucky!" Miyoshi continued. "To have *discovered* diamond drops on the floor we *just happened* to lease."

“Miyoshi...”

“Well, why not? There’s no point in rocking the boat at this point.”

Naruse gave a strained smile. “Very well. I haven’t heard anything about this until you decide to make your first sale. That’s for the record. Please appreciate my award-winning surprise when you bring in your first diamond.”

“It’ll have to beat my award-winning performance first,” Miyoshi responded.

“You guys...”

“Of course, this’ll make it harder to back up your theory about mineral drops,” Naruse pointed out.

“That’s right... We’ll have to wait until we announce our first drop.”

Naruse stared at the diamonds, thinking for a minute, then looked up. “Well then, I’ll try to lay groundwork so that there are no serious problems between the JDA and other industries when the announcement finally does get made.”

“Sorry. We’ll owe you one. There’s already a glut of low-quality raw stones and artificial diamonds in the world, so hopefully ours won’t make too much of a splash. If anything, maybe they’ll be in a different sales category, like Lightbox jewelry.”

De Beers had announced a line of artificial diamonds branded “Lightbox” the previous September. Sold at one tenth the price of natural diamonds, they came in pink, blue, and white, and were marketed as fashion pieces. Dungeon diamonds, if they hit the market in high enough numbers, might get a similar distinction...if there were a way to tell them apart from natural gems in the first place, that was.

## **Kishi Memorial Gymnasium, Yoyogi**

On the fourth floor of the Kishi Memorial Gymnasium in Yoyogi, a member of the Athletes Training Committee of the All Japan Archery Federation engaged in heated discussion with his director, whom he’d called in on a holiday. [\(12\)](#)

“You mean to tell me someone scored 705 points in the seventy-meter round?!” The director blinked.



The seventy-meter round saw archers fire seventy-two total arrows at targets seventy meters away, competing for best total score. The highest score possible was 720, achieved by landing every arrow within the twelve-centimeter-diameter bull's-eye.

That was nearly humanly impossible to pull off. Or, at least it had been...

The Japanese men's record stood at 692 points, the women's 650. Even the world men's record was only 700.

"That's right," the committee member replied hesitantly. "At an open competition at Hikarigaoka yesterday. It...wasn't even really an exhibition round. She was there for *a movie shoot*."

"'A movie shoot'?! Do you mean to tell me she's not even a federation athlete?!"

For an official league tournament, she'd have had to register with the hosting prefecture's federation on sign-up. However, that didn't extend to smaller scale open events. Furthermore, if she'd been there for a movie shoot, there was the possibility she might not even be an athlete at all.

"We've...searched through federation databases, and couldn't find any Ryoko Saito matching her approximate age." Ignoring the director's beleaguered sigh, the committee member extracted something from his pocket. "However, a competitor at the event got the whole thing on film and uploaded it to YouTube." He passed the director a USB drive containing the video file.

"Then this has already gotten out?!"

"The video was deleted. Probably at the request of her agents. But..." Deleted didn't necessarily mean gone. Footage had a habit of not disappearing from the internet. Someone might have been uploading a copy as they spoke. "At any rate, we've got to get her on the Olympic team!" the committee member urged.

Ah, yes. The promotion and development committees were sure to *love* the idea of a celebrity actress athlete. All the more if she was worth her stuff. However, there were plenty of hurdles to clear.

"Where did she learn archery?" the director asked.

“In the dungeons, apparently.”

She was less of a competition archer and more of a hunter, then, if pressed for a category. The director recalled recent debate surrounding the dungeons’ influence on athletics. “We’ve already made selections for next year’s Olympic team,” he observed. “At Tsumagoi in November last year.”

“I *know* that.” The committee member was growing impatient with the director’s logistic lamentations. Unless they had another competitor who could score 705 points, even once, they had an obligation to get her on the team. “But after our shameful performance in Rio, I thought we agreed to select the best athletes as close to the event as possible. That was *your* policy.”

“That’s true, but...she’s not even registered with the federation. It was an open tournament, right?”

“We can find some way to retroactively register her! And listen, the size of the tournament has no bearing on her score, right?” The committee member couldn’t slow himself down. “Listen, she shot a full seventy-meter ranking, and other than her first two shots, every one was a bull’s-eye. Furthermore, she was using a barebow, which she’d never shot with before.”

“Unbelievable,” replied the director. “Absolutely unbelievable.”

“That’s not all. She didn’t take any practice shots. If anything, you could chalk the first two arrows up to that.”

“Then...she might have gotten a full 720. With a barebow. On her first try.” The director was flummoxed. “My god.”

“Chula Vista next month might be out of the question, but we can still make the third World Cup qualifiers in March.”

“And give her a spot in the top eight for the World Cup qualifiers, just like that? We’ll definitely hear from the other athletes about that. It’s going to look like a half-baked marketing scheme.”

“Let it. She’s far and away the best.”

If the director needed to, he could almost certainly allow for an extra competitor at the qualifiers as an exception. However, would Saito even

accept?

“Let’s say it’s possible,” he replied. “I don’t know how showbiz works, but would she be able to attend the final qualifier in Medellín in April? The world championships in Den Bosch?”

That year’s World Archery Championships were to be held in ‘s-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands. The final qualifying rounds were to be held in Medellín, Colombia.

“I’m not sure,” the committee member admitted.

“Well you better damn well be sure!” the director bellowed. “I’m sticking my neck out here!”

“I-I’ll look into it! Right away!”

The committee member bowed, then scurried out of the room.

“Phew. He’s motivated, I’ll give him that,” the director mumbled to himself. “Just needs someone to rein in all those big ideas of his.” He stood up from his chair, walked to the window, and stared out in the direction of Yoyogi Dungeon.

In the three years since the dungeons had appeared, their impact had permeated deep into sports.

“Damn. And here I was hoping it’d just be endurance sports. Now we have to deal with it in technique competitions too?”

Unlike in Europe and America, nearly all archery in Japan was competition-focused. If a dozen people scoring 720 in seventy-meter target rounds emerged, would that be motivating, or kill off interest in the sport completely? The federation’s role was to promote archery competition. Moving forward, it seemed like that would include learning more about the dungeons as well.

**January 15, 2019 (Tuesday)**

**Yoyogi Dungeon**

*“Yaaaaaawn.”*

“Feeling sleepy? How late were you up, Miyoshi?”

The day had finally come for us to follow Saito and her pilot film crew into the dungeon. We had just descended to the first floor. Her group had gone in some time earlier.

“Don’t talk to me about it. We’ll be in the dungeon for two days starting today, so I was up finishing my thesis.”

She was referring to our “thesis” report concerning dungeonization. Given that the saplings we had cut hadn’t grown any further, we’d decided to write up our findings and submit them with our patent application. The report wasn’t necessary, but we hoped its information would inspire others to keep running dungeonizing experiments for us. At least that was our intent.

“Er...good work. Well then, I guess I’ll lead the way.”

“Be my guest.”

The first several floors were still crowded, so we didn’t have to worry about concealing ourselves, easily blending in with the surrounding groups of explorers. Unlike on our earlier trips, we were wearing ordinary beginner gear too, so we didn’t have to worry about Nosy Nancies coming up to give us pointers. We hummed a bit as we walked, as if we were going for a stroll.

Late last night, Saito had stopped by our office, having finished her last round of slime hunting.

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“Coach! Ten hours! I was splashing and bashing slimes for *ten hours*! No breaks! Aethlem here is no dog! He’s the devil!”

Aethlem shrunk himself next to her. He’d just been doing his job. He appeared uncertain of how to take this sudden stream of beratement.

“It was Sisyphean, I tell you. Sisyphean!”

However, the results spoke for themselves.

In just six days, she’d defeated 4,007 slimes, for a total of 80.14 SP, raising her rank to a staggering 368. It was likely she had even surpassed Mitsurugi, becoming the highest-ranking unaffiliated Yoyogi explorer. *If Rokujo can just keep up a similar pace, I thought, she might actually hit her goal in half a*

*month.*

Defeating four slimes per minute would mean six hundred in ten hours. Managing eight a minute, that'd be twelve hundred. This was all armchair theory, but with the density of slimes on the first floor of Yoyogi, anything seemed possible.

The only issue now was how to divide her SP.



Saito used a bow, so a DEX-AGI build would make sense. I could up her DEX to 100, which might also make her the greatest actress in the world. Maybe not in terms of fame, but in terms of objective skill.

However, her recent training sessions had been for something else—survival. Destination: the tenth floor. If she were overwhelmed by an undead horde, even upping her VIT would only extend her life for a matter of time. Plus, all the AGI in the world wouldn't help if there was no room to escape.

“Hm...”

“What is it, Kei?”

Miyoshi had joined me in the dining room to prepare some Teastruction as a subterfuge for Saito's impending gains. She gave me a serious look.

“I was just thinking about how to...*you know, distribute her stats.*” I whispered with a finger in front of my lips, glancing toward Saito on the sofa. She was busy giving Aethlem an earful.

“How about an even, across-the-board build?”

“Maybe...” This was certainly different from trying to improve her acting, when she'd had a specific goal in mind.

Ultimately I took Miyoshi up on her advice and raised Saito's stats evenly, taking advantage of the moment after she'd had her first swig of tea.

For a moment it seemed as though she might almost pass out, overwhelmed by its pungent flavor, but after a moment or so to regain her composure, her eyes lit up as if she'd found new vigor.

She'd just hit the top four hundred in the world rankings, after all. With each stat getting a boost, in terms of raw stats, she was on par with Team Simon. The sensation must have been totally different from all her previous gains. It was only natural to feel a little taken aback. Even at Christmas, I had only raised her stats by 33 points, and at that point her gains in STR and AGI, the easiest two stats to notice, had been minimal.

“Coach...what the...?”

“Don't worry. The tea's brought out all the latent power you'd stored up. It'll

probably feel a little funny for a minute. I...wouldn't go running at top speed right away."

"The *tea*?" She looked at me dubiously, but said nothing more.

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"So, what was Saito's group's plan again?"

"She said they'd be in the dungeon around eight," Miyoshi responded. "Even if we can't find them, we can always contact them through Aethlem if we need to."

"Sounds good. Then let's hurry up and get to the sixth floor."

We had a certain errand to run before convening with Saito's team. I'd thought about going alone, but we currently had Drudwyn loaned out to Rokujo and Mishiro. That left Miyoshi and me with only Cavall between us, meaning it was best we stuck together.

"We should be fine leaving Saito alone a bit longer," I commented. "She's already in the range where even top-ranking explorers should think twice about tussling with her. Nothing in the early floors should give her any trouble. For the tenth, did her group have any of the assimilation drug?"

"A little. Although apparently they were planning on getting more on the way."

"What kind of half-baked cost-reduction measure is that? It's not like they can control drops."

"The area by the eighth-floor meat skewer stand'll be crowded, so given their destination, that probably means heading down to the ninth floor. And you know what lives on the ninth floor..."

"Colonial worms..." I shuddered.

Church grims, which dropped the assimilation drug, were only found on the fifth through ninth floors. But if that put Saito's team on the ninth floor for the hunting and in range of the colonial warms—bodyguard or no bodyguard, count me out. Even Aethlem would run away from one of them with his tail between his legs. Or...his tail sunk into the shadows, I guess.



“If they encounter one, you might just have to be ready to pick Saito up like a piece of luggage again and run,” Miyoshi offered.

“Although at this point, the one with the lowest agility out of all of us is you.”

*“Wha?!”*

Still, with Miyoshi’s current AGI, she should have no problem outrunning a colonial worm either. They were only a ninth-floor monster, after all. Not that I wanted to bump into one.

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*“The geese have landed. Repeat. The geese landed.”*

A man not quite 180 centimeters high—slightly short for a military type, but a burl of sinew and muscle—listened to the message over his headset, standing up in the center of a crowd whose gear seemed a touch militaristic for explorers. They were gathered by the second-floor exit.

Known primarily by the nickname of “Ratel,” an alternate name for honey badgers, he had proved himself in the Iraq War and in the regions controlled by the anti-Gaddafi forces during the First Libyan Civil War, where he had been heralded as the “Basilisk of Cyrenaica.”

Opting for a selection of military equipment wasn’t unusual among explorers, but this group seemed to be something else altogether. There was something in the way they conducted themselves. Those around kept their distance. They were the real deal.

*“What do we do now, Captain?”*

To the side, Ratel’s longtime adjutant, Facile, requested orders. He stood taller and lankier than Ratel, with an aloof demeanor that was true to his name.

[\(13\)](#)

*“The client asked us to trail them for a few days following the end of the auction. So trailing ’em’s what we’re gonna do.”*

*“Can we expect our geese to lay a golden egg?”*

*“Hmph. With any luck,”* Ratel snorted.

Skill orbs only lasted one day. Whatever quarry their “geese” delivered to winning bidders had to be delivered within one day of—less than twenty-four hours before—the exchange. By following them in that interval, they could smoke out their delivery network.

However, surely there had been other organizations that had run the same math. The fact that they hadn’t been caught yet meant their targets were more than they let on.

*“Just a warning. I heard they completely decimated the Chinese and Russian teams during the Otherworldly Language Comprehension incident,”* Facile commented.

*“A Chinese team was extracted by the JSDF,”* Ratel responded. *“I haven’t heard anything about Russians.”*

*“A team of FSB agents were found unconscious by some explorers in the dungeon. Then later, on the day of the orb handover, five Russian nationals rumored to be members of the SVR’s Zaslon Barrier unit were arrested in Shinjuku Gyoen.”*

*“Japanese police arrested members of Barrier?!”* Ratel thundered. *“Damn. I’d like to dismiss it out of hand, but it’s possible there’s someone in their group even Barrier can’t handle.”* They couldn’t afford to take the situation lightly, he grumbled.

*“I did hear the Russians had a run-in with DSF members too, but... Either way, they were sent packing.”*

*“And yet there’s been no retaliation. The long arm’s gotten weak.”*

*“If the 2010 arrests are anything to go off, it looks like it.”*

In 2010, ten deep-cover Russian spies had been arrested in America, caught communicating carelessly over social media, speaking with Russian accents despite cover stories saying they had grown up in America, etc. Such blunders would have been inconceivable during the old KGB days.

*“Well, use another stone’s mountains,”* Ratel mumbled.

*“I’m sorry?”*

*"A Chinese proverb. 'Use another stone's mountains to polish your own jade.' It means, 'Use other teams' fuck-ups to ensure your success.'"*

*"I never took you for the learned type," Facile quipped.*

*"And I never took you for the dead one," Ratel shot back.*

*Facile sighed. "Standard flanking maneuvers, then?"*

*"No. Judging from previous incidents, they have some kind of detection skill or device. Keep your distance."*

*"Tch. This espionage bullshit's for the birds. We might engage in the occasional assassination, but that doesn't make us spies." Facile lazily scratched his cheek. "Ah well." Sabotage and subterfuge were still components of their work, after all. Only their targets' unknown abilities gave him pause. "I just so happen to have gathered some members more skilled in scouting than combat for this mission. Plus, our generous benefactors were magnanimous enough to provide us one member of the French Special Operations Command's Dungeon Tactical Unit, who I'm told is a skilled Life Detection user. Apparently he can even narrow the direction and extend the distance of his detection at will."*

*"Just see that he doesn't get in our way," Ratel grunted.*

*"Captain. Our adversaries are dungeon pros. We have to even the odds."*

*"'Pros'? It's been three years. No one becomes a 'pro' at anything in three years." Ratel, who had more combat experience than any of them, practically spat out his words.*

*Facile could only shrug in agreement. "If it makes you feel any better, there are a few other groups down here today whose credentials appear to be closer to our own."*

*"Mercenaries?"*

*"Militaries, from the look of it."*

*"I'll be damned before I let any buzz-cut GI Boy Scouts walk away with our quarry."*

*"Well said."*

Facile called several names forward. Their orders: interference.

## Yoyogi Dungeon, Sixth Floor

As soon as we got to the sixth floor, we made our way to the woods where our target was supposed to live.

I was a little worried about the second digit of my kill count, but figured I couldn't be more than fourteen off. Trying to align it exactly off of slimes or other monsters at this point would have taken too much time.

"Now..." I commented. "How do we actually find the damn thing?"

The target was the Bittacus Chameleon—or at least that was its English name. Since the monster hadn't dropped an item in Japan yet, no one knew how its official Japanese name would display. Instead, we'd taken to referring to it by a pun name coming out roughly to "Chamimiclon." There was a reason for that.

The chameleonlike monster was apparently so adept at blending into its surroundings that you could search for a whole day and not find one. "Bittacus" usually referred to long-legged winged insects resembling crane flies, but it had originally been the name of a talking bird described by Ctesias of Cnidus in the fifth century BC.

The orb which had revealed the monster's English name had come from a dungeon in Madagascar. The skill was Impersonation. Its effect was—

"Pretty lucky there is actually an orb out there that allows you to change your voice."

"Lucky," Miyoshi responded, "but almost completely useless to your average explorer." *Well, one man's trash...* "Perfect for us though! The Phantom's voice was probably our biggest concern."

Having looked, it didn't seem like those magic voice changers you saw in movies that you could just hold up to your neck existed in real life—or at least, we hadn't been able to find any so far. I could have just tried deepening my voice, but I wasn't very confident about that. Miyoshi had even suggested cutting out comic-book speech bubbles and holding them up like protest signs to communicate. Needless to say, that hit the cutting room floor right away.

This wasn't a manga!

"Apparently they're even harder to find than the eleventh floor's lesser salamadoras," Miyoshi explained.

"Wha? But not even Life Detection could pick those guys up when they were camouflaged!"

"Then I guess we'll just have to rely on Cavall's built-in radar."

We weren't sure how, but somehow the Arthurs had managed to find a camouflaged lesser salamadora on one of our previous trips, like it was nothing at all. It might have been their sense of smell, but most dungeon monsters didn't appear to have any olfactory senses. They didn't seek prey or mate.

Then again, the Arthurs enjoyed eating human food just like we did, so maybe they had a sense of smell after all. Otherwise, how could they taste any flavors? *It might be worth experimenting with giving them something as fragrant as a can of Surströmming pickled herring.*

Despite how easily the Arthurs had searched out the lesser salamadora, searching for a quarry that dwelled in the treetops proved more difficult. We ran into quite a few wild boars and other ground-based creatures, but came up empty-handed with regard to the Bittacus Chameleon.

"Guess that wasn't the ticket after all," I commented after some time had passed.

"Do you think they're just that rare?"

"Maybe. Are we even in the right place?"

"If the JDA's map is correct."

The JDA published maps of each fully explored floor of a dungeon, including what monsters inhabited the area. According to the sixth floor's map, the chamimiclon inhabited this forested area.

We wandered around for ten more minutes, but to no avail.

"Hold on, let's give this a shot." I took out two orbs.

“Kei?”

“Here. Use this.”

“Life Detection?”

“We had two just sitting around. Why not? I’m going to see what happens when you stack them.”

Skeletons, wolves, kobolds—the list of monsters who could drop Life Detection went on. Each offered their own probabilities, but Making was the great equalizer. We could always get another if we wanted.

Plus, as we were understandably reluctant to put surveillance-based orbs up for auction, it was one of the orbs we were most likely to accidentally accumulate.

We raised our hands in our usual ritual and shouted “I reject my humanity!” at one another.

“So, what’s it like?” Miyoshi asked. “Double Life Detection?”

I tried scanning for signals around me, but the results were no different from before. However—

“I’m not really sure, but it feels like my range has increased?”

“Oh?”

Just then, I noticed a cluster of signals on the very periphery of my range.

“The hell?”

“What is it, Kei?”

“Miyoshi, are you picking anything up with your Life Detection?”

Miyoshi squinted. “Can’t say that I am.”

In other words, whoever it was was hovering just outside the range of normal Life Detection.

“Kei?”

“There’s a group of people hanging out at the very edge of my range. I’m not sure what they’re up to.”

“Someone following us?”

If so, it was someone frighteningly well-versed in Life Detection. They knew enough to follow us just outside of its range. To do so, they’d have to have some other kind of detection technique or equipment. However, we still didn’t know if they were ordinary explorers. If it were someplace as ordinarily deserted as the first floor or tenth floor at night, I might have been more immediately suspicious, but we were still in the relatively populated portion of the upper floors.

“Maybe, but we’re still in the single-digit levels. It could just be a coincidence too.” They didn’t seem to be getting in our way, so for now I decided to ignore them. “Still, no sign of the chamimiclon. On that note, in all the times we’ve been to the tenth floor, we’ve still never seen a monoeye. Are there really that many rare monsters?”

“Fine. This calls for drastic measures.”

“Uh?”

“Time to break out the secret weapon.”

“‘Secret weapon’? I’ll tell you right now, I’m not burning down the whole forest.”

According to Life Detection, there weren’t any other explorers around who would be caught up in the blaze. There was the group on the periphery, but they were far enough away. However, given our target was a specific orb, a forest-consuming conflagration would have been the wrong play. There would be no way to control which monster became the one hundredth kill that way.

“What do you take me for?”

“The world’s most dependable nutcase?”

“Exactly! I am dependable!” Miyoshi said proudly, ignoring the “nutcase” jab. “Ta-da!” She pulled some sort of strange machine out of Storage.

“What is this? A projector?”

“Not just any projector! A portable, ultrapowerful *UV light* projector!”

“What, are we sealing up some Pillar Men?”

“Hardy har. Listen, Kei, I don’t know if you keep up with biology, but some chameleons have fluorescent bones.”

“‘Fluorescent bones’?”

Apparently in January the previous year, a PhD student at the Bavarian State Collection for Zoology had published his findings in *Scientific Reports*, to widespread interest.<sup>(14)</sup> Certain chameleons were found to fluoresce brilliant blue when exposed to ultraviolet light—particularly the round bone plate at the front of their skulls. The fluorescent bones even shone through the skin.

Chameleons mostly lived in heavily wooded areas, just like the one we were in now. In the dim lighting and green and brown of the surrounding scenery, any spots of bright blue were sure to stand out.

“Wait, so does this work on all chameleons?” I asked. How were we sure it would affect our monster the same way?

“Not necessarily. But this particular monster got on everyone’s radar via a dungeon in Madagascar, right?” According to Miyoshi, the fluorescent chameleon used in the published study had been a variety common in Madagascar.

“Well,” I said, eyeing the projector, “might as well give it a try.”

Pointing the lens of the UV projector, which was attached to the end of a handheld stick, toward the forest before us, Miyoshi called out, “Here goes nothing!” and flipped the switch on.

“Holy—!” Illuminated by the UV projector, spots of fluorescent blue appeared throughout the canopy in front of us, as if we were looking at a sea of stars. “Are those...all of those...?”

“Why do you think they’re not attacking?” Miyoshi wondered out loud.

“Maybe they’re waiting for the forest to fill up with explorers, so they can stick their tongues down all at once.”

“Ew, yuck! Don’t even say that!” Miyoshi shuddered. “Take these things down!”

“On it.”



I stepped just a liiiiitle farther away—just in case—and fired a water lance into that canopy of fluorescent blue stars.

Due to their tough hides, I wasn't able to get the kill in one shot. But I knew I'd hit my target, because one of the chameleons revealed its true colors and let out a...human shriek?

*"Gyaaaaah!"*

*"What are these?! Some kind of mandragoras?! Give me a break!"*

One more shot reduced it to a cloud of black light, but each time I hit another chameleon, it let out yet another uncanny human wail. Some of them even spoke.

*"Stop it!"*

*"How could you?!"*

*"I want to liiive!"*

"Do these guys specialize in mental damage? I don't know how much more I can take."

"Imagine one of them creeping up on you in the dark! You'd turn around and there wouldn't be anyone there!"

"Imagine if you died and I heard one of those guys wailing 'Keeeeeii,' behind me. I think I'd have a heart attack on the spot."

*"Very kind of you..."*

If any explorers were nearby, the sounds the chameleons were letting off seemed like a misunderstanding waiting to happen. I took out seven more as soon as quickly as I could, until Making's window appeared.

Skill Orb: Impersonation | 1 / 40,000,000  
Skill Orb: Tongue Shot | 1 / 500,000,000  
Skill Orb: Camouflage | 1 / 1,200,000,000  
Skill Orb: Invisibility | 1 / 3,100,000,000

“What the hell?!”

“What is it? Is Impersonation on the list?”

“Yeah... And that’s not all.”

I passed Miyoshi a handwritten list of the orbs.

“Tongue Shot? Do you think that’s what it sounds like?” It looked like she was about to start laughing.

“Maybe. But like Self-Amputation and Self-Regeneration, we only have the species of the monster to go on. Maybe not the safest bet.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should give it a try.” Miyoshi pulled back on her forehead with her hand to affect a lizard-like appearance and darted her tongue in and out. “Might be pretty funny to see you shoot out a stretchy tongue as an attack.”

“Cut the jokes. This is serious.”

“You’re talking about this one, right?” She pointed to “Invisibility” on the paper.

“It’s a chameleon, so I get it dropping ‘Camouflage,’ but ‘Invisibility’?”

Camouflage was probably the ability to blend in with one’s surroundings to escape danger, exactly like the real animal could. But was Invisibility exactly what its name implied—the ability to become fully transparent?

“Careful. If it’s like the movies, you’ll be stuck that way and go insane,” Miyoshi commented.

“Never mind that. What’s even worse is that I’d have to run around naked. I can’t imagine it turns your clothes invisible too.”

“Hmm...” Miyoshi assessed. “Potentially useful, but I’m not sure it’s a complete one-stop espionage shop.”

“Right. Plenty of scanners and floor pressure sensors would still find you.”

Being invisible wouldn’t take away your body weight. Invisibility would only get you as far as your first attempt to break into a heavily guarded facility.

“Still good to know skills like this exist,” Miyoshi commented. “Maybe we’d

better take note and outfit the office with some pressure sensors of our own.”

“Nice. Secret base vibes increasing,” I smirked. I’d taken Miyoshi’s comment as a joke, but seeing her serious expression, maybe I shouldn’t have. “Still, one in three billion,” I commented. “It *is* tempting.”

“We have a mission, so let’s stick to the plan for now,” Miyoshi advised. “We can always come back to play orb investigation later.”

“Roger.”

I selected Impersonation and used it on the spot.

“Testing. Testing. Trying Miyoshi’s voice,” I intoned.

“Gwah! You sound just like me! That’s so weird. It’s like listening to a recording.”

“Not quite right for the Phantom though. I’ll need something deeper and more...refined?” I thought for a minute, trying to find the right voice. “Wait, shit!”

“What is it?”

“I just realized. This isn’t like a magic voice changer. It’s ‘Impersonation’! I can’t get it to make a voice I haven’t heard before.”

“So just pick someone you have. For a deep voice, how about Yuri Wichniakov?”

“Yuri Whonikov?”

“A Russian basso profundo. Never mind.”

“Sometimes I have no idea what you’re talking about. Couldn’t I just go with Simon?”

“Doesn’t that seem like asking for trouble? It’s your funeral.”

“Just this once.”

“Don’t come crying to me.”

Noting Miyoshi’s concerns, for right now I turned around and got walking, trying to make up for lost time. Saito’s team was probably going to spend the

night on the eighth floor near the meat skewer stand, as was customary for explorers heading to the tenth.

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*“What? Was that a scream just now?”* Alan Baugé, second lieutenant in the French military and Life Detection user dispatched to Ratel’s team, turned a long-distance microphone in the direction of the shout.

Among certain, more loquacious American members of Ratel’s team, Alan’s skills had earned him the nickname “Rubbernecker.”

The microphone wasn’t sensitive enough to pick up distant conversations, but it could pick up any bits and pieces spoken at a volume slightly higher than normal.

*“They’re saying...hold on. Let me see if I can get this straight.”* Alan repeated the phonetic phrase to a Japanese-speaking member of the team.

*“‘I give up my humanity,’”* the other member reported back.

*“Huh? Both of them are shouting that? Why?”*

*“Maybe some kind of transformation skill?”*

*“Like a werewolf?”*

*“Maybe they ate a Devil Fruit.”*

The team buzzed with jokes, although their faces betrayed their concern. The only way to know for sure what was happening was to get closer.

*“Wait, was that...another scream?”* It wasn’t just one. Suddenly it sounded like a chorus of cries had erupted from the forested area up ahead.

*“Someone’s calling for help.”*

*“What the hell? Are they massacring some other group up ahead?”*

The color had drained from the faces of nearly every team member as they listened to the mic feed over their headsets.

*“No,”* Alan replied. *“The only two signals up ahead are their own.”* Predicting their targets would be Life Detection users, Alan had worked to keep the group just slightly beyond the normal range. Using his own advanced variation, he

detected no other humans around.

*“Then what the hell were those voices?”*

*“No clue. It...doesn’t make any sense,”* Alan answered. Internally, all sorts of superstitions about the lost souls of the dungeons and vengeful spirits reared their heads. He didn’t voice them out loud. *“A bunch of screams in a spot where no one’s around. You don’t think, when they talked about rejecting humanity...?”*

*“Cut the superstitious crap. We report this to the captain and await further orders,”* Alan’s superior barked. Nothing was more dangerous on the battlefield than operating off of speculation. What they needed was accurate information, and machinelike adherence to any orders in pursuit of their goals.

*“Yes, sir!”*

Ultimately, Ratel ordered a thorough investigation of the area once the “geese” had flown. Moving cautiously forward, Alan’s group scanned the forest for traces of a battle or massacre. However, the only thing around them was a silent cage of wood and green leaves.

## **Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighth Floor**

*“You, uh...you’re a better explorer than you let on, huh?”*

*“Wha?”*

*“Girl, you’ve barely broken a sweat the whole day.”*

The team had arrived at the eighth floor, their final destination for the day, and Ryoko had hardly batted an eye at any of the dangers they’d passed.

*The monsters on the eighth floor of Yoyogi alone are already stronger than the ones on the first floor of Yokohama,* Tenko thought. Even he had been feeling on edge, mostly due to being unfamiliar with Yoyogi’s various monsters. But from what he’d heard, Ryoko had never set foot on these lower “pro” floors before.

*“Um...maybe I’m just not good at realizing when I’m in danger.”* Ryoko’s answer was self-effacing, but Tenko caught a hint of a smile.

“Methinks you doth protest too m—”

“Ah!”

Yoshida, ears perked to the contents of the conversation behind him, had been about to interject when Ryoko let out a small shout and quickly fired two arrows with hardly a second in between.

The team traced the arrows’ path through the air to where they embedded themselves—near simultaneously—into the throats of two forest wolves some forty meters away. The wolves howled in unison and toppled to the ground together.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Tenko’s eyes were wide as saucers.

Not only could he not have pulled off a stunt like that, he didn’t know a single explorer who could. Landing even one arrow at that speed and distance would have been difficult—two should have been nearly impossible. Yet someone had just done it, and it hadn’t been a pro or deep-floor regular, but an actress who claimed never to have gone beyond Yoyogi’s second floor.

Yoshida, before even registering his surprise, did a small fist pump in the air. Now he was more certain than ever that he’d made the right choice in his selection of hosts.

However, although she didn’t tell Tenko, what was actually keeping Ryoko calm was the knowledge that her backup party was keeping a watchful eye on her. As long as Miyoshi and Yoshimura were around, nothing bad would happen.

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“Whoa, that was the sickest thing I’ve ever seen. Kei, did you see that?”

We’d hurried to catch up to Saito’s team, finally doing so on the eighth floor near where they planned to set up camp. Miyoshi was watching them through a small pair of binoculars. “It was just like—what’s his name—the pretty elf guy from *Lord of the Rings*!”

*Lego— Never mind, I’m fairly sure all elves are pretty.*

For a right-handed archer to fire multiple arrows in quick succession,

ordinarily they'd need to be fired from the right side of the bow. Crossing the arrow over to the left, as one normally would to aim, took time. Of course, a certain handsome elf had managed to fire three arrows in quick succession—all from the left—in the films, but...hey, movie magic.

“She really *is* Artemis.”

“‘Artemis’?”

“Didn’t you know? That’s what they’re calling her on the web.”

“*More* aliases?! Since when?”

That was when Miyoshi let me know about what had occurred last week at Hikarigaoka, at an exhibition archery tournament. Apparently Saito had set some kind of truly impressive record.

“That was the day she was filming, right? It wasn’t just some kind of movie stunt?”

“Nope. Someone even uploaded footage. She was shooting for the film during lunch, doing a practice round.”

“A practice round? So she wasn’t even part of the real competition?”

“Nope, but that doesn’t change the fact that the score itself was the highest ever recorded.”

“Wait, what?!”

*A world record?! Why didn’t she say that from the start?!*

“Uh, are we in trouble? Seems like we might be in over our heads.”

“No use crying over spilled milk. Besides, I don’t think it’s necessarily a *bad* thing... Although, poor Saito. Since she’s not a registered federation athlete, apparently her record’s off the books.”

“Okay... I’ll wrap my head around this later. Anyway, why ‘Artemis’?”

Artemis was the ancient Greek goddess of wild animals and the hunt, Miyoshi explained. Rumor had it that Saito had honed her skills hunting goblins and wolves, drawing the comparison. Rather than forests and wild beasts, her domain had been dungeons, her prey the monsters therein.

“Dang. Wish I’d known earlier so I could have made fun of her the other day.”

“It is kind of funny, isn’t it? Despite the hype, all she’s actually done is smash slimes on the first floor of Yoyogi.”

“Well, at any rate, it doesn’t look like they’re in any trouble here. Let’s go on ahead and back them up on the tenth floor.”

“No complaints from me.”

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“Incredible, Saito! You’re absolutely unbelievable!” Yoshida fawned. “*Fwish! Whoosh!* Oooh, those shots were divine! You really are an Artemis like they say!”

“Er, thanks.” Ryoko smiled awkwardly. She wasn’t taking very well to the overly grandiose nickname.

“I don’t suppose you could do that again, could you? Jo, line up a good shot this time!”

“Gimme a break! I’m one cameraman!” Jo grunted. “I’ll do my best, but no promises with the speed she shoots at.”

Ryoko looked around. She’d been told to shoot but lacked a target. She was worried about using unnecessary arrows too. Even if she retrieved what she could, every arrow lost or damaged was an arrow that couldn’t be used on the tenth floor.

As Jo began capturing B-roll, an altogether different fear seized Ryoko. “*I am* just appearing in this one pilot, right?” She turned to Yoshida.

She wasn’t about to be dragged into a full production. Actors and actresses being replaced between the pilot and proper first episode of a drama wasn’t uncommon, but the more prominent her role in the pilot, the more she foresaw protests that there’d be no alternative if she tried to pull out. Certainly there was no one who could replicate her archery.

“I got it, I got it. Saito,” Yoshida responded, “it’s really just this one time. But since it is just the one, you want to make a good impression, don’t you?”

“I guess so...” *Ah well, it’s just like any other role,* she thought. Yoshimura and



Miyoshi would be watching from somewhere in the distance, so as long as she didn't encounter any sudden fatal attacks, like long-distance projectiles or magic beams striking a vital organ, she'd be fine. And she was unlikely to encounter any of those in the floors they were visiting for the shoot. Even if she did, if Aethlem's abilities were half of what Yoshimura and Miyoshi claimed, she had even less to worry about.

Although the group had spent more time than expected shooting, by the time they arrived at their campground—an area on the eighth floor known as the Turnspit—they were still just a bit ahead of schedule.

“Aaah, finally...” Yoshida said, panting.

“What are you talking about, ‘finally’?” Jo asked. “You’re the one who was all hyped up to do extra shoots.”

That was true, but now that they'd reached the day's destination, Yoshida felt all the enthusiasm drain from him. An entire day in the dungeon had taken a toll on his nerves, and he felt it all creep up on him at once now that they were done for the day. It was as if the tension and adrenaline that had been sustaining him had come rushing out like air from a punctured balloon.

“Wow. They really do sell meat skewers down here.” Ryoko took in the abnormal sight of the stand, located eight floors down in a dungeon. She sounded slightly relieved.

“That's why they call this place the Turnspit,” Yoshida responded lazily. Turnspit dogs, now extinct, had once been used in kitchens to run on wheels connected to contraptions to rotate meat skewers, as briskets cooked over open flames. In time the phrase “turnspit” had come to refer to the rotating skewer itself or to humans who tended them.

“Huh.”

“Try one if you're curious. We have plenty of time.” Yoshida plopped his backpack on the ground and promptly lay down on it like it was a pillow, spread-eagle on the ground. “Although don't get your hopes up...”



“Don’t get yer *whats* up?” a gruff voice called out from behind the stand. Known to explorers as “Jack”—taken from “roasting jack,” a spit-turning machine—the stand owner stared down Yoshida with a smirk. He then turned to Ryoko. “Um, are you Ryoko Saito by chance?”

Ryoko looked up from the skewers she’d been eying, surprised to hear her name. *Oh, shoot. Am I just too famous to go diving at all at this point?* she thought, cocking her head.

“A package for you,” the meat skewer stand owner said.

“Wha?”

The owner handed over a large quiver full of arrows. A note attached to it contained a message in Miyoshi’s handwriting: “Waste not, want not! You’re using arrows too fast!”

Ryoko scanned the area, grinning broadly. She was just getting worried about her dwindling arrow supply herself. She looked around for a hint of Yoshimura and Miyoshi, but there was no one in sight.

“Someone asked if I could pass this over to a woman with three men looking like they were doing a TV shoot. I didn’t expect it would be for *the* Artemis though. Uh, can I get an autograph?” Without missing a beat, Jack produced a sign board and marker from behind the meat stand.

*Does he always keep those on hand?* the group wondered simultaneously.

“What, you keep that on hand just in case Saito comes through? You some kind of stalker?” Tenko squinted at Jack.

“Ha ha, no, no. We just get a lotta famous folks coming through.”

However, even if a famous explorer came by, whether Jack tried to get an autograph depended on the individual. Many famous explorers were too skittish about misuse of their signature to ever volunteer one. However, a famous athlete or entertainer would be more likely to play along. Tenko, for instance, would have happily provided his signature. If only he’d been asked...

“Welp, might as well set up,” Tenko lamented as Ryoko readied her marker.

Among regular explorers, there were two particular products competing for

such extravagant praise as “the WDA’s greatest invention” or “the dungeons’ greatest contribution to human civilization.”

The first was an item that hadn’t relinquished its spot with the number one adoption rate among parties since the day it had first hit the markets—an item which nearly one hundred percent of parties headed deeper than the fifth floor carried.

It was a simple mechanism—one-touch, pop-up shielding to hide explorers from outside prying eyes. It was—

“I wonder why they call this thing the Loo,” Tenko said, getting ready to set up the device. He pulled what looked like a folded tent out from Jo’s backpack.

“It’s just ordinary English,” Yoshida answered. “Old name for toilets, usually used by women in slightly polite company.”

“Huh. You sure know a lot about shit, huh, Yoshida?”

Ignoring Tenko’s response, Yoshida added a bit more. Back in the Middle Ages, before houses had come equipped with proper toilets, people had disposed of waste by tossing the contents of chamber pots—bedpan-like objects—out of windows. To warn those below, they had apparently shouted “Gardylloo!”—or “Look out for water below!” The phrase had originally come from the French “Garde à l’eau,” but, at any rate, it was enough to make one wonder whether the WDA didn’t have a streak of black humor, comparing this dungeon solution to the rustic hygiene methods of yore.

Tenko unfolded the Loo, setting its four legs on the ground, then undid the string at its top so that the shielding sprung up to full height. That was all that was necessary for setup, producing a 1.6-meter-tall, one-meter-square stall. It didn’t come with any flooring, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, even though there was plenty of room left to beg. Lightweight and fragile, the Loo could easily be toppled over or broken. About its only selling point was that it provided a bit of privacy.

Upon release, it had been a popular mean-spirited prank to hoist up the stalls mid use, but threats to revoke the licenses of explorers caught doing so had quickly put an end to that.

“Wouldn’t ‘Emergency Toilet’ or something have worked?” Tenko commented.

“Probably a trademark concern,” Yoshida responded.

“Ah, right.”

Tenko now took out another package, removing something that looked like dehydrated soup stock.

The Loo had solved the issue of privacy, but it didn’t take care of cleanup. When roughing it, a simple hole in the ground would usually do the trick, but the dungeon’s indestructible floors called for a bit more ingenuity.

At first, explorers had made do with emergency portable toilets set up inside the Loo, but that meant extra luggage and required leaving unpleasant waste strewn about. And so, a second item had emerged as a perfect companion product, known simply as “Powder.” Among Japanese explorers, it more commonly went by “furikake,” taking its name from seasonings used to accent rice.

Nippon Shokubai, one of Japan’s premiere chemical manufacturing companies, had partnered with the JDA to create the product, using a combination of dungeon-based compounds and superabsorbent particles. Since its release, Powder had occupied the top sales spot among all explorers, reaching legendary sales rates. It could be said to be the world’s most successful product created using dungeon resources.

Its sole use was simple: sprinkling it on whatever waste had been left in the Loo would lead to the offending substance turning to powdery ash and disappearing.

Now that only left the problem of what to do with toilet paper, and that was a problem not yet solved. Experiments were ongoing—using cloth and paper made from dissolvable dungeon compounds, *etc.*

The quest to do one’s business in dungeons and clean up afterward: this simple hurdle had already pushed humanity thus far into the realm of new discoveries. Adversity was the breeding ground for innovation.

“I’ll leave some Powder inside, so help yourself if you need it.”

“Th-Thanks.”

Ryoko gave a slightly embarrassed response as she took a meat skewer from Jack in exchange for her autograph. Jo couldn't believe how much good footage he was getting. It was Yoshida's sudden shout from behind him that finally pried him from his viewfinder.

“Jo! Get a load of *that*!”

Jo whipped around. Yoshida had suddenly roused himself and was staring straight ahead in the direction of the staircase to the ninth floor.

“What is it?”

Jo peered in the same direction, and saw a tightly packed line of explorers descending to the floor below. Squinting, he could just make out that they were dressed in military gear.

A stocky man in the middle of the group barked orders to the others, which they followed in lockstep.

“That one their fearless leader?” Jo asked.

“Don't you smell it?” Yoshida inquired.

“Smell what? The meat skewers?”

“A scoop!”

“Uh?!”

“That's no ordinary group, Jo! Look at them!”

“Now hold on...” They might have been nothing ordinary, but all Jo could focus on was how ill-advised it seemed to get involved. Precisely *because* they didn't seem ordinary. They looked like bad news.

“It's not just a feeling,” Yoshida continued. “Those aren't high-ranking explorers.”

“And you know this...how?”

“They might look like professionals, but you can tell from their movement—they're rank amateurs when it comes to dungeons. Besides, I don't recognize them.”

Yoshida's claim to fame was being a self-proclaimed dungeon researcher. He had to at least be familiar with the names and faces of top-ranking explorers. The group in front of them was not among the professional explorer teams he was familiar with, but they were at least *some* kind of professionals, which in his mind was all the more reason to investigate. They were clearly on some sort of mission.

"Why don't we tail them? Just for a bit." Yoshida separated his thumb and pointer finger into an L shape and brought them up near his chin, fire in his eyes.

"What? But we were planning on stopping here for the night!"

"Those who let a big fish off the hook are destined to flounder in small ponds."

Yoshida was no flounder. Lady Luck was on their side, but she might not stay long. He stood up.

They still had three hours to sundown.

## **Yoyogi Dungeon, Ninth Floor**

"I wonder if Saito and the others are doing okay," Miyoshi mumbled.

Having slipped past the group on the eighth floor, Miyoshi and I were currently wandering around the central area of the ninth.

"They should already have made camp for the night," I answered. "And anyway, if anything happens, they have Aethlem."

Even if they ventured to the ninth floor, as long as no one got any insane ideas like trying to interview a colonial worm, they should have been okay. We'd decided to go to the tenth floor early and try to get another Darkness (VI) orb from a barghest, as well as obtain more magic crystals, while we had time.

"Although..." I muttered.

"What?" Apparently my uneasy demeanor was making Miyoshi concerned.

"Nothing. It's just...remember that group I mentioned on the sixth floor? The

ones I picked up just outside of normal Life Detection range?”

“They’re still following us, huh?”

“Looks like it.”

“But how would they be able to track us while remaining out of range like that?”

“They might have another multiple-orb-user, like me?”

“Doesn’t seem likely, but I guess...”

Life Detection was an incredibly useful skill. It *did* seem unlikely that an organization would allow two of its orbs to go to the same person, rather than spreading them around.

“Then maybe they have some kind of skill-boosting equipment?” I suggested.

“You mean like those PsyExpander rumors? Personally I never put much stock in them.”

“PsyExpanders” were a catchall word for the idea of skill-enhancers. True to form for the birthplace of manga and anime, certain enthusiast circles had actually tried to manufacture the fantastical-seeming equipment, but rather than any concrete successes, what attempts had given birth to were rumors and speculation that seemed to crop up in waves—that projects had been shut down, or had actually been completed in secret, *etc.* It was ripe for hot-button conspiracy talk—or maybe just hopeful talk—on the web.

“Ah, Kei! There’s something up ahead, to the right, in the woods! I’ll run up and check it out. You see what the guys behind us do.” Miyoshi took off from behind me, running at full speed. “When I’m just at the edge of your Life Detection range, I’ll veer right and take it out. Keep a look out for me!”

“Roger!”

Checking the group behind us with my own expanded Life Detection as I ran after Miyoshi, I noticed the group pick up speed in turn. “Gotcha.”

Up ahead, Miyoshi shot right, going after the monster she’d detected. That would keep her out of their range even after they rushed to catch up. “It’s a blood boar!” she called back.



Blood boars were larger versions of real-world boars—mean attitudes, tough hides, sharp tusks—with a name that reflected their penchant for tearing hapless explorers to shreds.

Up ahead, the blood boar launched into its typical, favored attack pattern—a straightforward, headlong charge—but was buffeted into the air by a black mass charging in from its side. Cavall had come out to play—his first time cutting loose in a while.

“Looks like I’m not needed here.”

Meanwhile, the group behind us had fanned out suspiciously left and right, as if searching for a signal. They still remained just outside of ordinary Life Detection range, careful to not move beyond it.

As Miyoshi and I walked back toward our main route, they hastily retreated in turn. Sure enough, they were conscious of being detected.

“What’d they do?”

“Fell back as soon as we did. They’re following us. And they’re probably some sort of pros.”

“So what do we do?”

“Nothing for now,” I shrugged. “They haven’t attacked us or anything, and they won’t be able to follow us through the tenth floor anyway?”

“Think they’ll try?”

“If they do, the zombies and skeletons will be picking them from their teeth come morning.”

They might have been used to scouting, but they didn’t appear to be overly experienced explorers. At least from my reading. The thing was, ever since I’d used the second Life Detection, the little light blips indicating nearby entities seemed to vary in terms of size and brightness, probably according to something like the strength or stats of the subject the dot represented. If my interpretation were correct, this bunch didn’t rank above intermediate.

“And you wouldn’t help them if it came to it?”

“What am I supposed to do? I’m an ordinary G Rank, remember?”

“And the Phantom?” Miyoshi grinned.

“Cut the jokes. Whatever happened to personal responsibility?”

“What indeed? I know you’re a big softie, after all.”

*That might be true, but it doesn’t mean I’d risk my life for a group who’s stalking us and maybe intends to actively harm us...does it?*

Miyoshi clasped her hands together behind her back, humming as she strolled toward the staircase to the tenth floor.

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“Yoshida. Let’s turn back. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Are you kidding me? Did you see that group move in and hang back just now? We’re definitely onto something big!”

“When the hell did you become a reporter?”

Ryoko and Tenko walked a bit farther behind, keeping their distance from the two arguing in front.

“Tenko. You really think this is all right?” Ryoko asked.

“Hard to say. The situation’s looking hairy. Maybe you oughta hang back by camp?”

“And you?”

“I’m...supposed to be on guard duty,” Tenko sighed.

“Hm.” Ryoko thought. “But I don’t really want to be back at the camp on my own either.”

She was famous, and an attractive lone woman in the dungeon at night. That was scary in its own way. There were some frightening explorers out there.

“That’s fair.”

“If it’s okay, I’ll keep going forward with you guys, then!”

Seeming as though they’d reached a conclusion, Yoshida and Jo pressed forward in the direction Tenko had indicated as leading to the tenth floor. Saito and Tenko followed after.

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“So we’ve got, what, another hour ’til sundown?” I stopped in front of the stairs to the tenth floor and took out our supply of Assimilation Drug. “Should we take it?”

“To tell you the truth, I’d kind of like to head down and just take the zombies head-on—let off some steam—buuuut that’s probably a little too conspicuous while we’re being followed.”

“This could be a good opportunity to test the effect of the Assimilation Drug at night too. We’ll be the guinea pigs.”

And so, in a rather conspicuous spot, in a blatantly conspicuous manner, we paused for a minute to use the Assimilation Drug before heading to the tenth floor.

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*“Captain. The geese are going down a floor. Repeat. The geese are going down a floor. Christ, the tenth floor at night and they don’t even seem worried. Do we pursue?”*

*“You got a reason we shouldn’t?”* Ratel grunted.

*“Are you joking? It’s the tenth floor. You’ve heard what it’s like at night.”*

The tenth floor at night was apparently what had led to the Chinese team’s near-death experience during the Otherworldly Language Comprehension incident.

*“I’ve looked it up. It’s all skeletons and zombies. You running scared of a bag of bones? Rotted bodies that couldn’t beat you in a three-legged race? Squish their heads, they go down. We have zombie gloves, plus knives and blackjacks and hammers, so take a blade in one hand for the ghouls and a club in the other hand for the skeletons. Don’t come crying to me. They’ll be easy pickings.”* Zombie gloves were much like dog-training gloves—long, thick arm coverings meant to prevent zombies’ teeth from penetrating the skin. The team had boots made from the same material. *“Just the two of ’em went down, right? No other accomplices?”* Ratel confirmed.

If the two members of D-Powers could hack the tenth floor alone, so could his team.

*“Yes, yes. Okay, very dramatic. I had a feeling it would come to this.”* Facile raised his hand, looking slightly put out. *This is exactly how Ratel earned his nickname*, he thought. The honey badger was famous for never backing down from a fight, or turning tail, but charging headlong into whatever danger lay ahead.

*“Guns?”* Facile asked.

*“Unless you’re bringing a tank, you might as well forget it. You’d run out of bullets ‘fore long. Not worth the weight.”*

*“Roger.”*

*“Captain!”* Now the team’s rather small-framed sniper raised his hand.

*“What is it, Shoot?”*

*“I’m bowing out. Doesn’t look like I’m built for this mission. I’m not much use hand to hand, and sniping won’t do any good against crowds.”*

Ratel glared at the man he’d called Shoot, but offered no objection. Freedom to participate or bow out of missions according to each man’s judgment was the benefit of life on Ratel’s team. However hard he pushed them, he wouldn’t force anyone into a battle they didn’t think they’d survive.

However, it was rare for anyone under him to drop out once a mission was already underway.

Facile stared at his boss, rather surprised by the implicit approval, and placed one hand on his waist and shook his head with a sigh.

*“My, my. Could the Basilisk of Cyrenaica be growing soft?”*

*“You want to die that badly? You know I’d be happy to oblige.”*

Ratel’s stare alone would have been enough to make most men’s blood run cold, but Facile only smiled. *“When I get tired of living, you’ll be the first person I call.”* He turned to the man who had backed out and told him to wait near the stairs with a rifle. He would be emergency backup—in the case of a retreat.

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“Yoshiiiiida...” Jo pleaded as he watched the group of soldiers equipping themselves in the distance.

There was only one hour left until sunset. Yoshida took a quick glance up at the sky, then turned to Jo. “We have the Assimilation Drug, right?”

“Are you kidding me?” They’d been planning on spending the evening gathering more, but did have the emergency rations they’d purchased in advance. Any they didn’t need could be sold afterward or used for future episodes if the dungeon program was picked up.

“Let’s get in closer,” Yoshida said. “Swap out your camera battery this time.”

“Yoshida.” Tenko spoke up. “It’s your choice if you want to go down there, but I can’t guarantee your safety.” No matter what, Tenko was coming back up if the sun went down. Spending a night on the tenth floor wasn’t in his contract.

“Don’t worry. We’ll only go as far as we can before nightfall. I have no intention of getting footage I’m not alive to bring back.”

“You mean that?” Tenko responded dubiously.

“Of course.”

Tenko shrugged and passed around the Assimilation Drug. “Now, apparently if a fight breaks out, as long as you don’t get involved, the undead won’t target you. Just stay calm and don’t make any sudden moves,” he cautioned. When he got to Ryoko, he added, “Listen, if it comes to it, don’t waste your arrows on skeletons. Focus on the zombies. Your only chance of taking down a bone bro with an arrow is landing a shot right through its eye socket so that you destroy the whole head. Otherwise, they’ll just keep coming. Aim for the ones with flesh.”

Ryoko listened silently, glancing down at her feet. Aethlem’s tail wagged back and forth in the shadows, patting the ground by her toes. “Counting on you, buddy,” she murmured in a voice too quiet for the others to hear.

*Well, in the meantime, I guess this is good practice for horror movies.* She took a deep breath and strapped on the leather gloves and leg guards Yoshimura had

given her as a countermeasure against zombies, along with attaching a simple mace to her waist. Coupled with the equipment, Yoshimura had given her a single piece of advice: “Don’t get bitten.”

## Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Floor

“Damn. Those guys really followed us down.”

Seven lights had come down from the ninth floor, six of which were headed our way.

“It’s almost sunset. Think they’ll be all right?” Miyoshi asked.

With the tenth floor’s steep elevation differences and winding paths, it would be a bit before they caught up to us. They were still a few hundred meters away.

“Shoot. They’re dungeon amateurs. They might not even be aware that the Assimilation Drug stops working at night.”

“If they were *total* amateurs, they wouldn’t have come here at all, right? You said it seemed like they were some kind of pros. So, what, like a military organization? Lots of combat but little dungeon experience?”

Whoever they were, judging from how successfully they’d dogged us, it at least seemed like they shouldn’t be in *immediate* trouble. However, that was when I began to notice lights around the floor moving in unison.

“Whoa.” I stopped dead in my tracks.

“What is it?”

“Those guys...are they not using the Assimilation Drug *at all*?”

“What?! But that’s crazy!”

The undead across the floor were active, heading toward our pursuers. Since there weren’t many monsters by the entrance, it had taken me a moment to notice.

This was too big a blunder to chalk up to them being beginners. Were they...just *that* confident?

“Maybe they’re like us, and zombies and skeletons just aren’t a big deal to them?” I suggested.

“Possibly. But then we better hope they’re not relying on guns.”

*That’s right.* No matter how well trained the users were, firearms alone wouldn’t hack it against the undead denizens of the tenth floor.

Then again, in all this time, we hadn’t heard a single round of gunfire.

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“Jesus...” Upon arriving at the tenth floor, Alan voiced his surprise.

“What is it? Something wrong?!” Ratel barked.

*“It’s just...the floor’s so filled with monsters. I can’t make out which of these lights are the targets. Hold on.”* The floor’s monsters were relatively stationary. He spotted two dots on the move. *“I’ve got them. Geese are flying due opposite the eleventh floor staircase. Plenty of monsters on the way. Exercise caution.”*

“You heard ‘im. Go!” Evidently neither the throngs of zombies on either side of the party nor Alan’s call for caution posed much concern for Ratel.

“Monsters moving within a fifty-meter radius,” Alan reported.

“Let ‘em move. A brisk walk’ll outrun them.”

“Do you really expect us to fight those things?” one of the soldiers asked, scrunching his nose.

“You ever hear of someone dying from stench?” Ratel shot back. “Maybe someone needs to go back up to the surface and have a nice, warm bowl of mutton stew.”

“N-No, sir. I’m fine, sir,” the soldier hastily responded.

Part of Ratel’s training for new recruits had been conducted at a camp where the only food was a warm, brown, mutton offal stew. It had taken everyone’s stomachs some time to settle in, they remembered with a sense of bile rising in their throats.

The team members fanned out around Ratel and Alan, striking down any undead who got close.

“Forty-eight minutes to sunset. Bros, time to get going while the going’s good.” Tenko’s face was devoid of its usual warmth. The tenth-floor sky was half dyed an ominous red.

“Got it. Now then, where did they...?” Jo swung his camera back and forth, scanning the horizon for some sign of the team they’d been following. Yoshida didn’t waste a second before pointing to a low hill to their left.

“That away.”

The hill was in the opposite direction of the eleventh-floor staircase.

“How do you know?”

“Didn’t you see the guard stationed by the stairs? He was staring in that direction.”

“Hmm...”

*It might be misdirection*, Tenko thought, but that didn’t bother him as long as they still got back in time. He stayed silent for now. They just had to get through the next few minutes without any major incidents.

“Okay, well, I’m not positive, but,” Yoshida clarified, “nothing ventured, nothing gained! At the very least, it doesn’t seem like it’ll be a waste of footage.” The area he had gestured to was one of rolling, gravestone-covered foothills, among which a multitude of zombies and skeletons swayed back and forth as if tethered to the ground.

“Yikes. Are all those things monsters?” Ryoko asked. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“Idle ones,” Tenko answered. “But if they all get triggered, it’s gonna be one heckuva fracas.”

“‘Fracas’?” Jo chuckled, looking at the distant undead through the camera zoom. “Man, this looks like a B-movie set.”

The slumped heads of the zombies and skeletons in his viewfinder suddenly lurched upward as the monsters began to take slow, deliberate steps. Lifting his head away in surprise, Jo saw that it wasn’t just one group—all the undead in



the area had started moving toward a common point.

“S-Something’s happening!” Ryoko gasped.

Tenko furrowed his brow, checking the path behind them. Thankfully the monsters in that direction hadn’t started moving yet. “We might want to get—”

“Jo! I knew it! There’s something happening over that hill!” Yoshida had grabbed Jo’s arm and was pulling him up the slope.

Tenko in turn grabbed Yoshida’s other arm. “Hold on. If you want to go, go, but don’t run. Not unless you want to get killed.” He cast a glance toward the undead.

Any sudden movements now could spell their doom. They had to do everything in their power to not draw their attention.

“Tch. Fine.” Curbing his excitement, Yoshida slowly walked to the top of the hill, keeping careful pace with the zombies nearby. However, when he got to the top, he lost his composure again. “Jo! Jo, get up here! Get filming!”

Tenko pushed Yoshida to the ground.

Below them was a group of six men, four surrounding two at their center, fighting off zombies as they got close. They were moving toward a clearing a little ways ahead.

“Awesome...” Jo mumbled, catching up and crouching behind them. He readied his camera. He wasn’t sure what this was all about, but he was certain that the knife skills on display below were out of the ordinary—what’s more, they seemed intended for one-on-one human combat.

“Whoa. They’re really takin’ em out,” Tenko commented.

“Tenko.” Yoshida seemed unable to pull his eyes away from the carnage. “How close do you think we can get?”

“Are you kiddin’ me?!” This was the time to be beating a retreat, not getting closer! Tenko assumed Yoshida meant “How close can we get before triggering the undead?” but in this situation any proximity was too much. “Are you crazy? Get it through your head, bro. This is gettin’ wild. We’re getting out of here.”

It wasn’t just the zombies that worried Tenko. No sane person would pick a

fight with the tenth-floor undead, not when doing so precluded any guarantee of a safe return, no matter how experienced the explorer. It wasn't worth it in terms of loot or drops either. He had to wonder just what had possessed the group below.

More and more undead were pouring into the valley.

As the center of the fighting kept moving, newly triggered undead in turn stirred up more inactive ones around them, spreading the radius of potential opponents.

This was one of the textbook patterns leading to tenth-floor deaths.

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*"Captain. Is it just me, or are the numbers getting a little—ngfh!—out of hand?"* Facile dodged a skeleton's blade, swinging back nimbly to crush its skull with his club.

*"Haven't we pasteurized enough of these guys already?! Where do they keep coming from?"*

*"I don't know if you're aware of this, fearless leader, but dungeon monsters respawn. That's why no matter how many we read their last rites, there's always a fresh supply."*

*"I thought respawn relocations were—hngrah!—supposed to be random."*

*"Yes, well..."* Facile used a break in the action to survey the landscape around them. More and more undead flooded in. *"Apparently triggered zombies trigger others. Looks like word about us's gotten out. We're the most popular party on the whole tenth floor."*

Ratel couldn't help but crack a smile at Facile's cavalier attitude.

*"Ratel! Let's turn back!"* Alan cried, stomping on the head of a zombie that had broken through the outer four's barrier. His special ability required a level of focus unavailable in their current situation. Without it, he was no better than the average Life Detection user.

*"I didn't know 'COS' stood for 'crying, overwhelmed sops,'"* Ratel spat, plunging his knife-wielding left hand into the head of a zombie that had bitten

into the glove on his right. COS was the abbreviation for France's Special Operations Command—Commandement des Opérations Spéciales.

*"I wouldn't be 'overwhelmed' if I didn't have to keep fighting these things off myself!"* Alan retorted, the insinuation that his current predicament was due to Ratel's team's lax security not going unnoticed. He whacked a zombie approaching from his left with an extendable baton, then whipped out a handgun from his holster and shot another through the head.

*"A USP?"* Ratel asked, identifying the gun. *"French SAS?"* [\(15\)](#)

*"Former,"* Alan responded.

Judging from Alan's movements, he was on par with Ratel's own men, if not better. Likely as a result of dungeon stats, Ratel determined. He reconsidered a place for dungeon-training on his own team moving forward.

That was, if they made it out alive.

Ratel began searching for an escape route.

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"Well, you had it right. They're some kind of pros no doubt." Miyoshi was observing the battle through a pair of binoculars from the safety of a nearby hill, crouched under a gnarled tree. I sat at the tree's roots. The undead on the tenth floor normally stuck by gravestones—at least when unprovoked. That left certain areas, like the one we'd holed up in, in the clear. "You should see this. They're going at it with just knives and clubs."

I was too busy trying to focus on the area in front of us with Life Detection. Concentrating left me unprotected, but I had Cavall with me for backup, and the Assimilation Drug would do its job for at least another several minutes.

"What about their reinforcements?" I asked. "Looks like four people are trying to meet up with them."

"Reinforcements'?"

"Yeah. I'm getting four readings from over by the top of that hill."

"Top of a hill..." Miyoshi repeated half-heartedly while scanning the horizon for something that matched my description. "Gwah!"

“What is it? You nearly gave me a heart attack! I thought maybe the Manor had shown up again.”

Miyoshi shook her head, lowering her binoculars. “Kei, those aren’t reinforcements. Take a look.”

“Huh?” Looking closer, it was obvious the undead weren’t going for the four on the hilltop. Maybe they were uninvolved. “But then...who are they?”

Miyoshi handed me the binoculars. “Here.”

I put the lenses up to my eyes. “What are they doing so close?!”

Lying prostrate on the hill just meters from the battle was none other than the Yoshida Exploration Squad: Saito’s filming party.

“Kei, looks like it’s time for your debut!” Miyoshi’s eyes lit up.

“Are you serious?!”

“It’s perfect! Today is January 15, the old Coming of Age Day! What better time to symbolize your transition into an adult?! Come ooon, it’s the perfect metaphor!”

“I’m already an adult!” I delivered a karate chop to Miyoshi’s head.

“Ouch!”

We were probably the only other explorers on the tenth floor. If that group had followed us down here, they’d be able to connect the dots to my appearance, and my cover would be blown in a second.

“You can’t just leave them there,” Miyoshi protested.

*Shoot, shoot, shoot.* There was no telling what could happen. The lives of Saito’s party members were about as secure as four candles in a breeze.

“But that group down there knows we came here.” I pointed to the six in the valley. “If I show up now, I might as well go around admitting I’m the Phantom!”

“Who says they’d even know you were already on the tenth floor? My Life Detection’s all but useless right now. What about yours?”

True, without concentrating, I couldn’t tell who was who—there were too many monsters around. Of course, if it would be different if I focused—but that

would have been impossible in the midst of combat.

“You can come in facing the exit to the eleventh floor and make it seem like you’ve just arrived from the ninth,” Miyoshi pointed out. “Or just appear out of nowhere. Even better. Like you appeared out of subspace.”

“And how am I supposed to pull that off?” One light cutting across the field running faster than all the zombies would stand out even to a distracted Life Detection-user.

“When you must fool all, call Cavall!”

*I see! The shadow pit! In that case, all we’ll need is a few magic crystals...*

“But if I do that, you won’t have any protection yourself,” I protested. We only had the one dog between us. Recalling Aethlem from Saito would just make the situation even worse.

“We have fifteen minutes until sunset. I can hang tight until then.”

“Fifteen minutes to go down there, save them, and come back. Are you sure I can pull this off?”

“Of course you can. If you can’t do it, who will?”

“Thanks for the pep talk, Admiral Sithole,” I smirked. [\(16\)](#) Then I let out a deep sigh. “Okay. Just a liiittle bit longer. They might still turn back by sunset. If they don’t, I’ll head down.”

“Are you serious?! Kei, what happens to me if you wait that long?!”

“I’ll set up Dolly behind this tree. If the sun goes down while I’m not here, get inside.” The hills and shade of the tree would hide Dolly from those below.

“Cavall, you good to go?”

Simply dropping large objects into the shadow pit was apparently easy work, but lugging them around was another story.

“Wruff?” He tilted his head.

*Right, got it. Negotiation tactics. You’re too big to act cute.*

“Okay, okay. How many?”

Cavall got close and pawed my arm three times.

“Three magic crystals?”

“Wrruff!”

I couldn't help but feel like I'd been taken for a ride, but beggars couldn't afford to be choosers. *But who ever heard of a human begging to a dog?!*

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“*Facile.*”

“*What? In case you hadn't noticed, Capitaine, I'm a bit preoccupied right now.*” Facile knocked back a zombie with each arm and kicked down a skeleton down with his right leg. He seemed almost like a child at play.

“*There's someone over on that hill. Have you noticed?*”

“*Bien sûr.*”

“*Radio Shoot. Tell him we need the attack going over there.*”

“*Ah. Divide and conquer, you mean?*”

“*Something like that. If we can send half over there, we should be able to get a clean path to the exit. We have plenty of ammo in reserve, and these necro-knuckleheads aren't winning any footraces.*” Any undead trailing them from behind would also be distracted by the four strangers on the hill.

“*A dirty tactic,*” chuckled Facile. “*I'll say a prayer for them on the way out.*”

He pushed a button on his headset and radioed a message to Shoot.

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“Yoshida, this is getting bad,” Tenko cautioned. “Time to unsubscribe, bro, for real.”

“Leave now? But, are you sure...are you sure we shouldn't be helping them?”

“H-Help them? F—” Tenko stammered. “Damn it, are you out of your mind?!”

Each time disaster struck, there was the perennial debate about the role of journalist and onlooker. If there was time to document the story, there was time to help, went a common argument. Yoshida couldn't deny that he *had*

thought about how much more tantalizing the footage would be if it were connected to a handful of notable deaths—but the sentiment of wanting to help was genuine. The intoxicating thought of the footage, excitement over the scene unfolding before him, his duty as a human being—these things all swirled in his head.

“B-But...” Yoshida protested.

“But nothing! Bro, you go running down there, you’re a dead man! Ever hear of going out for the wool and coming back shorn?”

“T-Tenko. Someone’s coming!” Ryoko cried out.

“Wha?!”

Turning around, Tenko saw someone running toward them from the direction of the exit. A group of lethargically moving undead trailed him.

“This is bad!” Tenko shouted at Yoshida. “Get back! Get up! Get up!”

“What? Just one more soul trying to get away, isn’t he?” Yoshida answered. “We should be cooperating.”

The man arrived on top of the hill, stopping just in front of the group. He looked down toward the undead in the valley—and fired.

“Ah, shoot!” Tenko cried.

“Ah, nice restraint!” Yoshida commented. “Good for clean footage for the airwaves.” Tenko was probably used to self-censorship to avoid demonetization, Yoshida figured.

“Exactly,” the new arrival—Shoot—replied to Tenko in Japanese, mouth twisted into a grin.

He pointed to Tenko with his index and middle fingers—“I’m watching you”—then turned his attention back to the valley and continued firing. Half of the undead in the valley began breaking away and clambering up the hill toward the sound of his shots.

“I— Wha—” Tenko didn’t get to finish before the sound of rushing wind whistled past his ears. Three zombies fell to the ground in front of him. Turning around, he saw Ryoko readying another arrow.

“Seems like we’re on the menu! Time to get out of here!” she shouted.

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*“Shoot got the message,”* Facile observed, hearing the shots from above. Zombies fell in conjunction with each crack of the sniper’s gun. A number of undead had turned around and were climbing out of the valley.

*“All right!”* Ratel bellowed. *“Follow ’em up and let ’em know who’s the prey now!”*

*“You don’t have to tell me twice!”*

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“Not...good...” Miyoshi shielded her eyes with her right hand as she peered out over the valley.

“They’re planning on using Saito’s group as decoys,” I observed.

“Looks like it. They didn’t even hesitate. These aren’t your ordinary military types.”

“Argh. I know I should save everyone I can, but...” Did I really have to save *them*? “If it comes to it, Aethlem can get Saito into the shadow pit, right?”

“He can, but I don’t know if he’ll bother with her crew.”

When we’d given him his mission, we’d only instructed that he look after Saito—we didn’t even know how many people she’d be diving with. *But I can’t just leave them...* “Can I?” I mumbled to myself.

“No way. It’s not in your character.”

“Were my thoughts leaking out again?”

“Nope. I just knew!”

“Thanks.” I smiled.

“Kei, see that roundabout down there? It almost looks like a Celtic cross. Perfect for making your debut.”

“Hold on, don’t *demons* normally appear from crossroads?”

“No time to get hung up on folklore! It’ll be good for an entrance. Get going!”



I set Dolly behind the tree. Given its size, ordinarily Miyoshi's Storage would have worked better, but the trailer contained perishables. Thus, we'd wound up deciding to store it in the time-stopping Vault.

"All right, Miyoshi. Get comfy in there. The sun's about to go down."

"Don't worry about me."

Next I took my costume out and did the fastest clothes-change routine of my life.

"Whoa. You're practically a quick-change artist now."

"I...might have been practicing."

"You always have managed to take even ridiculous things seriously. You could even give Ennosuke a run for his money!"

Ennosuke was a kabuki actor who had made a name for himself via incorporation of quick changes, levitation, and other gimmicks into his shows. Opinion on him was divided, but he was often credited as helping to make kabuki into more accessible entertainment.

"I mean, I'd better be practiced," I said. "Can't afford a wardrobe malfunction."

"On the other hand, do you know how funny it would be if you made a dramatic entrance only to realize you weren't wearing any pants?"

"Come on. Am I supposed to be a hero or a gag character? Cavall, here we go."

"Break a leg."

I gave a thumbs up and felt myself sink into the shadow pit.

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*"Captain, there's no end to these things. I'm dead tired."*

As long as Ratel's team kept moving, the zombies behind them had no chance of catching up, but that still left the ones encroaching from the sides, along with those changing targets back to the mercenaries as the group pushed their way up the hill.

Plus, the massive number of aggroed undead appeared to be aggroing others throughout the floor, causing a catastrophic chain reaction.

*“Who knew these guys worked this way? Damn it, we should have done more homework,”* Facile lamented. If they only had to worry about the undead closest by, the mission would have been a milk run.

*“You’re saying there was a problem with our intel?”*

*“Hey, don’t be too hard on us! It was an area inside a dungeon, and a deserted one at that! Those two ahead of us didn’t seem to be breaking any sweat!”*

The smiles hadn’t faded from Ratel and Facile’s faces. It was as if their danger circuits had switched off.

*“Well, at this point go for broke, huh? I have to tell you, Captain, I’m a bit beyond caring how many bodies I need to step over to make it out of here.”*

*“Me too,”* Ratel responded. *“On that note...”* He tossed a meaningful glance up to the top of the hill, a vicious grin spreading across his face. Nearby was a crossroads with a single, prominent gravestone in the middle. *“Four sitting ducks on a hill. Let’s double back to the crossroads, lose the undead there, then make a break for the exit. They can provide the distraction on the way out.”*

Relatively few undead lay ahead of the crossroads. Zigzagging toward it, Ratel’s group would undoubtedly trigger more, but as long as they kept moving, any newly awoken zombies wouldn’t pose any harm.

However, the same couldn’t be said for the group up on the hill when Ratel’s squadron led those undead toward them. One of them had a camera. *Ah well, no matter,* Ratel figured. Its footage would soon be lost...along with its operator.

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*“I-I was right about those guys. They’re bad news,”* Jo mumbled, voice trembling as he viewed Ratel and company through his lens.

Suddenly, to his horror, he realized one of the fighters had broken away and was rushing up the hill on his own, slicing a path through the zombies on his way.

“Jo,” Yoshida called, “what’s going o— Gaaah!”

Tenko’s Gurkha machete had cleaved in two the head of a zombie directly in front of Yoshida, catching it midlunge. Yoshida turned away to avoid the resulting splatter. The bodies of fallen zombies all dissipated into black light, but that didn’t make the moment they were killed any less unpleasant.

“Enough talk!” Tenko shouted. “Out! Now!”

“I’m running out of arrows!” Ryoko called. She was shooting three at a time at the zombies climbing up the hill.

*Great. What else could go wrong?* Tenko almost felt like laughing at how hopeless the situation was.

Just then he saw one of the military types try to grab Yoshida’s collar.

“Hey, what the hell?!” Tenko grabbed the man’s arm just before it reached the stunned TV talent.

After a second of stare-down, another man, thin and wiry—Facile—approached from behind the first man and swung at Tenko with a knife.

“Whoof!”

Tenko dodged, letting out only a faint grunt of surprise. Facile’s eyes widened.

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*He dodged it?!*

Facile had struck from a blind spot. He should have been able to sever an arm tendon with the first swing, then land a fatal blow—into the jugular, for example—on the return.

Yet this man, who didn’t look as though he had a day of combat experience in his life, had *dodged*?!

Figuring bait was bait, dead or alive, Facile had planned to run up ahead and leave some sliced explorer for the pursuing zombies. It was supposed to be simple, but now it looked as though he’d have to expend a *little* effort.

“Hey, watch where you’re swinging that, man!” Tenko shouted. “We don’t have time to be fighting each other!”

Facile quickly cut down two zombies approaching from either side, and, determining he still had time to kill the man in front of him, looked back with fire in his eyes.

“Tenko! Doesn’t look like Japanese is getting through to him!” Ryoko cried. “Maybe he doesn’t speak it!”

“Ah, dang. That’s right. Yoyogi’s gotten a lot of international teams lately! Hold on, let’s clear this up. *Hello. Nice. To. Meet. You!*”

Capturing Tenko’s clumsy greeting in the camera lens, with undead approaching from all sides, Jo let out a sigh. He didn’t know whether to admire his companion’s blissful ignorance, or curse himself that he’d been stuck working with it.

Still, Tenko was a C Rank explorer hardened by the boss floors of Yokohama. In contests of pure reflexes and strength, he wasn’t about to lose to any nonexplorer. On the other hand, Facile had years of combat experience and tactical knowledge.

Closing in tight with a concealed weapon in his left hand, Facile swung, this time finally—

Landing? Or so he thought.

He should have struck his opponent clean in the thigh. Instead, something had propelled his hand backward, accompanied by a sharp metallic clink.

“*Wha?!*”

He clutched his injured left arm with his right. It felt like he had been struck by something small and pellet-like, like slingshot ammo. He turned his gaze toward the direction of the attack, only half believing what he saw.

Alan was looking too, toward where a single bright blip of light had just appeared on Life Detection. He was no less dubious.

“*What the hell?*” Ratel peered forward.

There, atop the gravestone in the middle of the crossroads, framed by the setting sun against a bloodred sky, was the unmistakable silhouette of a man in a...cape?

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*Phew. Barely made it.*

Despite nailing my entrance, I was a sweaty mess. We might have been in a dungeon, but this was still Japan. I didn't expect to have to fend off an armed attack against Saito's crew the second I left the shadow pit. I didn't know these military types' story, but that didn't seem called for.

Thanks to having to fend off an attack, I hadn't had time to think about characterization. *Miyoshi...!*

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Yoshida practically could have cried in happiness. Before him was a scene that, were this fiction, would have seemed clichéd. But this was real life! Just when his party had been at their darkest hour, a...masked hero(?)...had appeared!

Clad in a white-tie tuxedo and white mask, the figure placed one hand atop its hat, a fedora with a pronounced divot, and stood up straight atop the grave, cape billowing in the wind.

One wrong move and he might have looked ridiculous, but somehow the effect landed. No one would deny that a hero had arrived.

Jo wondered if he wasn't just seeing things out of fear. He kept the camera rolling, but wouldn't have been at all surprised if, checking the footage later, it turned out he had only captured empty sky.



Ryoko, who had been steadily plugging away at zombies with her arrows, was caught off guard by the commotion. A zombie grabbed her arm from the side and prepared to clamp down.

“Eeeyah!”

As if responding to Ryoko’s scream, the mysterious figure atop the gravestone tossed back his cape with his left hand and raised his right into the air. A bright-blue, translucent circle spread out from his hand, encompassing the entire area, forming a perimeter containing both the film crew and mercenaries. No sooner had it appeared than all undead within its radius crumbled to dust, and shortly thereafter became black light.

Facile let out a small gasp. Beads of sweat shone on Ratel’s face.

“Bro...” Yoshida murmured.

As Ryoko cast her gaze up to the mysterious figure, a certain something caught her eye. “Don’t tell me...?”

Despite all that had happened, Ryoko couldn’t help but smile.

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*“Wh-Who the hell is this?”* Ratel demanded.

After a rather disapproving stare at the men gathered before him, the caped figure tucked his hat beneath his elbow and gave an affected bow as if courting a debutante at a ball.

*“I am the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness! Hear my oracle.”*

*“What?!”*

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness” was a phrase appearing in Isaiah 40:3 in the King James Version of the Old Testament. It had continued to find use in messages of hope delivered to any party in dire circumstances.

For once, Facile had nothing to offer besides dumbfounded exclamation. He was struck by the strange sensation that he’d been thrust onto an opera stage, with everyone knowing the lyrics but him.

Ratel was overcome by simultaneous urges to lash out and laugh. “The voice

of him that crieth in the wilderness?” What kind of savior complex did this bozo have? Next he’d be telling them to pave the way for God’s coming.

Fighting the urge to put a bullet straight between the masked man’s eyes, Ratel tried reasoning out the situation.

The technique the figure had shown off just now had been the real deal—all the zombies within the circle had died. Furthermore, the circle was lingering, forming a barrier that continued to burn away any zombies who attempted to get close. One by one as they approached, they continued to be vaporized and turn to black light. Whoever this person was, they possessed a technique that could kill hordes of undead just by raising one hand.

*“Alan.”* Ratel whispered.

*“Yes?”* Alan could have sworn he’d heard the masked man’s voice somewhere before and was trying to place it.

*“Can Victor do anything like that?”*

Victor was the world’s ninth—no, currently tenth—ranked explorer, the French Dungeon Tactical Unit’s ace in the hole.

*“No.”* Alan didn’t miss a beat.

In other words, the person in front of them was capable of things even top-ten explorers couldn’t manage.

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I’d figured some sort of old-world greeting would be helpful in establishing my persona, but hadn’t expected to be rushed into using one on the spot. I felt like I’d delivered the line well enough, but I couldn’t help but picture Miyoshi doubled over with laughter in the distance.

The group in front of me seemed to be speaking French. Were they French military? Then again, what kind of *military* would offer up civilians in a public dungeon like that?

*“So then, Mr. Savior Complex. What business do you have with us mortals?”* Ratel asked, sensing that the man could no doubt kill them all if he wanted but was too soft to do something like that.



*“Business? N-No business. I merely sensed you might be in danger and came to investigate. Of course, if I’m not needed...”*

*“You’re needed! Help me!”* A member of Saito’s crew, Haruki Yoshida, shouted, adding the last bit in English.

*Now hold on. At least make that “Help us!”*

*“You wish for...salvation?”*

*“Ah!”* he cried. *“You speak Japanese!”*

*“Then you shall have it.”*

I lifted up my right hand like Gabriel in Rembrandt or Rubens’s *Annunciation* (the 1628 edition, for Rubens), gesturing toward the sky.

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*“What’s happening?”*

*“Captain. That man asked him to save them, and apparently he said okay.”*

Shoot, taking charge of Japanese interpretation, relayed the situation to Ratel.

*“Oooh? So you’re saying he means to fight us off.”*

Ratel tightened his grip on his weapon and narrowed his eyes.

*“Hold on, I’m not saying—”*

Suddenly some kind of bright vortex began to swirl above the figure. The monsters wandering the edge of the circle he’d formed earlier turned to look at him en masse.

Ratel eyed the situation warily. *“What’s going on?”* he asked Facile.

*“You know,”* said Facile, *“I have absolutely no clue.”*

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The D-factors I was gathering around me caught the light of the ring I’d put on earlier, glistening in the sky like faintly glowing blue snowflakes. Only these snowflakes were deadly—they instantly vaporized any undead they happened to land upon. With all these luminous fairy lights, the scene grew increasingly

fantastical.

I'd already used Water Magic enough around dungeons for it to be conspicuous, so this time, I'd turned to some advanced uses of Ultimate Flame Magic. No massive inferno this time, though. Even if it wouldn't touch those inside the circle, Miyoshi was still too close.

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*"I-Incredible! I've never seen anything like it!"* Alan shouted.

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*Picture it like a ring of fire forming around those you care about. A holy flame, searing all evildoers, sending them back from whence they came. The all-purifying fires of an imploding star...*

*That's it!* While I'd focused on performing it, I came up with a name for the technique.

I shouted in English: *"Sirius Nova!"*

The spirals of light that had been spreading out around me let forth a sky-shattering sound, bursting into flames and expanding outward, until they'd burned their way through all the undead outside the first circle just as the earlier circle had taken out those nearby.

*"Wh-Wha?"*

The men were so stunned by the valley's sudden silence, they could hardly get a word out. Casting them a stern glance, I pointed the way toward the exit to the ninth floor.

*"Go now. The path...is cleared."* Then, in my attempt at a native pronunciation, I added, *"Au revoir."* I wrapped my cape around me, and disappeared into the dark.

To the shocked onlookers, it must have looked as though the cape, which ought to have contained its owner, was suddenly pulled down to the ground by a burst of increased gravity—revealing itself to be empty. The Phantom had vanished—without a trace.

*"Did he just...disappear?"*

*“No signal on Life Detection.”* The frustration was palpable in Alan’s voice.

*“What do you think, Captain? I’ve heard stories about men on the brink of death seeing illusions, but...”* Facile surveyed the valley, freshly clear of undead. *That, at least, was no illusion, regardless of how they explained everything else.*

*“Whatever,”* Ratel responded. *“Illusion or no illusion, we have a path out of here. Let’s get going.”*

*“What about them?”* Facile gestured to the four explorers who had been observing them from the hill.

Ratel threw his hands up, opened palmed. *“Not our problem. You heard Mr. Lord and Savior. No doubt he’s still watching from somewhere nearby.”* Glancing over, Ratel saw the group of bystanders already making a break for the exit. *“Plus, luckily they’re not too bright. That one seemed to think your...altercation was some kind of misunderstanding.”*

Alan kept staring at the gravestone where the figure had appeared earlier. *“Could that have been...no...the Phantom?”* A moniker flashed across his mind—that given to the anonymous Area 12 explorer who had suddenly shot up to number one, a figure about whom so little was known that their very existence was no more than a rumor.

However, he *knew* he had heard that voice somewhere before.

He paused the recording on his smartphone he’d begun part way through the encounter. Later, he could have Lieutenant Colonel Boulanger analyze it. For right now, he tucked his phone back in his pocket, and followed the rest of the group.

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*“Unbelievable! Did we get lucky or what?”* Yoshida was a cornucopia of conversation on their way back.

*“‘Unbelievable’? Bro, we almost bought it!”*

*“I know, I know! But still—it was...unbelievable!”* Apparently all the excitement had stripped Yoshida of his vocabulary. *“So, what do we do about him?”*

If they could get that mysterious phantom to give his consent to the footage, they'd be number one on the airwaves, guaranteed!

"All we know is that he's the real deal as far as explorers go," Jo said. "I've never seen anyone do something like that."

"Let's look into it as soon as we get back! Can't get started too early!"

"Yoshida, maybe we'd better leave well enough alone," Jo responded with a hint of worry. "Some things are...not meant to be trifled with, you know?" He paused and looked behind him as if someone might leap out any moment. "Plus, those military guys. One of them attacked Tenko. It seemed like he was out for blood."

"Did it?" Tenko said nonchalantly. "I dunno. It was a sharp blade, but I did grab his arm first. There was a lot going on in the battle."

Lacking any experience with combat outside of dungeon monsters, and thinking the man's attack had felt just a *little* too slow, Tenko couldn't rule out the possibility that it had been something like a warning shot.

"M-Maybe," Jo responded dubiously. "But it still feels like this is footage someone might not want getting out."

"Come now. It's not like anyone's going to attack us in the open on our way back."

"Yoshida. With all due respect, I think it's a little late to be ruling out *anything* at this point."

"Ah, w-well..."

"Better safe than sorry, right?"

"Hrmm... I-if you put it that way..."

After a bit of walking, and thankfully without any more confrontations with ambulatory corpses, the team reached the ninth-floor stairs.

Despite all they'd been through, Tenko couldn't help but note Ryoko's total ease. Here was someone who had never dived past the second floor—not even a career explorer, but an actress. Yet she was the most composed of any of them.

“Saito,” he said hesitantly. “You have any idea what happened back there?”

“Me? What do you mean?”

“You know...that hero guy.”

“Surely you don’t expect that I know him.”

“Come on. You can’t blame me for asking. He didn’t start moving until you cried out.”

That mysterious circle that had covered the battleground had spread out just after Ryoko screamed for help.

“Are you trying to implicate me in all this?” *He’s more observant than he lets on*, she noted. She was beginning to reassess Tenko—and already had a fairly high estimation of him as an explorer from his exchanges with Jo and Yoshida earlier that day.

“Let me guess,” he responded. “Your coach?”

*Bingo!* she thought. “Don’t be silly! My coach is just a G Rank...”

“Huh. Well, if you say so... But then, man... Who could it be?”

*You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.*

She had caught something earlier, glinting on the Phantom’s left hand: a small, ornate ring with something like tribal markings.

After the Phantom had left, she had found something else by her feet—a fully stocked quiver.

Sure, Aethlem could have left it there—it wasn’t out of the question. A long-distance gift from her backup party. But in her mind, it had been left by Yoshimura himself.

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“Pheeew.”

Stepping out of the shadow pit, I changed back into my original clothes, let out a deep sigh, and sank onto the sofa.

“Au revoir! Aaaaau revooooir!” Miyoshi giggled, making fun of my accent.

She'd been laughing so hard there were practically tears in her eyes.

"Hey! Let's see you trying to do any better! You're the one who told me to get into character!" I clasped my hands around Miyoshi's face, flashing a frightening grin.

"Ouch ouch ouch ouch! Okay, I get it! Jeez! Sometimes you forget your own strength, Mr. Stats. My head was liable to explode!"

Rubbing her temples, Miyoshi continued, "But if we're going to keep up with this, we should at least get you a white rose or something to leave behind."

"If that's the kind of nonsense you're packing your head with, maybe it's *better off* exploded." I gave a sheepish smile.

"I'll take a rain check on that one."

"Anyway, field report: this costume is super cringe. I thought I was going to die of embarrassment."

"That's why you have to *own* it! Although, I don't know. I think it works pretty well. The cringe character might put people off, but then—prominent figures have always been eccentrics."

"For example...?"

Well, either way, I hadn't had time to think about my character going in. Next time, I'd have to do more planning. *Maybe the strong, silent type...* I could avoid having to embarrass myself any further by talking.

"Still, it would have been pretty cool if I didn't know it was you under there. You sure left everyone in the field slack-jawed, and that magic show was something." She held her hand up. "*Sirius Nova!*"

*If you didn't know it was me...?!*

"About that," I responded. "The firepower is handy, but it has its downsides."

"Like what?"

"Having zero control over what monster rounds my kill count up to one hundred, for one."

"Ah. And we're supposed to be here for barghest-hunting too."

“I’ll just have to get everything back in line from scratch. Thankfully there’s no shortage of monsters around here.”

Undead had already started to repopulate the area I’d cleared, and there were plenty crawling around closer to Dolly. Since I’d focused the attack toward the exit, the undead in our direction had sustained minimal casualties.

With that, I cast my eyes toward the orb selection screen that had been hovering in front of my vision for the past minute or so.

Apparently I’d hit one hundred on my kill count twice over.

“Looks like they don’t overwrite each other if you stack them up, at least.”  
*That’s good to know.* “But shoot. It’s just two zombie drops.”

Skill Orb: Life Detection | 1/20,000,000  
Skill Orb: Rot | 1/400,000,000  
Skill Orb: Infection | 1/900,000,000

“Miyoshi, what do you think about ‘Rot’ or ‘Infection’?”

“I’ll pass. If those are passive effects, it’d be ‘Goodbye, humanity,’ for real.”

“Looks like about the only thing useful here is Life Detection then,” I replied.

“We could do worse. We could always give it to trainees, or find some other use for it.”

“For sure. Although I was thinking about getting the other orbs just to note their info with Appraisal.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about anyone rushing into using orbs like that without info. We can get them again later.”

I wasn’t as confident as Miyoshi. I could totally envision explorers deciding to use them as a last, desperate chance at getting a useful skill before the orbs’ twenty-four hours were up but...if we started accepting responsibility for that, there would be no end to it.

“All right. I read you.” I selected Life Detections and put the orbs into Vault.

Occasionally item drops rolled in near Miyoshi's feet. Cavall was still running wild outside.

Unfortunately, thanks to my quick disappearing act, I hadn't had time to collect any of the spoils from the valley. *Ah well*. It wouldn't have been very Phantomly if I had.

"Anyway, I'll go line up my kill count for the barghest," I offered dejectedly.

"Right. No telling when the next one will show up."

Barghests brought thick fog with them, precluding any other monster spawns in the area. By the time one showed up, it would be too late for adjustments.

"Don't remind me."

We needed the orb to succeed with Rokujo's training; I was determined to get one this trip.

"Er, but, after dinner," I said. "You know what they say about empty stomachs."

Miyoshi shoveled down her bento like a woman possessed and, without bothering with the traditional postmeal tea, tossed herself into her seat in front of the monitor screen and started shooting 2.5 centimeter iron balls outside. The only difference from the last time she'd done this was that after each successful kill, she dipped in and out of the shadow pit.

"How's my statting?" she asked.

I pulled up Making. Sure enough, she was getting the full, base amount of SP from each kill. I made an "okay" sign with my fingers, chopsticks still in my mouth.

Receiving the good news, Miyoshi began to blip in and out of existence even faster. Watching her almost hurt my eyes.

After eating, I popped my head out of the hatch on the top of the RV and—looking both ways for archers—began shooting out water lances here and there in the direction of Life Detection blips.

After a bit, another orb screen appeared. My last kill appeared to have been a skeleton.



Skill Orb: Life Detection | 1/20,000,000  
Skill Orb: Magic Resistance (I) | 1/700,000,000  
Skill Orb: Undying | 1/1,200,000,000

With that, I finally knew where my kill count sat. That offered some release.

After selecting Magic Resistance (I), I continued picking off monsters while keeping careful count in my head. I worked quickly. I had to be ready in case our quarry showed up.

Reaching ninety-nine, I breathed a sigh of relief and flopped myself onto the bunk bed. Now all I had to do now was pop my head out once in a while and check to make sure the fog hadn't rolled in.

Miyoshi kept at her shooting. She was using the shadow pit so quickly, it looked like she was flickering on and off, like a herky-jerky movie frame.

Finally, we heard the rattling of chains.

"Game time." I leaped down off the bunk bed. "Miyoshi, which way?"

"Six o'clock. Still some distance away."

All the back monitor video feeds displayed an encroaching wall of white fog.

"Looks like your average barghest. Not the Hound of Hecate variant."

"Makes sense. I guess that was suitably rare."

"Time check?"

"A quarter till nine."

"Thanks. I guess sticking around here for more orbs is out of the question, huh?" I still had to see Saito's party off tomorrow.

"If you want, I could follow the film crew, and you could stay here and gather orbs."

"Er, that's..."

"Are you worried?" Miyoshi teased. "Are you woorried?"

“N-No. It’s just—I can’t say I really want to hang around here by myself for three days.”

“Oh? I don’t know. Maybe you could ‘crieth out in the wilderness’ for company.”

I gave her a half-hearted grin.

Outside, the fog was closing in on Dolly.

“This way barghest comes,” Miyoshi commented.

“Lucky for us,” I responded. “This way we don’t need to track it down.”

And so we successfully obtained another Darkness Magic (VI).

## **January 16, 2019 (Wednesday)**

### **Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Floor**

The next morning, we woke up in Dolly and took turns in the shower, scrubbing a truly tumultuous night away, and sat down for some breakfast sandwiches. No one would ever have guessed that they’d been prepared in November of last year.

Even Miyoshi’s orange juice was ostensibly “fresh”—squeezed from Sicilian Brasiliano oranges. Brasilianos shipped a bit ahead of other Sicilian oranges, usually in mid-November each year. Blood orange juice brands, like the deep-red Tarocco, usually didn’t ship batches until mid-to late-December. Finding their taste middling, we’d decided to make a box we’d gotten into juice at the end of fall last year. Seeing Miyoshi down it as if it had just been pulled out of the fridge was a testament to the convenience of Vault’s time-stopping capabilities. *No one should live without it!*

Finishing off her juice, which was refreshing if a bit unexciting, Miyoshi nabbed a few breadcrumbs from her plate and stood up.

“Okay, shall we get started?” she asked.

First up: summoning our next member of Miyoshi’s menagerie.

“Hold on, Miyoshi,” I said. “You should have quite a bit of experience piled up.

Want me to distribute it first?”

“Hm? You just distributed my experience points four days ago.”

“That was before you went Rambo on zombies and skeletons using the Arthur method. They’re worth a lot more than slimes.” I checked Miyoshi’s SP accumulation from last night. “Whoa! Fifteen points already! What the hell?!” Her rank, too, had jumped up to 814, placing her solidly in the triple digits. “Remember when we said getting to the triple digits in just a few months would probably be impossible last year? I guess we were being overly pessimistic.”

“That was pre-Arthur method,” Miyoshi responded. “The game has changed.”

“Right. And Saito jumped into the upper triple digits recently... Rokujo might have to watch herself too.”

“‘Watch herself’?”

“Think about it. Another anonymous Area 12 explorer jumping into the upper rankings? How do you think people are going to respond?”

“Well, it’s not like anyone will know it’s her. It’ll be all right.”

“Here’s hoping...”

“Either way, what’s done is done. It’s not like you can bring your rank lower. Things without all remedy should be without regard.”

“Thank you, Lady Macbeth.”

“Verily.” Miyoshi gave an uneasy grin.

*Well, it’s like she says. What’s done is done.*

“At any rate, just dump it all into INT. It’ll be good for the summoning,” she requested.

“Are you serious? You want even *more* INT?”

Name: Azusa Miyoshi  
SP: 15.411  
HP: 29.15  
MP: 136.75 (205.125)

STR: [-] 10 [+]  
VIT: [-] 11 [+]  
INT: [-] 80 [+]  
AGI: [-] 25 [+] [37.5]  
DEX: [-] 25 [+]  
LUC: [-] 10 [+]

“I told you! Min-max characters for life!”

“And I told you, this’ll be *your* life if you don’t get serious!”

Still, I couldn’t help but laugh. We were just circling the drain of an argument we’d had the other day. Miyoshi was going to Miyoshi.

“Look, I’ll bring your AGI up to a nice round 30, and you can min-max the rest all you want.”

“Much obliged.”

Name: Azusa Miyoshi  
SP: 0.411  
HP: 29.90  
MP: 153.50 (230.25)  
STR: [-] 10 [+]  
VIT: [-] 11 [+]  
INT: [-] 90 [+]  
AGI: [-] 30 [+] [45]  
DEX: [-] 25 [+]  
LUC: [-] 10 [+]

“Okay, time to put that buffed-up INT to work!”

We stepped into the open air, where Miyoshi raised a hand skyward.

“Summon! Glas!” she shouted.

It was nearly identical to the pose she’d used for her summonings before. And just like last time, a sigil appeared on our floor. Yep, everything was just like—

*Last time?!*

“Wh-What the hell?!”

“Wrriff! Wrriff!”

Sitting there, on the ground, was a dog about the size of a slightly large Pomeranian, like a golden-eyed Schipperke. [\(17\)](#)

“I-Is that what I think it is?” I asked.

Miyoshi was practically shaking. “It’s...so...cuuuute!” She looked like she was going to break. “Kei, it worked!”

“Hold on. ‘Worked’?”

I suddenly flashed back with mounting dread to something Miyoshi had said during our pre-boot camp visit to our wheat field: *“Ah, but if there were little Cavalls running around, they’d probably be even fluffier and soooo cute! I can just imagine their little yips!”*

“Kei, you theorized that the dungeon, like, reads people’s minds for certain effects, right?”

“Yeeeeeah...” *Uh-oh. I don’t like where this is going.*

“So I thought...maybe summoning works the same way!”

“And to test it you imagined...a puppy?”

“Isn’t he cute?!”

Ruffling her new pup—Glas, apparently—Miyoshi picked him up.

“Okay,” I said, eyeing him. “But we have things hellhounds are supposed to do. Can he fight? Can he trade places with the others?”

I had a feeling that if any of the larger Arthurs tried to change places with him, their necks would snap as soon as they tried to pass through Glas’s collar.

“You worry too much. Cuteness conquers all.”

“Miyoshi! What did we even come here for?!”



Responding to my frustration, Glas leaped out of Miyoshi's hands, ran over to me, and placed his front paws defiantly on my foot. Looking up at me with a gaze that seemed to dare me to watch what happened next, he bolted off.

"Whoa!"

Zippering forward at a speed I could hardly track, he hurled himself at a skeleton a few meters away, crushing its skull and twirling around in the air before landing in a perfect dismount. He turned around. *How's that?*

Just then the sound of an iron ball rupturing the ground nearby sent him leaping into the air. Miyoshi had sniped a zombie which had been crawling along the ground near the pup. Glas looked back at us, seeming, if anything, ashamed that he hadn't noticed and gotten the monster himself.

"Okay, so he's not guarding Buckingham Palace anytime soon," Miyoshi said. "Here Glas!"

Glas walked at a slow pace back to Miyoshi. She scratched him behind the ears and under his chin.

*Now hold on, you two! This place is still crawling with monsters, and you're acting like we're at a dog park!*

"By the way! Kei!"

"What?"

"I just thought of a way he can switch places!" She thrust her hand above her head again.

"Hold on! You're not seriously—?!"

"Summon! Gleisad!"

No sooner had she finished speaking than another sigil had appeared on the ground, followed by another hellpup happily wagging its tail—a carbon copy in size and appearance of Glas.

"Wriff!" it barked happily.

Miyoshi examined her handiwork, petting Gleisad on the head.

"Maybe I should have made Glessic small too," she mumbled.

*Glessic, Glas, and Gleisad. What, are they some kind of set?!*

Sooner or later I'd really have to read that *Mabinogion* or whatever everyone was talking about. Recently it felt like I was the only one who was in the dark.

## **Yokohama Dungeon, Second Floor**

A burst of machine gun fire lit the dark basement floor.

A few meters away, the monster—a giant spider—took two hundred thousand joules of force to its carapace, bursting into what seemed to be nearly as many pieces. Ten or so seconds later, the pieces dissipated into a familiar black light, a chest appearing in the middle of the dungeon floor.

*"The 12.7-millimeter barrel... More than enough for Yokohama's second level."* Primus Koopman, of Falcon Industries' Porter Development Unit, reviewed the combat data they'd gathered, eyes poring over his tablet screen.

*"We had the twenty millimeter scheduled next, but what do you think? Should we call it off, chief?"* Nora Bergman, the team's sole female member, felt the weight lift from her shoulders now that the combat test was done. She brushed some straggling hairs out of her eyes, readjusting her helmet.

*"No, keep it going,"* Primus replied. *"The higher-ups want each variation comba proved."*

Kai Lytle, known by other team members for his brash attitude, tapped the visor of his helmet with a pen. *"If you can even call this combat,"* he responded.

No sooner had the boss monster shown up than it had been turned to so much Swiss cheese by the porter. That was promising, but in the field, a combat scenario like this—patiently waiting for a set spawn, the weapon's sights prealigned—was less than unlikely.

*"Why don't we just take this baby down one floor and clear out the area that even the JSDF couldn't hack?"* Kai prodded.

Primus was glad to see his team in good spirits, but this was still a dungeon, he would have to remind them. And dungeons demanded caution, even in the most controlled circumstances. *"You've heard those rumors about dungeons*



*learning from combat and adapting responses into their bosses and unique monsters, right? So don't get overconfident. Hurry up and load the next turret."*

Thick doors guarded the entrance to Yokohama Dungeon. As the doors would have been eaten by slimes had they been placed inside, however, they lay a short distance in front of the dungeon itself. Between the doors and the dungeon entrance was a space several meters long occupied by outlets, LAN cables, and various forms of equipment.

Originally, the space had been intended for use as a JSDF base during exploration. However, the floor, consisting only of a boss room, with a single monster respawning every four hours, also made it the perfect testing grounds for new equipment. Or at least that had been Primus's thinking while scouting testing sites for the porters.

Falcon Industries had dispatched several units and a bundle of testing equipment to the location to finish the final adjustments of the prototypes through live trials. If they could clear this round of testing, they planned to debut the devices at the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi while all the international teams were still present.

The world's eyes were on that floor now, and a successful showing there would be worth more than a grand-stage unveiling at the biggest trade show in the world.

Kai ushered the porter, still equipped with its 12.7-millimeter turret, to the service area by the entrance, where a stone-faced engineer began prepping it for the 20-millimeter test.

*"Guillaume! The M2 alone was already overkill! And you're going with that?"*  
Kai could hardly contain his surprise.

The armament Guillaume had selected for the 20-millimeter test was their highest-powered option—the suspension-mounted Vulcan. An improved variant of the M197 short barrel designed to reduce jams, the Vulcan had been specially designed for porter-mounted use.

Guillaume nodded. *"Data is second to divinity,"* he said curtly.

*"If you say so..."*

The approach to the porter's guns had been the subject of much debate and discussion. Weight and framework issues had forced the team to go with a mounted machine gun, but it had caused the porter's insectile legs to tumble off-balance each time the turret rotated, making it harder to pilot the unit. Some had been in favor of a single, static gun protruding from the front of the porter, to be aimed by rotating the unit's entire upper body.

After nearly two hours of preparations and checks, Kai left Guillaume to complete the last step—installation of the porter's ammunition feed—and returned to where Primus sat.

*"Chief. The M197 is ready. Are we sure this test is worthwhile?"*

*"They'll be on our asses if we don't."*

*"Shall I add the 12.7-millimeter in case of a jam?"*

*"Please."*

*"Will do. By the way, we have to decide on a proper name before the debut."*

Various development names had been pitched for the project. Ultimately they'd gone with "porter"—it was simple and clear, even if it lacked a certain ambience.

*"Good luck. The Hringhorni, Naglfar, and Skíðblaðnir factions are still warring,"* Nora cut in.

*"The what factions?"* Primus asked.

*"Names of ships from Norse mythology. The ships of the gods."*

*"Some people are too dramatic. Might as well name it the Ark."*

*"We'll never get that one. The French team already claimed it for their version."*

Having completed his own final checks, Primus grabbed a paper cup of coffee, holding it with one hand.

*"The Renault Group-military codevelopment project?"*

*"The same."* The rival development's French name, "Arche," corresponded to "Ark" in English. *"Everyone's getting in on the divine boat naming schemes these*

days.”

*“Well, I can’t say I don’t get it.”*

In a sense they were divine ships, designed to ferry explorers deep into the innermost reaches of the dungeons. The porters provided both shelter and transport.

Twelve minutes remained until the boss would respawn. The team had only to bide their time.

*“Incidentally, what was in the treasure chest from the last one?”* Kai asked.

*“Ah, it was—”*

Primus began to explain what had been in the chest, when a spark of electricity descended onto the middle of the floor.

*“What the hell was that?”* Primus asked. Perhaps the respawn had come early, he thought. But this was a bit too flashy for the boss monsters around here. *“Porter, stand by!”* he shouted.

*“Standing by!”*

*“Twenty-millimeter, target locked!”*

A cluster of light particles steadily grew and congregated in front of the team—taking form. Multiple necks springing from a single serpentine trunk, a silhouette like a multiheaded snake.

*“A H-Hydra?!”*

*“Couldn’t be,”* Primus said. *“I’ve never heard anything about big shot monsters like that showing up on this floor. Besides, it seems almost too—”*

*“Skinny?”*

*“What the hell is it...?”*

There was nothing more dangerous than an unknown dungeon monster. Especially when it came to bosses, you always wanted the devil you knew.

*“Stay calm,”* Primus ordered. *“Just fire the second it’s fully spawned.”*

*“R-Right.”*

The moment the particles of light formed something resembling a solid body, the three rotating barrels of the porter's mounted armament sprung into action. Besieged by a hail of gunfire released from the turret, just a dozen meters away, the creature's necks burst at their shared base.

*"Well, that was anticlimactic."* The sweat was still thick on Kai's brow. *"Fucker gave me a scare."*

*"Reminds me of a phrase they have in Japan. Many ghosts clawing at windows are actually just dried branches."*

*"A bit like the boy who cried wolf."*

Nora couldn't take her eyes off the creature's body. Something was bothering her. *"Is this...a cleaner?"* she asked.

Given the need to run unaccompanied tests in the dungeon, the members of Falcon Industries' dungeon-related research units were all explorers in their own right. They were familiar with the dungeons' fauna.

The cleaners to which Nora referred were specialized scavenger monsters, looking like giant flatworms with lamprey-like concentric teeth. Their favorite foods included items left behind in the dungeons—and people.

*"But then why does it have multiple heads?"* Nora continued. Interest piqued, she crept closer.

*"Nora, wait!"* Primus shouted.

*"What?"*

*"The body! Why has the body not disappeared?"*

Ordinarily dungeon monsters, bosses or otherwise, dissipated into globules of black light after they'd been felled. However, mysteriously, the cleaner still lay where it had fallen, in seven pieces. It shouldn't still be alive, but the fact that its body hadn't faded indicated the possibility. Nora looked around nervously.

*"Come on, Chief,"* Kai responded. *"It's snake salad right now. There's no way it survi—"*

Suddenly the scraps on the floor began wiggling, accompanied by a sickening, wet, slimy sound.

*“They’re...regenerating?!”*

The seven pieces around Nora had suddenly transformed themselves into seven smaller copies.

*“Give me a fuckin’ break!”* Seeing the smaller cleaners begin to move, Kai ran back to the porter, switched it to combat mode, and initiated AI targeting. That was when a magic sigil appeared in the middle of the dungeon floor. *“Aw, shit!”*

The creature was known as a “cleaner” for a reason—its summoning technique. Vast numbers of slimes would pour forth from the sigils it created and begin consuming anything and everything nearby.

The porter, sensors triggered, began firing again in bursts.

*“Kai! Shut it off! Shut it off! You’re just making more of them!”*

*“But—”*

*“We’re outmatched. Leave the porter! Go!”*

Shutting the machine off via remote, the four team members ran together toward the exit. Thankfully, despite the second floor’s boss room status, the exit didn’t lock.

Kai looked back just once. The slimes had enveloped the porter, and the pieces of the cleaner blown off by the latest round of burst fire had again formed smaller, wriggling copies, patrolling the back of the floor.

## **Asakusa, Minato City**

Yoshida’s squad emerged from the dungeon, skipping their wrap-up party and hastily going their separate ways.

Or rather, Ryoko went her separate way. The other three headed straight for Jo’s studio together. They could hardly keep themselves away from the tantalizing footage they’d just captured.

*“Unbelievable...”* Yoshida rubbed his jaw, going over the raw footage. *“Absolutely unbelievable.”*

The footage was pure gold. A time slot was a done deal. More than that, they

probably had a bona fide hit on their hands.

If anything worried Yoshida now, it was the identity of the mysterious strangers they'd encountered. He couldn't help but feel like they'd stumbled across something they ought not to have uncovered. Maybe—just maybe—ratings were the least of their concerns.

“What's got me is this guy.” Jo paused on the arrival of the mysterious masked figure. Cloaked in shadow, tinges of fading sunlight hugged his edges.

“Even most single digits would struggle to pull off what homeboy did,” Tenko said admiringly.

“Hold on.” Something about Tenko's statement caught Yoshida's attention. “If he's actually above Victor, that leaves Natalie at rank eight. Now, she's out for obvious reasons. Rank seven is Joshua—renowned as more of a scout. I've never heard anything about him launching field-wiping magic attacks. His build doesn't fit rank six's King Salmon or rank five's Mason either...”

“So that leaves... Who, Dmitrij at rank two? Simon at rank three? Oh, but there's also Huang at rank four or William at rank six...” Jo mused to himself. “Now, that attack *did* look like light magic, but...”

Only one name came to mind for famous users of light magic—the Witch of Campbell, Ella Alcott.

“Ella's out on the same grounds as Natalie,” Yoshida responded. “We can at least be certain that's a man. Shoot...if we could just eliminate a few other possibilities, we could say for sure that we had footage of the Phantom.”

“What do you mean?” Jo asked. “The outfit isn't proof enough?”

“If anything,” Yoshida answered, “it screams ‘Phantom’ a bit *too* much. In a ‘methinks the lady doth protest too much’ kind of way.” The figure in the footage looked like he'd walked straight off the stage of an Andrew Lloyd Webber production. It was *too* perfect. It reeked of a daytime talk show stunt. “Hold on!” Yoshida added. “There's still the voice.”

What more powerful a tool could there be for pinpointing an individual than their voice? All they had to do was compare their recording of “the Phantom” to interviews with high-ranking explorers. It was so obvious.

“Tenko, you wouldn’t happen to know anyone in the National Research Institute of Police Science, would you?”

The National Research Institute of Police Science handled forensic test requests from police agencies nationwide. Its renowned Information Sciences Lab Three, within the Fourth Forensic Sciences Department, set the standard for voice analyses.

“Uh, that’s a little much, don’t you think?” Jo asked. “Couldn’t we just contract a private company?”

“Try it,” Yoshida replied. “We’d need a first-rate lab, and they’ll charge you a million yen for the privilege. Now, if you’re willing to pay that out of pocket before we even have a program budget...”

“Me? Why me? No thanks. I’ll pass. I like having a roof over my head.”

“Hm, there’s also facial recognition,” Yoshida added.

“The technology’s come a long way. We might be able to get something with it,” Jo admitted. “Although it can be a touchy subject, legally.”

“It’s not like we’re scanning the face of the person himself,” Yoshida replied. “We’d just be reverse-imaging searching from the footage. No legal problems. Although not as reliable as having the real thing.”

“I’ll prep the screenshot.” Jo shrugged.

“Now, that just leaves *these* fellows. I wonder if they’re anybody famous.” Yoshida gestured to the combat-gear-clad group in the footage. “Someone in international journalism might have leads. Jo?”

“I’ll ask around, but don’t get your hopes up.”

Yoshida patted Jo on the shoulder a bit too enthusiastically, as if to thank him for a job well done. “Now, while you’re at it, be sure to make a few encrypted backups,” he added in a serious tone.

“Don’t tell me—you’re worried some clandestine organization might come and try to erase it?” Jo grinned nervously.

“O-Of course not.” Yoshida’s smile was unconvincing. “Anyway, Tenko. I’m going to have to ask you to hold off on posting any of this to your channel. You

understand how it is, right?”

“Sure, sure. That’s the biz. But...” Tenko paused for a minute, lost in thought.  
“Yoshi-bro.”

“Yo-wha?”

“I was just thinking...why not let me upload just a screenshot and let the Tenkonation surveillance network do the rest?” He pointed to the picture of the masked figure still on the screen.

“The *what?*”

“Listen! Bro was coming from inside Yoyogi. You don’t think someone else saw a guy in a Tuxedo Mask cosplay going through?”

“N-No. That would be...unlikely,” Yoshida acquiesced.

“Come on. If this goes viral—and I’m guaranteeing it well—all of Yoyogi will be our eyes and ears.”

“Ha ha ha.” Despite his laugh, Yoshida sensed the frightening power behind Tenko’s words. Certainly, one must not underestimate the social media information machine. These days everyone carried a smartphone, and every smartphone had a camera app. About the only way to guarantee you weren’t in anyone’s photo roll was to move to a desert island. Especially if you stood out...

“S-Still, I don’t kn—” Yoshida began.

“Come on. I won’t reveal anything about our adventure. Just a little shout-out like ‘Hey, I saw this weird guy in Yoyogi. Anybody know who he is?’ *Something’s* bound to turn up on the guy.”

“I suppose...”

“Plus,” Tenko leaned in, “maybe we could bag him for the show.”

At that last bit, Yoshida’s heart skipped a beat.

**January 17th, 2019 (Thursday)**  
**United Nations Building**  
**New York, New York**



Due to the international cooperation that had led to its creation, the WDA operated its headquarters out of two floors within the United Nations Building in New York. However, construction of a new headquarters on an empty plot directly south of the building was nearing completion, with preparations for the move underway. [\(18\)](#)

Befitting its important role in public safety, the WDA's Department of Food Administration—the DFA—maintained two branch locations in addition to its office at WDA Headquarters: one in White Oak, Maryland, the other neighboring Parco Ducale in Parma, Italy—connected to the American Food and Drug Administration and European Food Safety Authority, respectively.

In its main location overlooking the East River, from an upper floor of the United Nations Headquarters, chief DFA researcher Nathan Argyle scanned the materials in front of him once, twice, and then, for good measure, one additional time. *“You have got be fucking kidding me,”* he mumbled under his breath.

The materials had been sent from the WDA's patent office. And here it was more than two months early for April Fool's.

*“Mr. Argyle?”* his assistant, Silkie Subway, inquired, overhearing her boss's remonstrance.

*“Silkie”* was her nickname. She had earned it via her achromatic, monotone outfits and ethereal appearance, the name sticking ever since adolescence. Perhaps if she'd been more vocal about her dislike for it, she could have avoided the name following her, but she was too polite for that.

Instead she'd grown into it, slowly but surely. These days, staring at her reflection in the bleary light of morning following an all-nighter, she would simply take in her appearance and think, *“Yep, that's Silkie.”*

Nathan, equally careful about how he chose his words, had taken to calling her the somewhat stilted *“Ms. Subway”* when they'd first met, and even now clung to the formal address, unwilling to course correct. She liked it—hearing him call her *“Ms. Subway”* in that halting way of his—and had taken to playfully calling him *“Mr. Argyle”* in return. The rest of the office staff, observing their exchanges, were convinced the two didn't get along—but nothing could have

been further from the truth. They were two test tubes in a centrifuge.

*“It’s just...this request we got from the patent office...”*

*“From the patent office? Now that’s rare.”*

Safety inspections for edible materials produced by dungeons fell under their office, but that jurisdiction hadn’t produced much work up to now. Drop items seemingly intended for human consumption had been few and far between.

Most expected that their true work would begin with the food drops on higher floors unlocked by reaching five hundred million D-Card-holding explorers. At present, a chunk of their work consisted of taking requests from other departments, in combination with their own research.

*“Ms. Subway, remind me of your major again? Molecular biology?”*

*“That’s correct.”*

*“Then you might find this interesting.”*

Nathan reopened the document he’d been examining on his tablet, passing the device to Silkie. It was a typical patent application.

*“‘D-Factors’?”* Silkie asked.

*“That’s right. The mechanism for—ah, well, according to the applicants, dungeons possess a specialized management system—one that applies to every object in them.”*

*“Well, that seems rather obvious, doesn’t it? If you count monster respawns as object management.”*

*“Yes, but according to them, it’s really rather gamelike. Ah, well, read it and you’ll see. Anyway, the um, source of that management system is in a particle they call D-Factors.”*

*“‘Source’?”* Silkie inquired.

Was it something like electricity? Or, no, even a computer company wouldn’t call the forces that powered their machines a “source.” Did the management function run by something like an AI? Even that wouldn’t explain these “factors.”

*“Hold on,” she said. “Are these the ‘magic particles’ that dungeon inscription referred to?”*

There were already theories that magic abilities functioned via manipulation of these so-called magic particles, and research into the subject was ostensibly underway.

The problem was that users of magic skills were few and far between, and the bulk of them were high-ranking explorers. Given the egos and abilities involved, push the subject or their abilities too far out of their comfort zone, and even the research team might not walk away unharmed. And so progress, as far as Silkie had heard, had more or less stalled out—not even a single brain probe experiment had been run.

*“According to the application, these D-Factors control more than just magic attacks. They constitute everything in the dungeons. They can be configured and reconfigured at will.”*

*“That’s...certainly a theory,”* Silkie offered.

Nathan gave a knowing smile. *That’s insane*, his assistant had wanted to say. *“If the writing in this application is to be believed, dungeons manipulate these D-Factors into all sorts of objects. One could infer that they could form essentially anything—miracle matter. Of course that...”*

*“Completely and utterly strains belief?”* Silkie finished his sentence.

*“Well, er, yes. I would think so. But if it completely strained belief, would it have wound up on my desk, furthermore marked ‘urgent,’ and ‘top priority’? Knowing the patent office, I doubt they’d break out that kind of treatment even for an application from the US president.”*

In other words, there had to be some credence underpinning the applicants’ findings. And now the patent office wanted further proof. What was more, it appeared they wanted it right away. That was where the DFA came in.

As to why, it didn’t take more than the briefest glance over the remainder of the application to figure that out.

*“So why?”* Silkie asked. *“Why did this come to us? I could understand it going to the Dungeon Department, but...?”*

*“Keep reading,” Nathan urged. “It isn’t a patent for D-Factors. That’s all foreword—an explanation for a process.”*

Silkie ran her eyes over the rest of the explanation on D-Factors, then scrolled to the next page.

Arriving at what appeared to be the abstract, she nearly dropped the tablet. *“‘Dungeonizing’?”*

Nathan rubbed his hands together. *“Bingo. A process by which objects from outside the dungeons’ jurisdiction can be brought within it.”*

*“Wait. So you mean— We could even potentially respawn dead humans?!”* Silkie’s eyes widened.

*“Potentially.”* Nathan gave a slight shrug. Despite his long years spent cultivating the image of a consummate adult, Nathan had been raised on British punk—alongside bands like The Damned and Sex Pistols. Nathan’s good grades and penchant for academics had hidden the fact that he was more likely to sympathize with Holden Caulfield than Steven Hawking. When he had first heard punk in his adolescence, it felt like he’d been called home.

Ah, he’d been the perfect little phony.

The world swooned over an album featuring a naked, infant Spencer Elden floating after a dollar bill on a fishing line in a pool, and as the music world was buffeted by perhaps the greatest disconnect between artist and audience in rock history, Nathan was left asking, *“Grunge? What’s grunge? It’s for posers who can’t keep up with punk.”* He’d boasted of his own musical purity to anyone who would listen. [\(19\)](#)

And so the years passed. His grades had been good—good enough to get a free ride into any school he wanted. And he found that he could conform himself to fit society’s mold, stacking up one career accomplishment after another to arrive at his current post. He had fit his square peg into a round hole.

But now the exuberance of that rebellious youth was starting to come back to him—the coolheaded facade was fading fast. Faced with this pure...fantasy—he could find no other word for it—his horizon once again teemed with glistening possibilities. Possibility—the word more alluring to him than the strongest drug,

the most tantalizing sexual tryst. It was like a bundle of pure pheromones, reaching its tendrils around him. It was his captor, and he its willing prisoner.

*“What do you think?” he asked. “Would a respawned human retain the original’s memories?”*

*“Well, I—”* Silkie paused, struggling for a hypothesis. She murmured a vague affirmative, and kept reading. There was a second patent application attached to the first. *“What the—”* Her voice trailed off again.

*“So now you see,”* Nathan said with a smile, *“the reason it came to us.”*

The second patent request was accompanied by a thesis titled *The Respawning of Intra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops and the Status Change of Outra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops*. It even had independent assessments attached.

*“Ms. Subway,”* Nathan said.

*“Y-Yes?”*

*“I need you to book me a plane ticket. Right away.”*

*“To Tokyo?”* She hadn’t lifted her eyes from the page.

*“Naturally. According to the report, there’s a field of dungeonized crops in Japan.”*

*“But you can’t just leave your other work half finished. I sincerely doubt you’ll receive permission from higher up.”*

*“Gh! I’ll get it all done quickly. Just get the trip booked. I’ll have it all done today!”* He launched himself back into his work, turning to a nearby stack of papers. *“Dammit, we’re on the brink of a historical breakthrough. How can we, as scientists, as humans, sit back and not verify it with our own eyes? Chance, you see, is like a bird. Fail to catch it, and it flies away. Incidentally, Ms. Subway, I assume you’re coming as well?”*

He hadn’t even looked up as he asked. There was only one answer she could give.

**Honan-dori Avenue, Nishi-Shinjuku**

Despite its name, Shinjuku Central Park, sitting in front of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, was situated more on the front leg of the elephant or anteater or tapir that was the silhouette of Shinjuku City when viewed on a map. Within one corner of that leg was Kumano Shrine, said to protect the whole of Shinjuku.

And not far from the shrine, on the seventh floor of a nondescript building with a Family Mart convenience store on its first, one David Jean Pierre Garcia watched the separate elements of the audio recording he'd brought in for analysis be traced along the screen of a small sonograph—a sound-analyzing device—each element its own bright color.

*“Comparing it to the samples you brought in,”* explained a rather nervous looking man in a lab coat, *“it appears to match number three.”*

The technician wasn't sure how David had ramrodded his analysis request past the company's sizable backlog, but he appeared to be a man of some influence and means. *What a bother.* He'd prefer to avoid getting mixed up in scandals if he could.

*“‘Appears’?”*

*“We can say with ninety-five percent certainty, to put a number on it. With ninety-five percent certainty, those two are the same person.”*

Sample number three had been an interview conducted with Simon Gershwin shortly after the capture of Evans Dungeon. David had brought in as many clips of high-ranking explorers as he could.

*“Ninety-five percent...”* David repeated.

*“Now, is it possible it's just a very convincing impression? Yes. Or, it would be, but voices have a...timbre, shall we say...that's nearly impossible to replicate without identical vocal tracts. The area spanning from the vocal cords to the lips.”* The technician gestured from the middle of his throat to the tip of his lips with his hand.

*“And what of it?”*

*“Well, no matter how talented an impressionist, that timbre from the vocal tract is hard to fake. Even that being a match is what led to such high certainty.”*

*"I see..."*

*"Now, taking a guess at the individual's stature—"*

*"You can even guess their stature?!"*

*"Ah, yes. With some margin for error. You see, generally a voice deepens with the physical size of the voice box, and that corresponds to other physical attributes. In addition, we can also glean some information, based on elements affected by that vocal tract, about their facial appearance."*

*"And how certain are you about that info?"*

*"Relatively. Relatively, but—within standard margins for error, I assure you. Now, the standard deviation is—"*

*"So, pretty certain?"* David assessed.

Interrupted, the technician pushed up his glasses with the middle finger of his left hand, giving up on his explanation, and nodded. *"Height around 180 to 185 centimeters, Spanish origin or grew up among Spanish speakers. Physically fit, medium build."*

*"How do you know the bit about where he was raised?"*

*"Pronunciation. The uvular consonants like the French r are flawless, but there's a bit of a rolling r in the English. In addition, certain s's come off with a bit of a lisp."*

*"And?"*

*"It's typical of Spanish—the country, not the language—accents."*

*"Intriguing..."*

Based on what David had heard from Ratel, only the top-ranking explorers would have the chops to pull off the feats they'd seen. That alone would have put Simon in the running, but now the voice analysis had narrowed it down to one man.

However, according to Shoot's report, the man also spoke perfect Japanese. That caught David off guard. He had never heard anything about Simon speaking the language, let alone fluently.

*“How did the Japanese sound? Any other hints?”*

*“Strangely, almost native. No hint of a foreign accent. However, other elements point to it being the same speaker.”*

That said, they had too little to go on, the technician explained. He would be unable to say more.

Leaving the lab, David climbed into the back seat of a car and opened the lab report he'd been given. Taken in combination with what he'd heard from Ratel, a picture was starting to form.

*“That rat Simon. He had a sunset rendezvous with D-Powers on the tenth floor.”*

It was the perfect cover. Focus was centered on the Mining hunt occurring on the eighteenth, and hardly anyone ventured to the tenth floor near sunset anyway. The pieces fit together too well.

*“And if I wanted someplace where there wouldn't be any cameras on me—no possibility of hidden mics, what better place than the inside of a dungeon?”*

That meant Simon also had motive. Nearly all official organizations employing explorers asked for submission of orb and item drops, barring extenuating circumstances. Such submissions usually yielded high bonuses—but he doubted high enough to compete with the windfalls of D-Powers' logic-defying auctions.

*“A back-channel trade!”*

David's lips curled into a grin.

If he played his cards right, he could have the world's third-ranked explorer in his pocket.

Of course all he needed from Simon was the occasional healing skill orb—Super Recovery—or potion-styled healing items. Other than that, the explorer could do as he pleased. David was not a greedy man. He knew when to not overplay his hand. That was the difference between successful and destitute gamblers—the ability to control one's own urges.

David knew that all too well.



# Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters

## Ichigaya

“Chief! We have a situation!”

Assistant Section Manager Noritake Sakai burst into Saiga’s office after a quick knock. It was nearly the end of the work day. The National Center Tests began the day after tomorrow.

Sakai had been sent as a JDA dispatch to talks with the national examination committee. Something must have happened, Saiga figured. He furrowed his brow.

“What is it?” Saiga gestured Sakai to a nearby seat. “You get into it with Okamoto from Secondary Sales again?” He grinned.

Yasunobu Okamoto of the Secondary Sales Division had been appointed to the exam response task force as the lead for the upcoming university-specific secondary exams. He and Sakai had been known to butt heads.

“Never mind that right now!” Sakai snapped. “This is bigger!”

“‘Bigger’?” Saiga was taken aback.

Preparations for the National Center Tests on the nineteenth were one of the JDA’s top priorities. What could be bigger than that?

“J-Just look at this report.” Sakai removed a stack of papers from his bag. “It’s...” Sakai’s voice dropped several decibels. “Yokohama.”

“‘Yokohama’?”

*Oh, great. What have those D-linquents done now?* Saiga wondered, his eyes scanning the report. However, this might have been the one time he wished he’d been right about the culprits.

“Falcon Industries, huh?” The accident had occurred on Yokohama’s second floor during a thirty-six-hour rental period for Falcon Industries’ equipment tests. “A multiheaded cleaner?”

Cleaners were unpleasant creatures, but not particularly dangerous ones. Ordinarily they functioned only as harmless scavengers.

“It was a variant. Some number of heads above average.”

Still, however strong it might have been spawning as a boss on Yokohama’s second floor, it was only a matter of leaving it alone until some suitably strong explorer wandered over. Saiga didn’t understand the urgency. Unless—

He turned the page, and there a certain phrase jumped out at him.

“Reproduction via fission?!” According to the report, each splintered fragment of the creature could regenerate into an identical copy, just like a real-world planarian. And that wasn’t all. “Plus reproduction at a rate of once every four to six hours? Every four to six hours, these things are doubling by themselves?!”

“The porters Falcon Industries left on the other side of the entrance kept broadcasting their camera feeds. We clocked the reproduction times off the footage. If this keeps up, we’ll be looking at 4,096 cleaners in three days.”

To make matters worse, each cleaner had the ability to summon eight slimes. Now Saiga understood the need for action.

“What’s the volume of Yokohama’s second floor?” Saiga asked. “Do we have an estimate?”

The dungeon inscriptions had alluded to the possibility of something called a “stampede.” If ever such an event was likely, it would be due to circumstances like these. Given that no stampede had yet been recorded, Saiga held out some dim hope that they might be able to avoid one here as well. However...

Unlike Yoyogi, Yokohama Dungeon conformed to a preexisting architectural structure. Its space was more limited, finite. If the monster count became too great for the capacity of the floor—

“They’re all going to be shoved to the entrance...” Saiga mumbled under his breath.

“The doors to the second basement floor parking garage are reinforced and should buy us some time. However, the staircase...”

The doors to each dungeon floor opened out into the staircase. They couldn’t be pushed open from the staircase side. Like all dungeon architecture, they

were thought to be indestructible, with no way to break them down. That meant the monsters would keep being pushed upward, without filling the other floors. The upshot was obvious.

“So they’ll be pushed up to and out the first-floor entrance,” Saiga concluded grimly. And from there, into the outside world. “Has Falcon Industries initiated a response?” Saiga leaned back, crossing his arms, brow furrowed.

“What *can* they do? Begging the USDSF to dispatch Team Simon would be about the most they could accomplish. According to what they’ve told us, even twenty-millimeter rounds just broke off pieces of the monster—conventional attacks would only make the situation worse.”

“And us?” Saiga asked, disgruntled.

“We can put a request for explorer recruitment in through Commercial Affairs, but...will that even accomplish anything?”

Each piece of the monster was capable of reforming into a new identical copy. An individual cleaner might have been nothing on its own—even a boss variant—but it was that regenerative ability that had them on the ropes. It was hard to imagine a more troublesome ability if they tried.

And soon it wouldn’t just be Yokohama Dungeon’s problem, but the outside world’s—Yokohama, the entire Kanto region, perhaps all of Japan...and beyond? There was no telling if the multiplying would stop. With each entity able to summon eight slimes, it might not be long before these gelatinous jokers covered the whole of the Earth.

“And if we just lit up the Yokohama Dungeon Building like a New Year bonfire? Sacrificed it for the good of Japan?” Cleaners were known to have a weakness to fire. They could pour napalm through the entrance gate before the area was overrun. However, if the entrance to the dungeon was still connected to the floors above by ventilation or elevator shafts, it might lead to some damage to the areas above. “Get a layout of the building—one that shows any connection points between the basement and upper floors. Also, tell Falcon to do what they can. Finally, get in touch with the Dungeon Agency and JSDF and request their formal cooperation. Remember, this isn’t just Yokohama on the line, but possibly all of Japan. I have my own connections, but running things

through proper channels still matters.”

“On it, sir!” Sakai vanished from the room.

“Hmph. Who knew ‘anything’ would come up so quickly?” Saiga mused to himself, recalling his phone call with Terasawa. “Still, Yokohama...”

As of a few days ago, ownership of the first floor had transferred to D-Powers. He imagined they’d want to hear about this. If a stampede headed out the first floor into the rest of Sakuragicho, they’d be neck deep in no-fault liability claims.

Saiga sank back into his chair and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He’d meant to call Terasawa, but instead found himself bringing up the number for one dedicated supervisor on his screen.

This might just be the chance for a certain party to ingratiate themselves even further with the JDA, even moreso than when they’d retrieved Otherworldly Language Comprehension. After all, regardless of any patriotic or heroic aspirations, they shared a mutual interest in the outcome. He tapped “call” and waited.

## **Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office**

“K-K-Keeei!”

“What?” I asked. “Doesn’t a busy high-school author like yourself have some books to be writing? Especially because you’re off school?”

Getting curious about the character behind Miyoshi’s press-conference cosplay, I’d recently started...ahem, reading...the source. It was a very specific dig.

“First of all, wow. Nenene Sumiregawa? No one’s going to get that. Second of all, no. Have you seen Tenko’s latest video?!”

Ever since watching our first video of his following our meet-up the other day, we’d been watching his stuff from time to time. We were awaiting our Tenkonation citizenship cards.

“No. Did he already post another one? It’s been basically one a day lately.

Maybe he got permission to use something from the pilot shoot.” Miyoshi thrust a tablet into my hands. Taking a peek at the screen, I felt a headache coming on. “Oh, come oooon!”

There, on the screen, was a blurry picture of me decked out in a cape and formal getup and striking a pose like Tuxedo Mask.

“Not a bad photo, huh! He really captured your good side! The sunset casting half of your face in shadow? Very chiaroscuro. Very cool.”

“You’re not taking this very seriously.”

“Of course not!” She smiled. “It’s not me!”

*You could show a little concern for your fellow man!*

“So what’s the story?” I asked. I’d only been handed the screenshot. I had no context for the video.

“Um, if I had to sum it up in a few words,” Miyoshi offered, “you’re basically a wanted man.”

“What?! Tenko put a price on my head?!”

“Ahem. ‘Hey, Tenkonation, I saw this total clown show down on the tenth floor of Yoyogi. Who goes dungeon diving in *this*? Now I *got* to know what’s up with him. Anybody got deets, leave it ’em in the comments below.’ End quote.”

“Wha?”

Still, it’s not like I’d been diving in costume. No one else should have seen me. I intimated as much to Miyoshi.

“Maybe not, but it’s what comes next that’s the problem,” Miyoshi replied.

“‘What comes next’?”

“Yep. Unfortunately, the writing is on the wall: you’re going to be a *huge* meme.”

“Aw, man!”

I knew all too well how fast the internet picked up on new trends. I’d already been on the other side of it once after our curry pilgrimage with Asha.

“Well, at least for as long as interest holds,” Miyoshi added.

“Prospect of it waning?”

“Weather says: soon enough.”

Unfortunately anything posted in that time would be there for all posterity.

“Well, it’s not like I’ll be diving in costume. I should be all right.”

“That picture isn’t exactly HD either, but you can never underestimate a dedicated internet sleuth. I imagine someone *could* track you down, if they wanted—”

“Stop it!”

“But don’t worry!” *Oh, no.* I saw it. This was the start of Miyoshi’s no-good I-have-an-idea face. “First, we mass-produce Phantom costumes!”

“Are you out of our mind?”

Mass-produce costumes? This wasn’t the first time Miyoshi had offered some cockamamie scheme to get us out of a pinch, but how and why she arrived at the conclusions she did remained a mystery to me.

“Listen, Kei. Where would a *wise man* hide a leaf? In a forest!”

“Okay, okay.” Her chosen quote had come from G.K. Chesterton’s “Sign of the Broken Sword,” one of the author’s Father Brown mystery stories.

“And if there were no forest?” Miyoshi continued the quote.

Of course. Her internet pseudonym was “Wiseman.” She must have felt some affinity toward the line.

“He would make one?” I gave in.

“Exactly! Want to hide a leaf? Make a forest. Want to hide a dead body? Build up a pile of them. If you want to obscure the identity of a Phantom—”

“Make a Phantom army?”

“Yay!” Miyoshi held up her hand for a high five.

*Okay, but even if the image got around, how were we going to sell the costumes?*

“You sure we can pull that off?”

“Not at all!”

“Hey!”

I felt like the ladder had been pulled out from under me when I was halfway up.

“Cool your jets, Kei. We don’t need a whole forest at once. Just some trees. As long as at least a reasonable number of people hop on the trend, we’ll have the plausible alibi that our costume purchase from Shi was just for cosplay purposes too!” Miyoshi threw up her hands and widened her eyes, feigning a nothing-to-see-here reaction. “That way even if someone happened to catch you in costume, I mean—come on, you’re G Rank!”

“Hmm...” I took in Miyoshi’s words. “Okay, so now you’re confident about this?” I asked.

“We’ll do a photo shoot with Shi on the second floor. Foolproof cover story. She’s pretty well-known herself.”

Smartphones wouldn’t receive signals in dungeons, but that didn’t stop camera apps from working. We could do a photo shoot then head up topside to upload the photos to social media sites.

“Wait. You mean I *actually* have to do cosplay?”

“Well, duh. Who else is supposed to?”

“This is so embarrassing...”

“What?!”

“What do you mean ‘what’?!”

“You’re being so selfish! Okay. Well then, if you don’t mind waiting for this summer’s Comiket...”

My shoulders slumped. “N-No... I’ve had it with that place.”

“So sure? Asha’s going to drag you there again, you know.”

“Gh!”

I had to admit, Asha made it hard to say no. But what if someone in European high society saw me dressed up like that? I'd probably die on the spot.

I let out a resigned sigh. "What's your real angle here?"

"For Shi to make money, of course!" She really just came right out and said it. I couldn't help but crack a grin. To tell the truth, hearing such a Miyoshi-style motivation actually put me at ease. "Poor Shi. I have to find some way to help her out..."

"What do you mean? You paid her plenty for the commission."

"Yeah, and then she took off for that fabric exhibition, right?"

"Ah, yeah..." I did remember that. That was her excuse for taking off during the call when I'd first tried the Phantom costume on.

Apparently her hobbies had put her in a pinch. Cosplaying didn't come cheap, after all.

"Doesn't she have a stable company job?"

"The salary's not all that much..."

Ah. That was pretty typical for a Japanese company—low starting salary, and then if you clocked out right on time every day to prioritize your own interests, you'd keep getting passed over for promotions and never come up for a major raise. Given Shi's predilections, it was possible that her interests were cutting into her focus on basic work duties too. "Guess some people just aren't cut out for the corporate world..."

"A shame. She's really talented too."

I paused for a minute. "Are we sure she's not just so into jellyfish that she's spending all her money keeping a spotted variety at home?"

"Regrettably, no drag queens in Shi's social circles," Miyoshi responded, picking up on my *Princess Jellyfish* reference. "You know, for someone who seems ashamed of being nerdy, you sure are a wellspring of knowledge. Didn't peg you for a josei manga enthusiast."

Just then, there was a ring on our office buzzer. Naruse came rushing in like a whirlwind.



\*\*\*

On the other side of a coffee tray, sitting opposite the two of us on the couch, Naruse launched frantically into her request. We listened in anticipation.

“A stampede?!” Neither one of us could contain our surprise.

“Possibly,” hedged Naruse.

We knew from the dungeon inscriptions that the possibility of stampedes—monsters spilling out from dungeons into the real world—existed, but the phenomenon had never been observed. Still, the mere threat of it had been useful for wresting deeds from reluctant property owners when it came to the JDA acquiring land on which dungeon entrances had formed.

“In Yokohama?” Miyoshi repeated. “You’re kidding.”

Naruse shook her head.

“But stampedes happen when there’s a monster overflow. There shouldn’t be that many monsters on the first floor, and from the second floor down it becomes the Loot Box Dungeon.”

Smaller monsters didn’t spawn on boss floors. As for how we knew they were all boss floors despite never having conquered them, the connecting stairwell running down the side allowed explorers to view each floor’s layout through windows in the doors.

“The thing is...” Naruse began, giving us a rundown of the previous day’s events. Falcon Industries had taken some new equipment to the second floor of Yokohama for testing, and an unusual boss monster had shown up.

“A cleaner?” Mioshi asked.

“Well, more like a cleaner variant. A multiheaded cleaner...is what we’re calling it for now.”

Cleaners were a bit like flat snakes, or flatworms, with creepy mouths like lampreys’. None had been recorded in Yoyogi, but they were apparently regular occurrences on the upper floors of New York’s Breezy Point Tip Dungeon. They acted as dungeon scavengers, being able to summon slimes. Despite that, though, they shouldn’t have been much of a threat.

Naruse pulled out a memory card and showed us some images captured by Falcon Industries.

“Oh, god. They blew it into little scraps. And now each scrap’s regenerated.” Miyoshi let out a sigh.

“Like real planarians,” I assessed. “Any limit on the number of slimes they can summon?”

“We believe the number of slimes each can have summoned concurrently to be eight,” Naruse responded.

“Okay, well, that is troublesome,” I replied. “But as long as no one blows them up into further pieces, there’s nothing to worry about, right? With only eight slimes a piece, I don’t think we’re looking at a stam—”

“That’s not all,” Naruse cut in.

“Huh?”

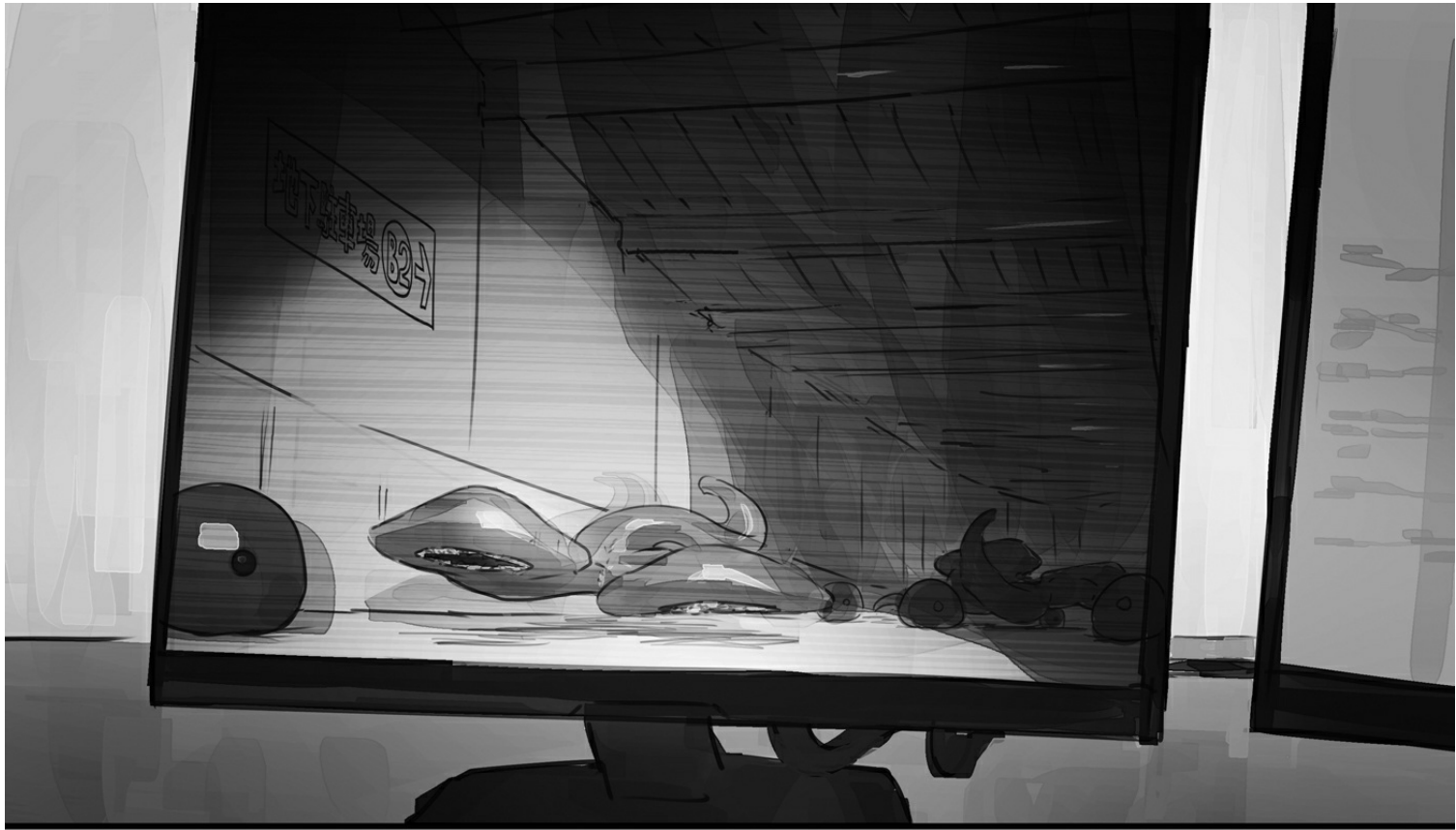
Naruse pulled up some footage. Several cleaners were crawling along the ground in an unpleasant manner. One paused, began shaking, and then—

“They’re dividing?!”

Where there had been one cleaner, two, identical in size, now wriggled along the ground.

“How did you get this?” I asked.

“The footage comes from the area just beyond the entrance gate, taken via equipment left by Falcon Industries. They kept broadcasting their feeds until they were covered by slimes and destroyed. It appears these multiheaded cleaners reproduce at regular intervals.”



“What kind of interval are we talking?”

“Once every four to six hours,” Naruse responded. Miyoshi did a nearly perfect comic-book spit take.

“Whoa! What?!” I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard.

“Kei...” Miyoshi sputtered, wiping the coffee from her lips. I hadn’t seen such a serious look in her eyes since the time she’d accidentally wasted a bunch of expensive catalysts as a new employee at our previous company. “Yokohama is on the record as our Shinshinan—we’re the registered property owners.”

If there were a stampede, it might come out the entrance to the first building floor.

“Y-Yeah, but we only own the first floor of the dungeon and first floor of the building proper. We’re safe as long as the monsters come out the JDA gate to the second-floor parking garage, right?”

“Kei, it’s a shopping complex. Think about the way down to that parking garage. The stairs.”

“O-Okay, but what about all the dungeon floors between the first floor and the parking garage? It’s not like they’ll just come running up.”

At Yokohama, each individual stair of the staircase counted as a dungeon floor. By some function of the dungeons, monsters were extremely loath to cross floors. If push came to very physical shove, it was hard to imagine they wouldn’t all crowd out the parking garage entrance first, which didn’t require crossing floors.

“They’re multiplying. Normally multiplying is determined by the abundance of food and other resources, but in this case they’re doubling every four to six hours, running on D-Factors. It isn’t a matter of where they *want* to go.”

“U-Uh-oh!”

Yokohama was *way* smaller than Yoyogi. They’d run out of room in a heartbeat, and in that case reluctance to cross dungeon floors would mean nothing—as the space reached capacity, they’d be buffeted along.

“Between the unlocked door to the staircase and the extra reinforced parking

garage gate—which I'll remind you the JSDF made about as sturdy as an armored car door—which do you think will give way first?"

Miyoshi set her cup down despondently and wiped some spilled drops off the table.

*Right.* It wasn't a matter of ordinary dungeon protocol—just one of practical physics.

"This is bad!"

If the monsters were pushed all the way up the stairs, there was nothing stopping them from being forced out of the entrance. We—

We were going to be subject to a no-fault liability claim for sure!

"If they spill out the parking garage entrance, it'd probably be the JDA's fault," I reasoned, "but if they come running out from the first floor..."

"We might as well march ourselves to court," Miyoshi replied.

"We're screwed."

"Mega screwed."

I couldn't imagine how much we'd be eating in property damage if slimes went and attacked the surrounding area. Forget some remote lodge in the boonies; our lab was situated in the middle of prime real estate, Yokohama.

"Well, now I understand why you were in such a rush," I said, turning to Naruse. She nodded.

"When was this footage taken?" Miyoshi asked.

"Yesterday, January sixteenth, at 4:48 p.m."

I glanced up at the clock. It was 8 p.m. "So about twenty-six hours ago." At a reproduction rate of once every four to six hours, they would have multiplied by a factor of at least thirty-two by now. "Yokohama's not as big as Yoyogi, so it's probably not as rich in D-Factors." I wasn't sure what kind of core lay at the bottom of Yokohama, but it took boss monsters a whole four hours to respawn—on the slow side. "As their numbers grow, the monsters' reproduction might approach and stay at a set maximum interval. It'd be helpful to know if they've

hit it.”

I asked Naruse for more information about the timing of the recordings.

“We clocked division at 8 p.m. on the sixteenth, 1 a.m. on the seventeenth, then again at 7 a.m. and 1 p.m.”

*Four hours, five hours, then six hours twice in a row. Seemed like we might be at the max interval.*

Miyoshi took out a notebook PC. Naruse jerked, seeing the PC seemingly pulled out of thin air. “I-Is that...?” she started to ask.

*Storage*, she probably meant.

Miyoshi nodded curtly, then pulled up a set of data. “The area of the parking garage is roughly 9300 square meters. The ceiling is three meters high. That means capacity is approximately 27,900 cubic meters.”

“Where did you find that?” Naruse peered at the layout information for the Dungeon Building projected on Miyoshi’s screen. She was surprised because the JDA had just received the same layouts from the owners, but she hadn’t shared them with D-Powers yet.

“I just had a hunch something like this might come up!” Miyoshi teased.

“Oh, come on!”

“Okay, okay. So I was thinking about the remodeling we wanted to do for Shinshinan and trying to find information.”

“Good timing,” I said.

“Thank you. Now, about how big are these cleaners?”

Naruse pulled up the information for Breezy Point Tip Dungeon. “About five centimeters across and high, and then about two meters long.”

“Okay, so let’s say it takes about two to fill one cubic meter,” Miyoshi said. “Roughly speaking, of course.” Since their bodies weren’t all the same size, it might take a few more than that. “Now, after fifteen divisions, they’ll be knocking at the door.”

“Is that counting for all seven starting cleaners that regenerated from chunks

of the boss?”

“Then they’ll be at the door...after the thirteenth division. Ah, plus we have to remember the eight slime summons.”

“Better prepare for the worst-case scenario,” I said. “When slimes are in their usual shape, they take up about...what, thirty by thirty by...twenty-five centimeters? Eight would be about 0.18 meters cubed.”

“Okay, and if we started with seven cleaners, then,” Miyoshi ran the numbers for a second, “the twelfth division marks our time limit.”

“That means hitting floor capacity at 1 p.m. on the nineteenth. Then at seven...” I held up a fist, then spread out my fingers, mimicking an explosion. “Hold on, Miyoshi. What about the seven floors down below?”

It was an underground parking garage. There had to be a way for cars to move between floors. Once the second floor reached capacity, the monsters were just as likely to fill in the lower floors that way.

“Kei, there are doors between the floors,” Miyoshi replied.

“Doors? Miyoshi, it’s a parking garage.”

“It *was* a parking garage. Now it’s a dungeon, and all of the lower floors are boss rooms. What do you think of when you think of an RPG boss room?”

“A-Ah...”

The dungeons seemed to work according to human cultural consciousness and fiction tropes. It wouldn’t be strange for boss rooms to each come with a locked door.

“Even in the best case,” she continued, “with the monsters doubling every six hours, an extra seven floors would only buy an extra twenty-four hours.” The monsters were increasing eightfold every eighteen hours. “And anyway, boss doors on the parking-ramp side or no boss doors, I think we can expect them to come up from the staircase first.”

“‘The staircase’?”

“Yep.” Miyoshi responded. “The doors to each dungeon floor open up one way—onto the stairs.”

“Ah! Aaah!” Dungeon objects, doors or otherwise, were held to be indestructible. That meant that monsters pushed into the staircase after the second floor filled up wouldn’t be able to break through to other floors. As the staircase filled, they’d have nowhere to go but up. “So the only thing standing between us and disaster once the second floor hits capacity is the volume of a parking garage stairwell.”

“And those’ll take far less time to fill up than a dungeon floor, that’s for sure,” Miyoshi commented. “We might as well consider the second-floor fill-up our deadline.”

That left us a scant forty-five hours to act. After that, goodbye lab, goodbye lack of lawsuits.

“In other words, not looking great for us,” Miyoshi summarized.

Not only for us, but if they kept doubling—maybe for Yokohama, Kanto, and Japan. If worse came to worst, we were looking at a global death-by-slime-dissolution scenario.

“Well, at least we won’t have to worry about no-fault liability claims if it’s the *apocalypse!*” Miyoshi shot Naruse a pointed glance as if asking, *Is the JDA going to take some responsibility for this?*

Following the direction of Miyoshi’s glare with a smile, I extended Naruse an olive branch. “So. What’s the JDA’s plan?”

“W-We’ve contacted the JSDF and Dungeon Agency,” she responded. “Falcon Industries appears to be responding too.”

“Falcon Industries?”

“They’re planning to have Team Simon sent in via the DSF.”

“I see.”

Falcon was one of Team Simon’s sponsors, supplying them with gear.

Well, that took care of our part. We could leave this to the professionals. However, the time frame was the issue. Team Simon was currently diving on Yoyogi’s eighteenth floor. Once they had word, they could return to the surface in a day, but the question was whether news could reach them that quickly.



Even in a best-case scenario, they might not be at Yokohama until the evening of the eighteenth.

There was no guarantee that even the JSDF could get moving right away either. The report had only gone out today, and Team I was based in Narashino. Even assuming all necessary personnel were on-site, they would still need time to mobilize. They might be looking at the evening of the eighteenth as well. To top it all off, First Lieutenant Kimitsu's ability was a bad matchup for the current threat. Team Simon's Natalie, with her fire magic, would fare better.

Miyoshi lifted her eyes from the Dungeon Building layout. "Kei. Stampede response would normally fall under the JDA and JSDF, right?"

"Right..."

"*Our* only problem is how we avoid liability claims."

"If you want to be cynical, I suppose."

"Okay. So listen. Two routes lead surface-side from the second floor of Yokohama Dungeon. The first is the parking garage gate, the second is the staircase up to us. As mentioned, the gate is pretty sturdy, so I think we could expect the problem to hit us first."

"Okay. I follow. So?"

"So, we just need to make sure it doesn't! We basically have three options." Miyoshi put up her pointer finger on her right hand. "First, we sell off the floor to someone! Right away! Like maybe the JDA!"

"And we can sell them a bridge while we're at it."

"O ye of little faith..."

"Right, it's my *faith* that's the issue here." I shrugged and gave an exaggerated sigh.

"Okay, okay, spoilsport. Option two. We blow up the JDA gate doors."

"Avoiding no-fault liability claims by committing a felony? As your lawyer, I strongly advise against it." I shook my head. I was pretty sure it was a joke, but sometimes with Miyoshi it was hard to tell, especially in situations like these.

“W-Well, desperate times!”

“Last I checked, there was no ‘desperate times’ clause in legal defenses. Also, Naruse’s *right there!*”

“Then option three. We bury the problem.”

“Are you saying we ice Naruse?!”

*Eliminating witnesses?!*

“No, not Naruse, dummy! The staircase! Luckily Yokohama Dungeon is situated in Sakuragicho, concrete factory central.”

“I’m going to need you to be more *concrete*.”

“So, look, slimes would break it down eventually, but with a thick enough barrier, it would still take some time to get through. Long enough to divert the stampede. We can even go cheap—something like a low-quality sea-sand mix would do.”

“You can’t mean... Are you serious? Seal up the staircase with concrete?!”

“Well, those are our options. What do we do?”

“What do you mean ‘What do we do’?! ”

Pouring a load of concrete down the stairs would seal it up all the way to the bottom floor. Who knew what kind of trouble that would cause on top of our current woes—it’d become the world’s first testing ground for what happened to dungeons whose entrances were forcibly shut.

Of course, alternately, we could put in some kind of stopper just beyond the second floor—a wall of bricks or something, and only seal it up past that.

“Assuming we go with this insane plan—think we could get the JDA’s permission?”

“Probably not, but ever heard the phrase, ‘It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission’? Look, it’ll be broken down by the slimes after a while anyway, so no need for spendy removal. We’re just making sure the monsters...you know, prioritize the other exit for a while.”

It didn’t exactly feel right morally, but I couldn’t deny it *would* solve our

current problem.

Miyoshi kept urging me on. “It’ll get us out of liability claaaaims...”

“What was that?” I asked. “A whisper from my shoulder devil?”

Miyoshi propped up her cheeks with two fingers, giving a cutesy grin.

“Although,” I pointed out, “you mentioned ‘asking for forgiveness rather than permission.’ How are we going to do this in secret? There’s a member of the JDA in the room with us right now.” Naruse gave a put-out smile. “Plus, cement mixers can only carry enough concrete for...what, about five cubic meters? Do you know how many trucks we’d need to plug up the top of the staircase?”

“The upper area is just a little over two meters by two meters. We’d need about...one truck for every meter of depth.”

“And you’re thinking about bringing in a cavalcade of cement mixers and parking them outside a shopping complex...*secretly*?”

“I guess you’re right,” Miyoshi sighed. “Plus, even if I put in the order right now, I’m not sure when they could get moving.” Her shoulders slumped. Then she looked up at me with a smile. “Okay, well if all *those* plans are out, I guess that only leaves us one choice.”

I had another bad feeling coming on.

“You have some sort of plan?” Naruse asked expectantly.

“To defeat one’s enemy, one must know one’s enemy. Kei, we’re taking a field trip to Shinshinan.”

“I knew it...”

Still, the situation was like a cavity—ignore it, and it’d only get worse. We couldn’t wait around for the other parties. We’d have to see about defeating the monsters ourselves. And, as Miyoshi had said in so many words, knowing was half the battle. We’d have to observe the situation with our own eyes.

Thankfully the threat wasn’t a single, strong monster like Ngai. We wouldn’t be throwing ourselves into the fray. Maybe we could find a convenient weakness like with slimes. It was worth investigating.

We told Naruse we'd try thinking of something, and despite the fact that it was already nearing nightfall, she gratefully, and hastily, left to return to the JDA.

"So, what's your plan?" I asked.

"Just...kill them all before they divide too much, I guess?"

"Oh, great."

"Okay, or, well, that's what I would like to say, but by the time we get to Yokohama, they'll already have doubled thirty-two times. That gives us...224 cleaners, and—"

"Seven thousand, three hundred ninety-two slimes."

"If they're spread out evenly across the whole nine thousand square meters, it might not be so bad, but... Something tells me that won't be the case."

I didn't want to think about a thousand slimes ganging up on us by the entrance, even if they were just slimes. Our patented Benzetho Blast might allow us to clear a path, but I wondered if we could defeat enough to overcome the rate of new summo— *Wait a minute.*

"Miyoshi. When we expose the cores with Benzetho Blasts, the slimes aren't actually *dead*, are they?"

"Hm? No, I don't think so. You've said we don't get any experience, anyway."

"Then maybe they won't be resummoned!"

"Of course! That'd really help us out. Although the footage earlier showed a bunch of slimes of different colors. No guarantee the benzethonium chloride will work on all of them."

"Hmm..."

"Plus, what do we do about the cleaners?"

"Them? They're nothing, right?"

"Nothing, but they'll regenerate if we don't take out the whole body at once."

We had iron balls and water lances. Not exactly suited to the job. A flamethrower would have been great, but even if we rush-ordered an acetylene

burner, it wouldn't give us much range. A gas burner, too, would have a pretty limited field of effect, although it could get up to temperatures of seventeen hundred degrees. If the cleaners came back from *that*, the situation would truly be hopeless. Even I'd embrace our new overlords. I'd be the first to proclaim Earth the Planet of the Planarians.

"We could freeze them, then break them into pieces, and burn them?"

"It'd take too long," Miyoshi responded. "Plus what if they melted and we just wound up creating more?"

"Putting off getting Fire Magic really came back to bite us, huh?"

"There's always Ultimate Flame Magic," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Yeah, but...the control issue."

It wasn't really suited for picking off a bunch of monsters individually. And if I went for a field wipe, the effect would probably ripple to the upper floors. At any rate, it wouldn't be subtle. Maybe—maybe if I could find just the right moment to pull it off without completely giving myself away.

"Well, whatever. Anyway you slice it, this is a job for the Phantom!"

"I knew it!"

"Protecting the world from the shadows! One man! A former researcher!"

"Protecting the world now?" We were still just trying to get out of no-fault liability claims, right? When did this turn into a whole superhero-saving-the-world thing? Leave that job to the comic books.

"Well, at least protect our financial solvency from the shadows," Miyoshi reasserted.

"Ah, well, I suppose I can do that much."

"Indeed." Miyoshi crossed her arms and nodded her head sagely.

"Phew. You know, with all this talk of saving the world and shadows, you ought to write action figure copy."

"Kei," Miyoshi responded, "it's 2019. Kids don't play with action figures anymore."

“I guess not,” I chuckled. “You know, I can’t help but feel as if you intended to get here from the start.”

“Just your imagination! Anyway, we have a lot to get ready. Plus if worse comes to worst,” she smiled, “we can just inferno the whole place.”

“I still don’t want to resort to that unless I can find a moment where I wouldn’t have to change my nickname from the Phantom to Captain Obvious. But okay. We’ll call that Plan B. After that, we need to worry about whether anyone would be present on the upper floors. Do we know if there will still be building staff around?”

“With the JSDF raiding the place? I don’t think so. But just in case, we can check with JDA.”

“Phew. Okay, now to think of a way to use that technique, er...subtly. If it comes to it.”

Miyoshi slapped me hard on the back, as if it were a done deal.

“Yowch!”

*And thus, fate knocks at the door!* That’s what the burning handprint on my back was screaming at me.

## **JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya**

### **Dungeon Management Section**

It was well after the end of the business day, but several employees of the JDA’s Dungeon Management Section still busied themselves with work. A mere two days before the National Center Test, they’d been rocked by another crisis.

“How’d it go?” Forgoing pleasantries, Saiga tossed the question to Miharu Naruse as soon as she entered his office.

“They’ll try thinking of something.”

“‘Something,’ huh?”

Saiga gestured Miharu to a chair next to his desk, a pained expression on his face. The situation had already moved beyond the grasp of any ordinary

explorers. Unfortunately all the *extraordinary* explorers were currently engaged eighteen floors deep in Yoyogi.

He wasn't sure when Falcon had decided to involve the DSF, but guessed it was after they'd witnessed the monsters' second division. Even then, they would need to get the DSF's okay before mobilizing Team Simon. The company couldn't afford to send the team out on an unauthorized mission, but receiving approval would take time.

The JDA could gather every explorer available throughout the night, but most still wouldn't arrive until the morning of the eighteenth. At the earliest, Team Simon would follow that night. And to top it all off, depending on how much energy they'd expended on the eighteenth floor, they might need some time to recover. Saiga glanced at the clock. *Time*: it was becoming a precious resource—and one they were fast running out of.

At this rate, arriving explorers might simply be crushed at the door.

The JSDF's firepower would add a bit more safety to the operation, but mobilization would require the National Diet's approval—something that, to tell the truth, Saiga had little confidence would be granted in time.

“Even though this is *exactly* the kind of ‘clear and present danger to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ they’re supposed to be around for,” he grumbled, quoting the section of the Japanese Constitution pertaining to the JSDF.

They could at least send in the subsidiary Japanese Dungeon Attack Group (JDAG), but the organization's top explorer—Iori Kimitsu—was a bad matchup for the monsters' fission ability.

At any rate, Saiga had sent out all the necessary documents, but the key was how quickly anyone could assemble the necessary personnel and equipment.

He eyed a 3D model of the building the owners had sent over, paying particular attention to the basement floor dimensions. “Based on what I’m seeing, the monsters will hit capacity at...what, 1 p.m. on the nineteenth?”

“Miyoshi and Kei said the same thing,” Miharu replied.

“What? How did they have the floor data to work that one out?”

“They said it was due to remodeling plans. They already had it on hand.”

“Heh, heh, heh. You don’t say...”

Miharu looked at her chief with a serious expression. “Sir, shouldn’t we issue an evacuation order for the areas surrounding Yokohama?”

Saiga sighed, then sank back into his chair. “The JDA doesn’t have that right.” Only the mayor could issue an evacuation order. And in any case, a recommendation to do so should come from the Dungeon Agency, rather than the JDA. “Plus, the individual monsters in this case aren’t much of a threat to humans. No one’s going to be trigger-happy enough to order an evacuation until the last possible second. No one wants to cause a panic.”

The individual monsters might have posed little threat, but en masse it was a different story. However, that was with the added caveat of “*if* they continue multiplying even once they are outside.”

That caveat would dull each organization’s response to the danger, preventing them from taking decisive action until it was too late.

“I don’t suppose this is one of those problems that will just work itself out?” Saiga joked.

Whatever the case, they had already fired every arrow in their quiver. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Saiga leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head and eyes closed, staying that way for so long that Miharu wondered if he hadn’t fallen asleep. “Sir?”

“I still have faith,” Saiga muttered.

Miharu blinked. “In?”

“God works in mysterious ways.” Sometimes—*sometimes*—forces conspired so that many individual players working off their own motivations came together to effect positive change. “For instance, if D-Powers hadn’t bought the first floor of the building, do you think they’d get involved?”

Miharu thought about it. She shook her head.

“You see? Even if we’d asked directly, they might have turned us down. And



yet here we are—just before our great crisis, the deed for the floor is turned over to the two of them. One more factor on the table. If that isn't providence, what is?"

*Of course if Yoshimura and Miyoshi hadn't bought out the top floor, Falcon Industries might not have gotten their rental, and we might not be in this mess in the first place,* Miharuru thought.

"I might mention," she responded, "that Miyoshi *did* suggest secretly plugging up the stairwell with concrete."

Saiga's eyes widened. "As a joke?"

"Yes, of course. As a joke."

"Anyway, let's leave this one up to the powers that be. Get in touch with the building staff, and if D-Powers has any orders, tell the personnel to obey them. If not, tell everyone to stay clear of the dungeon entrance and to not—under any circumstances—get involved."

"It's going to look like we're just punting off responsibility."

"Aren't we?" Saiga folded his hands on his desk, then closed his eyes again, deep in thought. "D-Powers is still hiding something. I know that; I'm not dumb. This *would* be a great chance to suss out more of their secrets—but I have a feeling it might be best to stay out of their hair for once." He opened one eye cheekily. "I mean for the world's sake. Not for ours."

"I wouldn't have interpreted that any other way." Miharuru smiled, nodded, then left the room.

# Epilogue

## Gary, Indiana

The dungeon quake had been traced to Gary, Indiana, striking near a famous Methodist church neighboring Michael Jackson's family home. Luckily, the church had been famous as a ruin—an urban spelunking spot.

A team comprised researchers from the University of Chicago and the Illinois Institute of Technology was dispatched posthaste to the scene. It was there they uncovered the phenomenon that would come to be known as “God’s Will.”

*“No way...”*

At first it had seemed as though a dungeon using preexisting architecture was forming. However, perhaps under the stress of the conversion, the abandoned church collapsed.

With nowhere to go, the D-Factors began pouring into the ground to form a subterranean dungeon in front of the research team’s eyes.

Rejoicing at the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, they whipped out various tools and began measurements and scans.

*“How is she?”* a university professor asked one of his doctoral students some time later.

*“Ah, Dr. Jones,”* the brown-haired student responded.

Three years ago, Dr. Reed Jones, now with the University of Chicago’s Dungeon Research Department, had transferred into the field from astrophysics—at a time when transferring from geophysics had been the norm.

A bona fide genius, Reed had landed the auspicious title of associate professor at a scant thirty-two years old. In his student days, his well-toned physique and the fact that he commuted from his family’s ramshackle home in Hammond, Indiana every day had earned him the nickname “Indiana Jones.”

Ordinarily, promotion to associate professor at thirty-two was unheard of. Even landing the rank of assistant professor at the minimum three years after earning a doctoral degree, it was typical to take another six to be promoted to associate. That made the de facto minimum age thirty-five.

*"It's like some sort of invisible...something...is punching its way into the ground."* The doctoral student pulled back her hair, looking at the equipment readings.

The students had launched a number of drones into the dungeon cavern as soon as it formed.

*"So we're finally seeing the dungeon needle,"* Reed commented.

According to the latest theories, subterranean dungeons were formed by some kind of "needle" punching an opening in the ground from above.

*"More like a drill than a needle,"* the student commented.

*"So that's why the aftershocks for deeper dungeons last longer than shallow ones. It actually spends time boring downward."*

Some minutes after the shocks had subsided, the video feed from one of the team's drones ceased. *"What's happening?"* Reed asked.

*"I don't know. That was our deepest drone. I—"*

Something strange had crossed its screen just before the footage cut out.

*"Can we make out what it was?"*

*"It looks like the supersonic sensor picked up something. Professor, here."*

Reed wasn't quite sure what he was looking at, but the supersonic imaging seemed to show something thick like a log and...ropey?

*"A snake!"* Reed shouted. *"Why did it have to be a snake?!"*

*"Asps. Very dangerous."* The student smiled.

Reed smiled back.

Suddenly the feeds from the drones started cutting off one after another.

*"What now?!"*

Something was knocking out the drones one by one. It wasn't long before their last had ceased transmitting.

*"That's going to be rough to explain to the budget committee."*

*"Don't worry. Half of them were ones the team brought from home."* The student grinned sheepishly.

Reed grimaced. *"My condolences."*

The student slumped her shoulders. Reed resolved to at least buy the team dinner on their way home. There was no way they were going to get the department to comp their expenses.

Setting aside the topic of mechanical carnage, Reed surveyed the data they'd acquired.

*"So something burrows its way underground, and, when it reaches the last floor, creates a dungeon core."*

*"'Core'?"* the student inquired.

*"For example—take this asp."*

*"Boss monsters, you mean."*

*"Probably. Boss monsters. The big kahunas. Defeat them, and the dungeon itself vanishes. In other words, maybe we should think of them as the source of whatever substances are supporting the dungeons' existence."*

*"'Substances...'"*

*"There was that paper earlier this month. Came out through the DFA. D-Factors."*

*"The DFA? The WDA division? I thought they only handled food."*

*"In principle."*

The student couldn't understand what a DFA paper would have to do with her own department's research. Truth be told, when the paper had come out, she'd ignored it, assuming based on its publishing organization that its contents would be too far afield.

Reed saw a teachable moment.

*“Everyone’s new in the field of dungeon research,” he explained. “Even if it seems unrelated, you never know how it might connect. It might be good to skim new writing from other fields.”*

*“Understood,” the student responded. Internally, she wanted to ask just how much free time Dr. Jones thought the average doctoral student had. She held off. “So from your reading, Professor, you think a cluster of these D-Factors is essentially making its way underground, forming this ‘core’ when it reaches a certain depth?” She cocked her head. “And then that ‘core’ produces more D-Factors, structuring the bottom floor, then each successive floor moving up?”*

*“Based on the information we have now, that’s what I think.”*

*“So when the core is first created, the dungeon isn’t fully formed all the way up to the surface yet.”*

*“I suppose not.”*

*“So if we plunged a missile down before the core first activated as a D-Factor production factory...”*

Reed threw up his hands and smiled. *“We could capture dungeons without needing to raid them! Of course the odds of having a missile on hand when a dungeon forms beside you are about as low as winning the lottery.”*

He reviewed data on his computer pertaining to the timing and location of each drone’s destruction. *“Hm. Thinking of the time the core seems to have been created, it’s possible upper floors do exist for a time in an unfinished ‘placeholder’ state.”*

*“So we need more data.”*

*“Unfortunately it’s going to be hard to come by.”*

*“Even if we, say, go diving into a freshly made dungeon.”* The student eyed the newly formed hole beside them.

*“You’re gonna get killed chasing after your damn fortune and glory,”* Reed exclaimed.

*“Maybe,”* she responded. *“But not today.”* She chuckled.

Their findings were already unprecedented—the first midformation

subterranean dungeon recording.

In exchange for the group's report, which they wrote up with enthusiasm, the world had lost one of its famous abandoned buildings. A wall of the church facing Washington Street had been adorned with graffiti reading "Everything before me is rubble and refuse," lamenting the town's decline. The entrance to the dungeon—now yawning like a great, black maw in the ground, seeming to stretch to the depths of perdition itself—would soon be adorned with an equally fitting tag: "Welcome to Purgatory's Gate."

Even though it had been a Methodist church.

### Annotations

**Hammond:** A town in Indiana not far from the border with Illinois and the University of Chicago. Reed would have commuted a distance of about ten miles each day. Being a "Jones" from Indiana was how he earned his nickname.

**Asps:** Very dangerous. Reed references his cinematic namesake's reaction to seeing a floor of writhing snakes from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). "Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?" is the original line. His assistant Sallah responds, "Asps. Very dangerous." Incidentally, asps are a large hooded snake—known in modern day as the Egyptian cobra.

**She chuckled:** From the second Indiana Jones movie, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). She repeats Indy's line, in response to Reed quoting the film's love interest, Willie.

"You're gonna get killed chasing after your damn fortune and glory!"

"Maybe. But not today."

She and Reed must have a pretty good relationship. They appear to joke around like this all the time.

**Even though it had been a Methodist church:** The Roman Catholic concept of purgatory doesn't feature in the theology of Protestant denominations like Methodism.

## Otemachi, Chiyoda City

“He hung up?”

“Well, technically, he said, ‘Let me think about it,’ then left me on hold.”

A smartly dressed man in his forties, wearing a tight suit like an American or European executive, turned to his boss—a bespectacled man with touches of gray in his hair—and explained the outcome of their latest headhunting call.

The man who had made the call was one Noriyoshi Miuchi—the director of Shinetsu Dungeon Corporation’s R and D Division. He had been tasked directly with aiding their current talent acquisition push. Such as it was proving to be.

“What? He’s just a prefectural environmental researcher! Who does he think he is?” It was unheard of for anyone in the public sector to turn down a cushy offer from Shinetsu. Much less when it came from the R and D director himself. “Think Mitsubishi Chemical or Shokubai got to him?”

“Possibly. He has to have offers lining up around the block.”

Their target was Masaki Miyoshi—the older brother of the one the internet was calling “Wiseman.”

No sooner had her status as an Appraisal user gone public than she had jumped to the top of the list of every dungeon-based company’s hiring priorities. And not only her—recruiters had swarmed to those in her inner sphere like ants to a sugar cube.

Even if the JDA wouldn’t cough up her information, there was plenty out there for the average individual to uncover. It wasn’t hard to track down relations, for example. Even so, Shinetsu was a respectable company. It couldn’t just hold family members ransom. It had to rely on legal methods.

“So, what?” Noriyoshi’s boss snapped. “Are we out of options? The family doesn’t seem to be accepting any offers—at least not from us.”

“Under the circumstances, I can hardly blame them. Anyone would be feeling overwhelmed,” Noriyoshi replied.

“Be that as it may, she is still only human. And what’s more, a young member of the Japanese workforce.” Noriyoshi’s boss flashed a frightening look from behind his glasses, hinting at experience with bending people his way. “Pile up

all the cash you want, and there are people who will never fold. However, give them one request from a direct acquaintance, and they're practically origami. The younger generations are too accommodating—too polite to say 'no.'"

Noriyoshi had a hunch D-Powers' "dedicated supervisor" had employed similar intuition to coax the party's cooperation before.

"So, next target: Hokkoku Materials?" Noriyoshi asked.

"Yes. It seems like she left her former employer on relatively cordial terms."

If she hadn't, it wouldn't do any good to try to ply her through former professional contacts. Thankfully, they appeared to be safe.

"We'll need to come up with an excuse."

"An excuse? Any joint project with Hokkoku that seems likely to get us access to her will do."

"Our records indicate she was a member of their basic research team. You know, I may have just the thing."

"Ah. That liquid identification that's too unglamorous for any of our *esteemed* researchers to touch?"

The liquid in question seemed to be of enormous potential. However, being of unknown origin, it still required identification, and—with projects promising more immediate results—none of Shinetsu's researchers had deigned to dedicate time toward it.

A shame. It seemed to Noriyoshi that it would be plenty useful down the line.

"All this obsession with advancement seems to be clouding our staff's heads." Noriyoshi smiled, remembering his own rise through the ranks.

"Perfect. We can kill two birds with one stone. Press the project's importance with Hokkoku. They'll be sure to try to reach out to her for help."

"Understood. I'll get on it."

Miura departed the room. His boss remained behind, going over the materials Noriyoshi had handed over until his next appointment.

"Hokkoku sure screwed the pooch," he mumbled to himself.



According to the report, Miyoshi had worked for the company until October of last year. Had they only kept her, they'd be standing on top of the dungeon industry right now.

Instead, whoever captured her on rebound would come out ahead. Sooner or later, all companies in the industry were going to make their move.

The phrase "corporate warrior" had fallen out of common use long ago, but battles were still waged beneath the thin veneer of polite company. Arms races weren't solely the purview of militaries.

He locked the documents in his desk and headed to his next meeting.

Outside the window, winter light glinted off the glass exterior of the Metropolitan Hotel.

## **Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor**

*"Huh? What? The world's in danger?"*

Simon figured he'd misheard. He and the rest of his team had been shaken awake at 4 a.m. in the middle of a dungeon expedition by an extremely haggard messenger. He sleepily scratched at his cheek.

Lieutenant General Martinez, just one month away from discharge—looked like he just might keel over at any moment. Nevertheless, he managed to stand up straight long enough to meet Simon at attention and pass over a USB containing the mission brief.

He must have been running all night, Simon figured. It would have been suicide to have gone through the tenth floor at nightfall, so he'd probably reached the eleventh before sunset.

*"That's...what...I've been told,"* Martinez huffed.

*This has to be some kind of joke.* Simon looked around for hidden cameras. But upon decrypting the brief and seeing it matched Martinez's explanation, he could only conclude that if it were a joke, it would have to be one the President of the United States himself had ordered.

*"Are you serious?"*

According to the materials, it was work worthy of a full-scale military operation rather than a small team of explorers.

Still, he understood. Mobilizing the military would take congressional approval. About the only situation in which action wouldn't require deliberation would be defending against an attack on home soil. Still...

*"‘World-ending’... What good is a military you can't deploy against world-ending threats?"* Simon mumbled.

*"Excuse me?"* Martinez asked.

*"Ah, n-never mind. Thank you. Orders received."*

*"Phew."*

*"What about gear?"*

His team had probably been prioritized for Natalie's abilities, Simon figured, but fire magic alone wouldn't see them all through.

*"Falcon Industries will supply you with everything you might need. The USFJ commander has seen to that personally."*

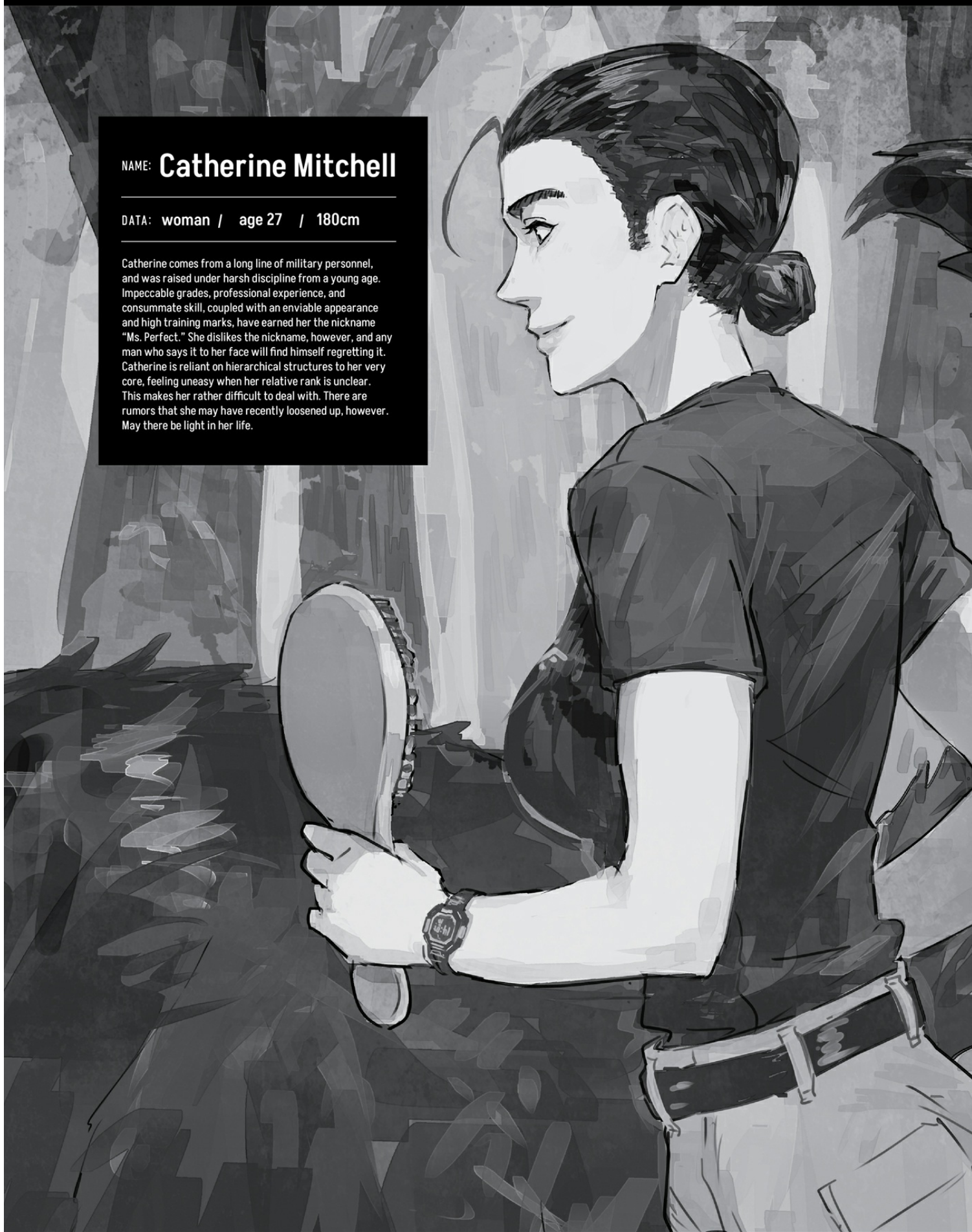
*Great. Another way for the government to maintain its distance.* Simon's eyes narrowed.

Martinez wished the end of his service had come a month earlier. He didn't like the way Simon was staring at him with daggers in his eyes. Ones that seemed to say, *Tomorrow was supposed to be a day off.*

NAME: **Catherine Mitchell**

DATA: woman / age 27 / 180cm

Catherine comes from a long line of military personnel, and was raised under harsh discipline from a young age. Impeccable grades, professional experience, and consummate skill, coupled with an enviable appearance and high training marks, have earned her the nickname "Ms. Perfect." She dislikes the nickname, however, and any man who says it to her face will find himself regretting it. Catherine is reliant on hierarchical structures to her very core, feeling uneasy when her relative rank is unclear. This makes her rather difficult to deal with. There are rumors that she may have recently loosened up, however. May there be light in her life.







NAME: **Takatsugu Himuro**

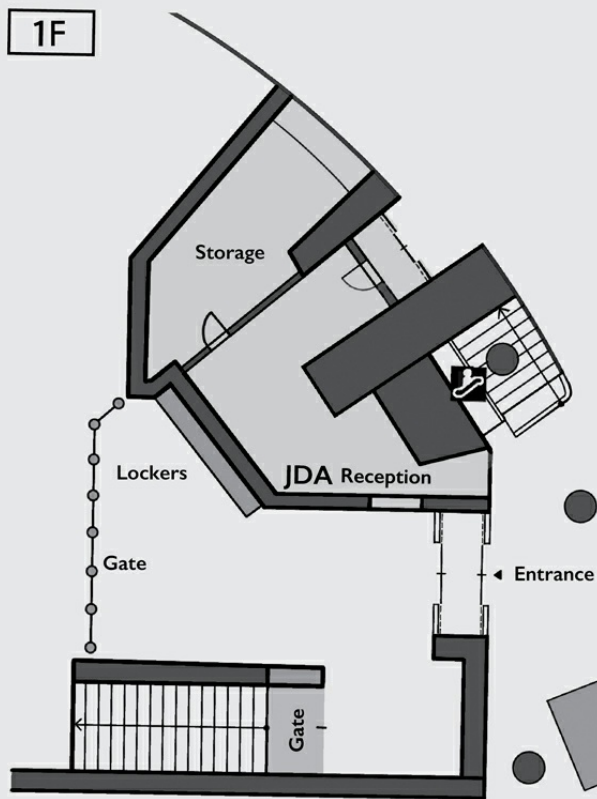
DATA: man / age 35 / 175cm

Himuro works as a director at television production company Media 24. He's known to his friends as Ryuji. He sometimes gets fed up with the production department's indulgences, but to him, work is work. His willingness to run headlong into questionable situations earned him the nickname "Ryuji the Fireball" in his younger days, and he still tackles assignments with zeal. However, most of his coverage now requires a finer touch. Over his shoots he's acquired a wealth of cultural, artistic, scientific, and societal knowledge useful when investigating and examining his subjects—not that you'd know it from looking at him. To the outside observer, he appears just like your average, stodgy middle-aged office man.



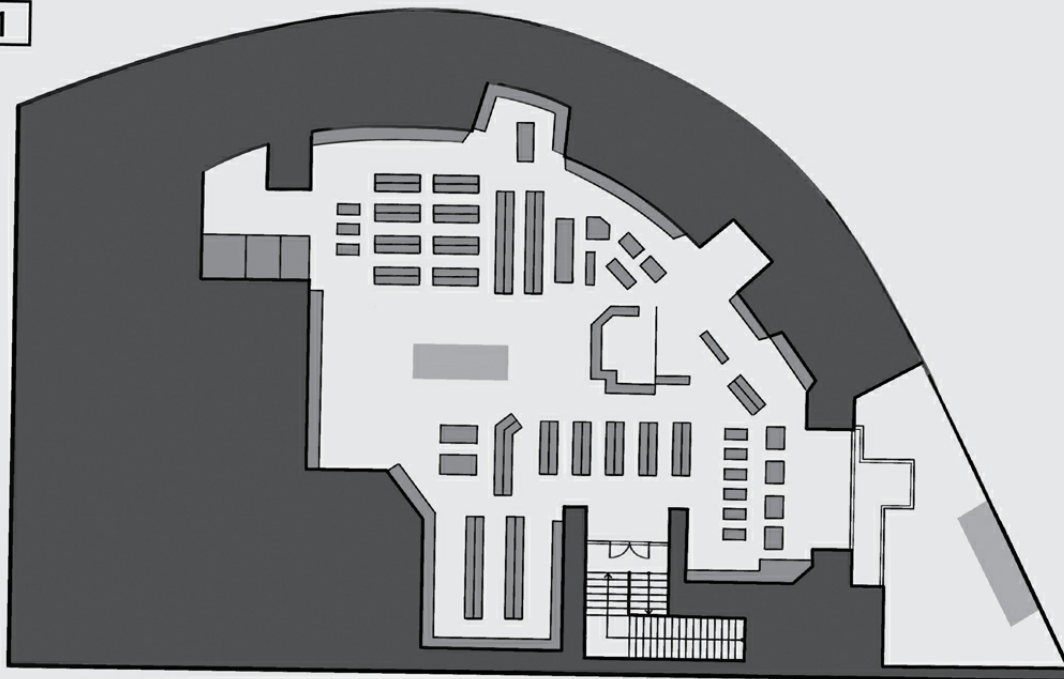
## Yokohama Dungeon Building

1F



The Nouveau Mare was designed as a shopping complex for Yokohama's Sakuragicho area, but a dungeon formed while the building was under construction. Construction of the framework for the upper floors was still underway, but the structure for the basement floors was completed—leading to the entire basement being dungeonized. The fact that the process completed most of the unfinished basement floors in accordance with their final design specs is a subject of much speculation. For a time, the status of the construction project was in flux, but ultimately the owners made the rash decision to seal off the first floor and basement and open the shopping complex from the second floor and above, adorning it with the marketing nickname "Dungeon Building." Perhaps this cockamamie commercial scheming was a sign of just how little was known about dungeons at the time. A world's first: shopping on the ground floors with a public dungeon down below! The basement floors gained the dungeon's indestructible properties, leading the Yokohama mayor—desperate not to leave unfinished ruins in front of Sakuragicho station—to author the tactless tweet, "Just think of [the building] as having extra reinforcement." Yokohama Twitter was in shambles.

B1



## 1F

At least the first floor wasn't dungeonized. (Objects on it were breakable.) Originally equipped to proudly display a host of brands, with high ceilings and ample amenities, the first floor became a mostly-empty space occupied solely by a JDA reception area. Miyoshi plans to renovate it into a dungeon-focused research lab (codename: Shinshinan).



## B1

Originally conceived as an underground grocery market, the first basement floor retains many of its vendor partitions. Possibly due to its labyrinthine nature, it didn't inherit the boss-floor "Loot Box" properties that the larger, more open lower parking garage floors did.



## B2 and Below

Floors from this point onward consists solely of a boss arenas. The boss monster that spawns changes each time one is defeated, but always leaves a treasure chest, leading to Yokohama's "Loot Box Dungeon" moniker. It takes four hours for the next boss to spawn; smaller monsters have never been seen on these floors.





# Yoshimura's Full-Course Cookbook

Recipe provision, supervision: Yumiko Yoshinuma



Replace out-of-season ingredients with equivalents and create your own arrangements!

And choose a good abbinamento (drink-pairing) to match!



## Clam Peperoncino

### Ingredients (Serves two)

Spaghetti (Voiello No. 103), 140 g  
Clams (3–5 cm), 400 g  
Konbu, 2 cm  
Canola florets, ½ bunch  
Garlic, 1 clove (5 g)  
Cayenne pepper (seeded), 1  
Olive oil, 1 tbsp  
Sunflower oil, 1 tbsp  
Salt (for boiling pasta), to taste  
Christmas Island Sea Salt (for seasoning), to taste



### Recipe

1. Add rinsed clams and 150 cc of water to a sauce pan and cook over medium-low heat. Once boiling, reduce to low heat, and deshell all but eight clams once shells have opened. The clams left in their shells will be used for decoration. (Depending on preference, you may deshell all clams.) Return half the clams to the dashi (clam broth) and the konbu. Concentrate dashi down to two thirds, then remove the konbu.
2. Boil water in a sauce pan and add salt at a 1% salt-to-water ratio. Boil the canola florets, then remove, strain out excess moisture and cut into 2 cm pieces.
3. Add the spaghetti to the water used in Step 2. Boil for two minutes less than package instructions indicate.
4. Add olive oil, garlic, and cayenne pepper to a frying pan. Cook over low heat until fragrant, then remove the pepper.
5. Add the spaghetti, canola florets, and dashi to the frying pan from Step 4. Rock ingredients gently in the pan and add water until the oil emulsifies. (Add more dashi if there is insufficient liquid content in the pan.)
6. Add salt to taste, plate, and serve.



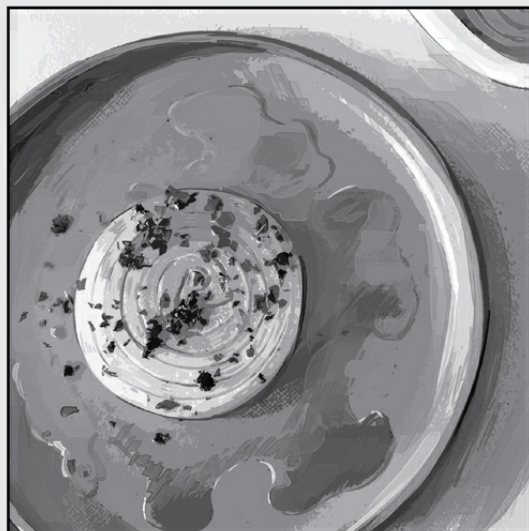
## Oven-Roasted Glazed Onions

### Ingredients (Serves two)

Fresh round onion, 1  
300 cc water + 3 g salt mixture  
Olive oil, 2 tbsp  
Dried oregano, 1 tsp  
Olive oil, to taste  
Italian parsley (diced), to taste

### Recipe

1. Create salt-water mixture above. (Adjust amounts based on size of baking dish.)
2. Peel onion, then cut into round slices approximately 1 cm thick. Arrange in a heat-resistant glass baking dish.
3. Add salt water mixture A from Step 1 to pan until onion slices are submerged. Top with 2 tbsp olive oil and 1 tsp dried oregano.
4. Preheat oven to 200°C, then cook for 40–50 minutes until onion slices are translucent.
5. Transfer onions to plate, and add boiled dashi and olive oil to taste (recommended 2 tsp dashi and 1 tsp olive oil per slice). Garnish with Italian parsley.



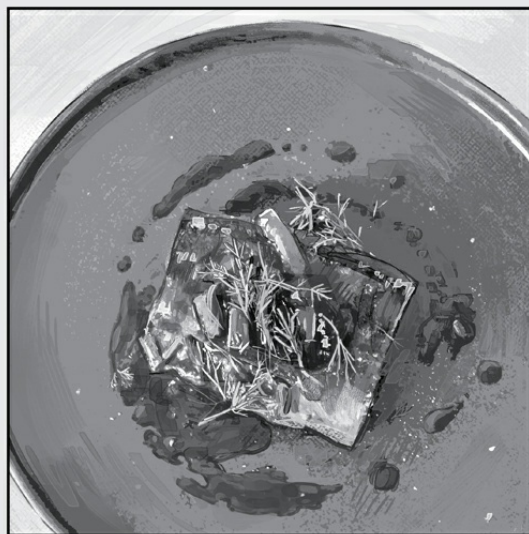
## Mackerel with Fennel and Red Wine Sauce

### Ingredients (Serves two)

Mackerel, one filet (from three-filet cut)  
Salt and black pepper, to taste  
Cake flour (for breading), to taste  
Fennel (thinly sliced), 30 g  
Blood orange juice, 50 cc  
Red wine, 30 cc  
Orange marmalade, 20 g  
Olive oil, 1 tbsp  
Fennel flowers (optional), to taste

### Recipe

1. Debone mackerel filet, then cut into two even halves. Salt and let sit for about 15 minutes. Pat dry with paper, then cut a seam into the filet.
2. Stuff fennel into seam, sprinkle black pepper over the top, and cover with cake flour. Brush off excess flour when coated.
3. Add olive oil to frying pan and cook over medium heat. Add filet to pan and cook skin-side down until meat begins to darken, then flip and cook opposite side.
4. Add red wine and blood orange juice to frying pan from Step 3. Once boiling, condense over low heat.
5. Add orange marmalade and mix into sauce. Add salt and black pepper to taste.
6. Transfer filet to plate, then top with remaining sauce. Sprinkle with fennel flowers (optional) and serve.





# NEXT VOLUME

MIYOSHI



Kei! Yokohama's in trouble! It's looking bad!

Maybe so, but...isn't that the JDA or JSDF's job?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Based on our information, there're only 42 hours to act!  
Do you think a big organization can mobilize in that time?

Hmm...

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Even medical relief activities with advance preparation  
need twenty-four hours just to set up an initial  
response, and seventy-two hours for full operation.

But we might be dealing with one hundred thousand  
monsters. What are the two of us supposed to do?  
Even massive stampede scenarios in fiction involve a few  
dozen thousand at most.

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



So it shall be proclaimed, "In January 2019, Yokohama  
fell..." And we'll fall with it, buried under liability claims.

What, are you auditioning for a film trailer narrator?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Plus, Kei, Naruse told us what was happening, right?

Yeah...?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Now that we've heard about it, if we don't try to prevent  
damages, we might even get claims for acting in bad faith!

And your point is?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Kei, bad-faith claims would land us non-dischargeable debt! Not even personal bankruptcy would clear it!

Oof.

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Listen, Kei. Ignoring the physical damage, the official area for Minato Mirai is 1.244 square kilometers. The official standard land value set by the prefecture last year (2018) listed its value at 1,450,000 yen per square meter. If that becomes zero...

C-Come on! It's not going to drop to zero!

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



We'll be in the hole for one trillion, eight hundred three billion, eight hundred thousand yen.

M-Miyoshi! We've got to get going! It's our duty to protect the area's tranquility (starting with our own)!

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



In that case, we'll go...  
**When D-Genesis Volume 6 releases in spring 2022!**  
We'd better hurry up and get the author to write it.

Hey...!

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Plus, Kei, apparently we've got one huge thing wrong!

Hold on! Save that for next volume! Speaking of—

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



See you there!

# TO BE CONTINUED...

## Afterword

Dreaming of escaping into a dungeon to beat the summer heat, coming to you live from the midst of Japan's State of Emergency Declaration (COVID-19 pandemic), it's the author, KONO. It is *hot*. Here I am looking for ways to beat heat exhaustion, while the story's still set in early winter. I hear Yoshimura and Miyoshi are still keeping healthy, getting their dungeon runs in every d—

What? The volume goes on sale in winter? *Ahem*.

Coming to you live from the coldest, bitterest days of winter (probably), frost nipping at my fingers, it's the author, KONO. How have you been recently? This volume's afterword takes the form of an author commentary, running along each of the chapter's days.

### January 8

So "Storage" is out in the open, and likely no one is more perturbed by that fact than Section Chief Saiga and myself. And now there's this business about entrusting an expensive facility to two ne'er-do-wells? If this were a family business it'd be one thing, but as an authority in a public organization... What's poor Saiga to do? What am I to do?

### January 9

Based on my highly scientific data derived from personal experience, a taxi ride all the way from Yoyogi to Yokohama costs about 10,500 yen. When the new price schemes reduced rates for starter fares (the first 1.5 km or so), rates also rose for long-distance rides (destinations more than 50 km away), so watch out.

Of course I understand the rationale; cab companies have their own turfs. They have to make their money on the way out, because a different company will be driving the passengers back. Just one of those things, I suppose. Also, we

get a peak at the elusive Shibu T.!

## January 10

Fans of ribald humor will get a kick out of the “can’t open an umbrella that’s stuck up your ass” idiom. I found it while browsing 4chan. It’s so vulgar I almost hesitated to include it. Almost.

## January 11

It’s true what the characters point out. A common trait of people with nothing going on and people rich enough to be able to buy a premium skill like Storage is a lack of any need for its use. Can’t be helped—at this point in the story, its time-slowness properties aren’t publicly known. About the only area in which saving a gram of cargo is worth the same or more in raw cash is aerospace payloads, I suppose. After that, the parties most likely to benefit from it would be explorers and gritty criminal enterprises. I guess it’s a bit too fantastical to imagine a rash of phantom jewel thieves... Right?

## January 12

After toying with the idea for a while, I finally made some of my own Teastruction. I got some *Swertia japonica* extract—easy enough to obtain from a drug store—but the allyl isothiocyanate (the wasabi extract) proved difficult.

I kept striking out with small sellers, only able to get wasabi paste and oil, which aren’t quiiiite the same. Still, figuring I could at least get a taste of what I’d put my poor boot-campers through, I tried straining some out from ground wasabi paste on my own. The shock to the sinuses was stringent—but brief. Allyl isothiocyanate has an LD50 of a little over 300 milligrams. I don’t think that amount should have any negative health impacts, but maybe don’t try this at home.

## January 13

You don't have to tell me. I know booking out the Javits Center for the end of February in the middle of January would be impossible. But I looked at a schedule for 2019, and there was no event info on the twenty-fourth. The next day was a fashion event so it was almost definitely a day reserved for setup, but I took advantage of that and squeezed the reservation in.

## January 14

Hold on. Our main duo aren't the baddies, are they...?

## January 15

Haruki Yoshida might be desperate to rekindle the last vestiges of his career, but really, I think everyone in the entertainment industry winds up a bit like him one way or another. It's the curse of the industry. You eventually start seeing deep holes in the ground and wanting to lean over and check them out for a scoop. Hold on—you're going to fall in!

And so! The Phantom makes his (per Miyoshi's words) "uproarious" debut. To be fair, if someone I knew was getting all "*Au revoir!*" on top of a gravestone, I'd probably laugh my ass off too. But uh, speaking of standing on graves, it might technically fall under Article 188 of the Japanese penal code prohibiting desecration of cemeteries and places of worship, so let's not try this at home either!

Incidentally, the iron ball that knocks Facile's hand away is flicked from Yoshimura's fingers. Unlike with Storage, you can't put extra speed on objects coming out of Vault. He must have been practicing. Unfortunately, the fact that he used Simon's voice is probably going to lead to trouble... Just a hunch.

## January 16

A massive intelligence buff—produces two micro-sized pups. Glas picks a fight with the hapless protagonist standing next to Miyoshi right away, but he's just trying to monopolize time with his momma—or maybe assert dominance. Poor pup—you'll have to learn to pick a fight with someone your own size!

Thankfully, Gleisad has no such compulsions. He's happily vying for the position of team mascot.

And then—Yokohama. What wicked wind this way blows? And has the Phantom not heard the last from a certain production team?

## January 17

The report finally gets published, and the world learns just what Miyoshi and Yoshimura have been working on.

Those on the front lines of crises tend to have two reactions—a heightened sense of danger or the total absence of one.

However much we might not want to face certain information, we have to! The world's problems can't be solved by sticking our heads in the sand.

Incidentally, Saiga seems to have a lot of faith in D-Powers. Perhaps just faith of an "If I'm giving you a job, I expect you to do it" managerial variety though.

There's a Japanese saying: "Flowers stay the same every year, but people change." I am here to tell you that as the flowers bloom, *books* do not stay the same. Would that they did.

Here I am, volume 5 suddenly completed.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank the tremendously talented ttl for doing the book's illustrations, and frighteningly phenomenal Miya Taira for helming the manga adaptation. Also N., in editing, and the entire proofreading, design, and production teams. And I reserve a special thanks for you, the reader, holding this book in your hands.

Speaking of the manga, in serendipitous timing, the second volume should launch alongside volume 5 of the light novel! Please give it a look! It's certainly different seeing the entire story illustrated.

Lastly—pop quiz! Any guesses as to some of my favorite fruits?? See the first two pages of this afterword for a hint!

With that, I look forward to seeing you next volume!



# Annotations

1. [Had she unlocked an extra move per turn or something?:](#) A reference to the “Zeal” Spirit Command in the *Super Robot Wars* game series, which allows characters an extra action each turn.
2. [Twrch Trwyth:](#) A great enchanted boar appearing in the “Culhwch and Olwen” section of the *Mabinogion* collection of Arthurian tales. Culhwch, cousin of Arthur, is given a series of impossible-sounding tasks by Olwen’s father, the giant Ysbaddaden, in exchange for Olwen’s hand in marriage. Among these tasks is the slaying of a giant boar.
3. [Sounds a little like a French greeting:](#) When asked “Ça va?” you might answer with “Ça va.” “How’s it going?” “I’m fine!”
4. [Bronze-cut pasta:](#) There’s more than one way to strain a noodle. Depending on the style of die, or extruder, used to make pasta, the texture of the noodle is changed. Bronze dies produce rougher, more porous noodles, as bits of the pasta dough cling to its edges when extruded, while Teflon dies produce smoother strands. Voiello and De Cecco are known for their porous cuts, while Buitoni’s are smoother. The former makes for better absorption of sauces, the latter for a more pleasant mouthfeel. Each of the numbered pastas named in this work is its respective brand’s 1.6 millimeter cut.
5. [A gifted appraiser:](#) The FGA, or Fellow of Gemological Association of Great Britain, is an internationally recognized gemological degree, along with the GG, or Graduate Gemologist degree, from the Gemological Institute of America. Most appraisers only get one, as each course is expensive.
6. [Ouzo:](#) An aperitif originally produced in Greece and Cyprus. Although grain alcohol variants have become more common, it was originally said to use grape-distilled liquor, infused with anise and other herbs. Northern variants tend to be drier, southern ones more sweet. The ouzo Miyoshi

brought up was probably a sweeter, southern variety, with stronger anise and fennel flavors.

7. [\*Her scorecard would be marked with an “M”:\*](#) In archery competitions, “M” is used to indicate “miss.”
8. [\*That’s a world record for seventy-meter targets:\*](#) At the time of this story, seven hundred points was the world record. The current world record as of the time of publishing stands at 702, set in Lima in July 2019.
9. [\*I used to watch Heroes:\*](#) An American superhero drama broadcast on NBC. Hiro Nakamura, a Japanese character who helped popularize the phrase “Yatta!” abroad, maintains a blog under the name “Kujo Jotaro,” using time manipulation powers similar to his namesake in *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure: Part 3*. It seems Cathy first became interested in the series via the show. Incidentally, during its broadcast in 2006, she wouldn’t have been in high school yet.
10. [\*But I thought only JoJo: Part 3 was out in English...:\*](#) As of the time of the story. Later, a hardcover English release of *JoJo* Part 1 was published.
11. [\*Looking like a gaudy FGO character:\*](#) A reference to the *Fate/Grand Order* mobile game and multimedia series, which features a *The Phantom of the Opera* character whose fashion sense runs toward the extravagant.
12. [\*On the fourth floor of the Kishi Memorial Gymnasium:\*](#) Many sports federations were located at the gymnasium at the time this work is set, before moving to the Japan Sport Olympic Square in Shinjuku in summer 2019 as part of preparations for the 2020 Olympic Games.
13. [\*Facile:\*](#) From the French word for “easy,” a nickname granted based on his seeming ability to do everything effortlessly.
14. [\*A PhD candidate at the Bavarian State Collection of Zoology had published his findings in Scientific Reports:\*](#)  
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-017-19070-7> “Widespread bone-based fluorescence in chameleons,” published January 2018.
15. [\*USP:\*](#) An automatic German handgun from maker H&K. In the French military, it’s mainly reserved for members of the 1st Marine Infantry



Parachute Regiment—aka the French SAS.

16. [Admiral Sithole](#): From Yoshiki Tanaka's *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*. Miyoshi echoes words of encouragement given to protagonist Yang Wen-Li by his current fleet admiral and former academy headmaster Sidney Sithole, upon promotion to rear admiral of the newly created 13th Fleet. Sithole's response comes when asked by Wen-Li if an assault on the empire's stronghold, Iserlohn Fortress, holds any chance of success.
17. [Schipperke](#): A small, Belgian dog breed. A jet-black miniature sheepdog.
18. [Empty plot directly south of the building](#): A large plot of undeveloped land sitting infamously by the United Nations Headquarters in New York for more than ten years. Currently owned by the Solow Building Company, the same group as the top-floor residents of the Solow Building skyscraper, which many outside New York might be familiar with from city skyline shots in movies and TV.
19. [Perhaps the greatest disconnect between artist and audience in rock history](#): A shot of then-infant Spencer Elden chasing a dollar bill attached to a fishing line adorns the cover of Nirvana's sophomore album, *Nevermind*. Frontman Kurt Cobain had intended the lyrics of the lead single, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," as a mocking joke, aimed at clichéd and vapid concepts of teen coolness at the time, but listeners rallied to it as a teenage anthem and anthesis to then-prevailing rock trends.

# 10 GETZYS



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.





## Glas

Bossy. The kind who stretches  
upward to actively try to make  
himself look taller.

## Gleissad

Friendly and easygoing.  
Rolls around acting cute.









## Bonus Translator's Notes

Another volume of *D-Genesis* has come to an end. This is the translator, Ian, here. As with the last volume, a few moments from volume 5 stand out for a bit of a deeper (dungeon) dive!

Early on in the volume, Tenko refers to Kei, in toxic 2010s YouTuber style, as Miyoshi's "beta buddy." This approximates a similar Japanese honorifics gag taking Kei down a peg in Japanese, drawing from Tenko's fake Kansai-region dialect, which he affects in the vein of many quirky entertainment personalities in Japan.

In Japanese, Tenko refers to Kei using the honorific "*don*." Kei expresses confusion at the phrase, and is instructed that certain Kansai variants come with an extra set of vernacular, hierarchical titles running "*yan*," "*don*," "*han*," and then finally the national standard "*san*," from lowest to highest ranking.

"I was reminded of a TV show that aired long before I was born, called *Bantohan and Decchi-don*. Now I finally understood its title," Kei narrates.

"*But does that also mean that the Kane-yan nickname for Japanese hall-of-fame pitcher Masaichi Kaneda meant he was at the bottom?* I could see it, in the sense of ribbing between close friends."

"So is he making fun of me then?"

"Who knows? Naniwa culture's a tough nut to crack," Miyoshi responded, referring to a particular region of Osaka."

"Although Tenko's actually from Kanagawa," I pointed out."

The folktale of "Hanasakajisan" that Yoshimura brings up—in response to Miyoshi suggesting they act as if Cavall has dug up an orb for them in the dungeon to fool onlookers—is a rather grim one. In the story, localized as "The Story of the Old Man who Made Withered Trees to Blossom" by Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford (and known by other English titles over the years), a couple's dog digs up a box of gold in their yard. When a jealous neighbor steals

the dog and tries to replicate the feat, it digs up only bones, leading to the neighbor killing the pup in a fit of rage. The dog's ghost continues to direct its original owners in inexplicable actions that lead to financial windfall, while the jealous neighbor replicates them to no or negative effect.

During boot camp, Kei refers to Cathy as nodding so much she resembles a "bobblehead." In Japanese, he compares her slightly more specifically to an *akabeko*, a traditional wooden bobblehead toy from Japan's Aizu region—now popularized throughout the country—carved in the shape of a red cow. The reference was localized to a broader reference for the pacing of the scene, with the full cultural context here.

As Miyoshi encourages Kei to keep up his world-saving shtick as the Phantom, Kei comments that her enthusiastic wording would be better suited to "action-figure packaging." In Japanese, he comments that it would be more fitting for the pack-in material for *shokugan*, combination snack food and toy packs commonly sold in bookstores, supermarkets, and convenience stores. Miyoshi goes on to comment that these days the snack food itself is more the pack-in material, with the toy element becoming more prominent. In English, to fit with the reference switch, this is instead changed to the similarly kids-these-days lamentation about action figures themselves no longer currying much favor.

Finally, a dialect pun lost in translation: as Ratel's sniper Shoot attacks Tenko and co. in the dungeon, Tenko lets loose an airwave-friendly "shoot," which his assailant cheekily takes as a command.

In Japanese, in Tenko's attempt to mimic an extravagant Kansai dialect, he uses the phrase "*Nanbashotto?!,*" which Yoshida is quick to point out to him is actually Fukuoka dialect, not Kansai—a variant of "*Nani wo surunda?*" or "What are you doing?"/"What's the big idea?" Shoot mishears this as the English "nunnin' but shoot," leading to him cheekily responding "exactly," and beginning to fire on the zombies.

That's it! See you next volume, as Kei and Miyoshi tackle the creepy cleaners of the former Loot Box Dungeon. *Au revoir!*



# D GENESIS

WRITTEN BY  
KONO Tsuranori  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
H

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared

05







## Glas

Bossy. The kind who stretches  
upward to actively try to make  
himself look taller.

## Gleissad

Friendly and easygoing.  
Rolls around acting cute.











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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 5

by KONO Tsuranori

Illustrations by ttl

Translated by Ian Sacks Edited by Jonathan Engel

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D GENESIS DUNGEON GA DEKITE 3 NEN Vol.5

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