

WRITTEN BY

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GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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Prologue

Three Years Ago

Nevada, United States of America

The US had staked their reputation on building a large-scale particle accelerator, constructing the facility in Nevada. There, the accelerator now extended from Groom Lake to Bald Mountain, boasting a circumference of 120 kilometers. On this day, 150 meters underground, the power output had been increased to confirm the existence of other dimensions. Eventually, the collisional energy reached a point far exceeding that of the Large Halogen Collider. Right as this happened, measurement instruments logged the smashing together of numerous particles into memory. Afterwards, the results appeared on a monitor.

“...We’ve confirmed the formation of a micro black hole!”

Cheers rose in unison, celebrating the moment of a new theory being proven.

“You’ve done it, Dr. Tyler!”

The surrounding scientists hurried over to shake the hand of Dr. Theodore Nanase Tyler, who had led the experiment.

“Great work, Ted!”

Tyler gripped the man’s hand. “Oh, anything but *that* nickname,” he said with a laugh, basking in his moment of glory. “Do I look like a talking stuffed animal?”

A young scientist watched with reverence. But after sharing in the excitement for a while, he suddenly noticed something strange on the monitor. Following the experiment’s success, the computer had continued following its programming, processing the information accumulating by the femtosecond. It now displayed some rather...unbelievable results on the monitor.

“Dr. Tyler, look at this!”

The young scientist's involuntary shout—more like a scream—was enough to draw everyone's attention.

"What's wrong?" Tyler asked.

Young researchers were liable to make small mistakes at any given moment. Tyler had learned that lesson all too well during his long career. He also knew that, during times like these, raising his voice would only make the problem worse.

Tyler approached the young researcher calmly. However, he couldn't comprehend the man's answer when it came.

"Th-The micro black hole..." The younger scientist hesitated before finally blurting the words out. "It hasn't disappeared!"

Silence fell over the room. Everyone shared the same thought: *That's absurd.*

If the theory had proven correct, the micro black hole should have evaporated in a single moment due to Hawking radiation. The mass used in its creation had been no more than a single proton.

"Multiple micro black holes are moving rapidly throughout the space! It's..." The younger researcher struggled to describe what he was seeing. "It's like some kind of force field has taken hold of them!"

At first, there was nothing more than a distortion of space on a quantum level. *IT* recognized this distortion, occurring within a single moment of time, as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to grant *ITS* wish. And so, *IT* grabbed hold of the distortion, carefully adding energy to it, making it expand.

Washington, D.C., United States of America

"*Th-There's some kind of huge mass inside the fixed force field... What the hell is that?!*"

As someone's cries echoed through the speaker, a white light filled the monitor, and the video ended.

“Is that everything?”

A nervous-looking man in a magnificent three-piece suit from Chester Barrie refolded his legs after asking that question.

“Yes,” reported a subordinate. “This is the only footage recorded at ground control of the accelerator experiment, which was conducted at Groom Lake Air Force Base.”

“In other words, ground control is intact? And what about the nuclear power plant? The one built to supply the base with energy.”

The nightmare of Three Mile Island flashed through the man’s mind. He wanted to avoid a repeat of that incident.

“There hasn’t been any significant effect on the surface,” continued the subordinate. “We’ve only lost contact with the underground, where the accelerator was built. The nuclear plant is fine.”

“What about the micro black hole?”

“I don’t know. But whatever happens to it, I can’t imagine that it’ll continue growing and consume the Earth.”

Hearing this, the man in the Chester Barrie suit relaxed, nodding. “And what about the rescue mission?”

“Initially, members of the base carried out the operation, yet anything resembling an elevator was completely shut down, not moving in the slightest. As such, the rescue team used the emergency stairs at point three on the west side of Bald Mountain to gain access. However...”

The subordinate brought up a still image on the monitor.

“...What’s this?” asked the man in the Chester Barrie suit. “The latest action flick from Hollywood?”

The image depicted something humanoid with a dreadful face and bluish skin.

“This creature is over ten feet tall,” answered the subordinate. “It’s the first lifeform that the rescue team encountered.”

Had this been a fantasy movie, the creature would have been called a troll or

ogre.

“The first two soldiers who immediately opened fire were killed,” the subordinate continued. “Their GAU-5A ASDWs⁽¹⁾ were about as effective as peashooters.”

Dumbfounded, the man in the Chester Barrie suit let slip the setting of a game he’d played obsessively in his youth. “Were those scientists experimenting on a teleportation device between Phobos and Deimos?”⁽²⁾

Nevertheless, he quickly shook his head, firing off a few orders.

The organism seemed to act with intelligence, performing with intent. *ITS* organs, which unceasingly generated weak yet complex electrical currents, suggested various things to *IT*. Between a moment and eternity, *IT* trembled with joy, unleashing vast resources. All to fulfill *ITS* own desires.

On this day, one hundred and fifty meters beneath Groom Lake, the first dungeon was born. Later, it would become known as The Ring.

Present, September 2018

Nevada, Area 51 Dungeon Laboratory

At the end of September, the daytime temperature of Nevada still exceeded twenty-five degrees Celsius. A hot, dry wind blew across the land.

In a certain government laboratory, Director Aaron Ainsworth raised his voice. “Has the Dungeon Passage Theory been proven?”

According to this theory, dungeons were passageways leading somewhere unknown. Similar to the Hollow Earth theory, this was but more wild speculation. Even so, the media had reported on it for their own amusement. Once it had become known that dungeons existed in “pocket dimensions” separate from Earth, some researchers had taken to studying the theory seriously. Of course, the most ardent supporters of it were questionable religious groups and dubious, self-proclaimed “researchers” who were popular with the media.

“Proven, sir?” a liaison officer spoke up. “That might be a little hasty.”

Underneath Aaron’s glare, the liaison officer timidly explained. Exactly one month ago, a particular skill orb had been found in the Ob River basin of Russia—more precisely, in a dungeon between Surgut and Nizhnevartovsk. The skill contained within that orb had been “Otherworldly Language Comprehension.”

Immediately, the finder had tried sending the orb to Moscow, but due to some bad weather with unfortunate timing, the plane hadn’t been able to take off. Right before the orb had disappeared, it had been used by someone who happened to be in the vicinity while in possession of a D-Card.

“So, has the name of the skill recipient been disclosed?” Aaron asked. “Given that the skill is academic, there shouldn’t be any way of hiding the user’s name.”

“Yes. According to the published paper, the recipient’s name is Ignat Severni.”

As far as Aaron knew, there were no dungeon researchers with that name in Russia.

“Here are the contents of the announcement,” continued the liaison officer, offering a memory card. “It’s a partial translation of an inscription found in a dungeon.”

Snatching the memory card from the officer, Aaron inserted it into the slot of his tablet. Then he entered his passcode, immediately opening the file. The contents were shocking.

“Dungeons are terraforming tools?”

According to this file, the dungeons—driven into the Earth like needles—were the means to create a substance called “magicules.” Apparently, this substance filled the otherworld. And apparently, the otherworld wanted to terraform foreign worlds. If a world selected for terraforming lacked magicules, dungeons would send out this substance in the form of monsters.

If true, this action could certainly be described as terraforming. Also according to the translation, dungeons with over 128 levels were passageways to the otherworld.

"If this is true, it would be more than shocking," said Aaron. "It would cause an uproar."

"I agree."

Yet for now, only one man—Ignat Severni—could understand the contents of the inscription. No one could verify what he claimed to have translated. For now, only God and God alone could prove that he hadn't merely committed his delusions to paper.

"To verify these claims, someone else would have to obtain the same skill orb and read the inscription," the officer commented.

"Has the monster who drops them been confirmed to exist in the US?"

"The drop monster hasn't been officially announced. But the skill orb was found in the Kiryas Kul'yegan Dungeon. It's located where the Reka Kul'yegan connects to the Ob River. In accordance with the International Dungeon Treaty, the monsters within the captured range have been made public. So, if we research them one by one..."

Hearing this, Aaron sighed. "It's a roundabout solution, but I suppose we have no other choice."

From the window behind his desk, he gazed at the Nevada landscape as the sun dimmed. At the end of September, the temperature cooled rapidly when dusk fell. Had the chilly air caused him to shiver? If not, had it been due to the power of *something* just one hundred and fifty meters below his feet?

And so, night fell over Nevada.

Chapter 01: And So, We Quit Our Jobs

September 27, 2018 (Thursday)

New National Stadium, Vicinity of the Aoyama Entrance

“It just had to rain *now*, didn’t it?” I muttered, watching the droplets pound against the windshield.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, I’d parked my car on the side of the road. Although autumn had deepened, the heat index inside the vehicle was rising.

“So, did everything go well?”

The cause of the skyrocketing heat index posed this question in a displeased tone from the other side of my hands-free phone call. The voice belonged to Yoshitake Enoki—my boss, for better or worse.

After a mistake in his management had angered a client, he’d sent me—a lowly employee—to apologize. No wonder the client doubted his sincerity.

“No,” I replied. “Looks like they’re terminating the deal...”

“What?! And just how did you apologize to them?”

In response to such a serious incident, you sent out someone else to do your grunt work, and you expected anything less? Are you an idiot? That’s what I wanted to ask. What I really, *really* wanted to ask.

“I hear what you’re saying,” I replied instead. “Even so, I wasn’t directly involved in this situation.”

Sure, various departments used me at their convenience, but I *was* a researcher, more or less. This was a sales job. Furthermore, I hadn’t been given a sufficient explanation for the situation. Until I met the client, I hadn’t known the problem was a failure in product development due to a misuse of DGB-2473.

“What are you talking about?” Enoki asked. “Your team created the materials,

right?"

Huh? Where do you get off saying that? You're the one who sold the materials to be used in an environment outside the guaranteed range.

"But aren't there annotations about DGB-2473 in the user's manual?" I asked. "If used outside the guaranteed environment, it won't produce the specified values. That much should be ob—"

"Did you explain that to the sales department?"

No, I didn't. Still, before carelessly claiming that something is usable, you should at least read the instructions for the materials you're selling.

"No, not directly," I answered.

"In that case, this is *your* team's mistake."

On the other end of the phone, Enoki ranted about proper business protocol. *Ugh, I've had enough of this guy.*

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You're sorry? In other words, you're admitting that this is your screwup. You really are useless. We're done here. Since you lost such an important client, I'll be docking your pay. Don't expect any bonuses either."

What? I wasn't even involved in this mess. This is all thanks to your crappy management!

Just as I tried to voice my complaints, Enoki hung up. Figured.

I sighed. This was all so absurd. A dock in pay? No bonus? What had Enoki been on about? *"If we succeed, it's all thanks to me; but if we fail, you're to blame."* How did a guy like that end up as anyone's boss?

"Then again, he's probably gotten that far ahead *because* he's that sort of person..."

If you merely looked at his profile, he had an amazing work history.

"Ugh, I feel like dying." I sighed again. "How am I supposed to go back to work...?"

The rain pounding against the roof of my car grew louder. When I turned on

the engine, cheerful music started playing on the radio. Perhaps I could raise my spirits, even a little. Gripping the steering wheel with one hand, I lifted my index finger to tap out the song's rhythm. As I turned on the windshield wipers, the music suddenly cut off.

"Huh?"

"Breaking news," the radio announcer said. "In America, a mid-depth dungeon has finally been captured!"

"Incredible!" someone else replied.

It sounded like this development had caused quite the stir within the news studio. Hearing that a mid-depth dungeon had been captured didn't mean that much to me, but apparently it was important enough for a news flash.

"There must have been some incredible items inside a mid-depth dungeon," noted someone in the news studio.

Three years had already passed since dungeons first appeared in the world. The initial chaos had died down, and exploring dungeons had become as commonplace as fishing in slightly dangerous locations. Defeating a monster sounded dangerous, but the act itself wasn't too different from hunting or fishing. To some extent, each of those activities posed life-threatening risks.

Maybe diving into a dungeon and having one of those "adventures" would help me blow off some steam.

While considering this, I started the car. This area—located around the outer gardens of Meiji Shrine—boasted many structures related to the upcoming Olympics. Even now, construction had started on several large buildings.

As the rain picked up momentum, the sound of water pounding against the rooftop resounded throughout my car.

"Given that it's been three years since the dungeons appeared, this feels like a long time in the making," said the radio announcer. "Today, we welcome dungeon researcher Haruki Yoshida. Thank you for being here, Mr. Yoshida."

Haruki Yoshida, huh?

I'd heard that name a lot lately, but I was skeptical of him being a researcher.

After all, no one knew his dungeon rank. Did he even dive?

“Thank you for having me,” replied Yoshida.

“The mid-depth dungeon was captured in Denver, Colorado—part of Area 36. Known as Evans Dungeon, it was discovered in Summit Lake on Mount Evans, and it’s been said to contain thirty-one levels. What are your thoughts on the matter, Mr. Yoshida?”

“Only a small number of minor-depth dungeons, which are up to twenty levels, have been fully traversed. As such, this is quite the accomplishment.”

“I see. Incidentally, what exactly *is* a mid-depth dungeon?”

“Great question. So far, about eighty dungeons have been discovered throughout the world, and for the sake of convenience, they’ve been classified into three categories: minor-depth, mid-depth, and massive-depth.”

“I’ve heard the term ‘deep underground’ before, but that doesn’t appear to be in use here.”

“Correct. ‘Deep underground’ was originally an MLIT term—that is, a term used by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism. For MLIT, ‘deep underground’ was used to describe a concept related to subterranean utilization. Therefore, it wasn’t suited to dungeon classification, and to prevent misunderstandings, new terms were created.”

“I see.”

“Dungeons are defined by their number of floors. Those with fewer than twenty-one are minor-depth, and those with fewer than eighty are mid-depth. Anything with more than that is a massive-depth dungeon.”

Actually, I’d heard another rumor. As a result of various military-funded dungeon dives, the boundary at which small arms became ineffective had been used to determine the classifications.

“Well then, despite being mid-depth, Evans Dungeon isn’t very deep, is it?” the announcer asked.

“No, it’s hard to say anything for certain, as these classifications are merely for the sake of convenience,” replied Yoshida. “For starters, we still haven’t

identified a massive-depth dungeon that meets this exact definition. To give an example, the Self-Defense Force's countermeasures team has reached the twenty-first level of Yoyogi Dungeon in Tokyo. Thus, we've confirmed Yoyogi to be a mid-depth dungeon or higher, but..."

"Until we descend farther, we won't know the actual number of levels?"

"That's right. If twenty-one or more levels are found during an actual descent, we know the dungeon to be mid-depth. However, very few dungeons have been captured to such an extent. Seeing as no one has reached level eighty, we don't know whether such a floor exists in any dungeon."

"I see. So, it's possible that dungeons are only thirty-one levels?"

"Until someone reaches the thirty-second level, that remains a possibility."

"However, it's been announced that there are five minor-depth and four mid-to massive-depth dungeons in Japan. How do we know this?"

"Those are merely estimates. Right now, by measuring a particular sort of vibration that occurs during the formation of a dungeon—otherwise known as a dungeon tremor—we can estimate the depth of the underground space occupied by the dungeon. The JDA refers to this as 'dungeon depth,' expressing the number in meters."

"Incredible."

"Because Japan is such an earthquake-prone country, we already had Hi-net and GEONET in place when the dungeons first appeared. By comparing the records of those systems, we were able to estimate the approximate depth of known dungeons. Even so, the insides of dungeons are mysterious spaces. In reality, we don't even know if there's a strict relationship between the number of levels and a dungeon's depth. 'If the occupied area has a great depth, there should be a large number of floors, right?' That's about as much as we know."

"So that's how it works."

"Two minor-depth dungeons have already been fully traversed in Japan. By comparing their levels to the calculated dungeon depths, we can make an analogical inference about the number of floors in other dungeons. That's the basis for our previously mentioned estimate."

“Makes perfect sense. By the way, I’ve heard that several skill orbs were dropped on the lowest level of Evans Dungeon. Unfortunately, the details haven’t been announced.”

“Well, of everything you can obtain from a dungeon, everyone dreams of finding an orb.”

“Skill orbs, huh...?” I muttered to myself.

The appearance of dungeons had led to a massive global disturbance. After all, much like in a fantasy world, monsters prowled dungeon interiors. Still, there being a small increase in dangerous places like the taiga and tropical rainforests wouldn’t have been very significant. Carnivorous beasts dangerous to human society had always lurked in such locations.

What had truly shaken the world were the three items obtainable from dungeons: cards, potions, and skill orbs. The first dungeon card—D-Card for short—to be discovered had rocked the scientific community as a highly futuristic piece of technology. Even so, these items hadn’t directly impacted our lives in any significant way.

When someone first defeated a monster, it would drop a card containing the person’s name and various informative details. That was the extent of the phenomenon. Even now, D-Cards were most commonly used to check the skills of explorers.

Yet at first, everyone had been under the impression that they were far more mysterious objects. A string of fourteen small letters were engraved upon the upper back side of each card. The strange characters used in these engravings had caused a small stir within the philological community. But seeing as they couldn’t possibly be deciphered, the letters had simply been collected into different categories.

Later, tablet-shaped sheets had been discovered in The Link, the writing on their surfaces matching the engraved character strings on D-Cards. Following this discovery, these letters had once again become a popular topic throughout society, but nothing more had come of them.

However, the next discovery—potions—had proven to be completely different. The first potion had been dropped on top of a dying soldier, whose lower body had been severed from his torso. By sheer coincidence, the soldier had used this potion, leading to a worldwide sensation. As if to make a mockery of modern medical science, the lower half of his body had reconnected to his torso. Thus, he had returned from the seemingly inevitable grasp of death.

This had been enough to convince governments, armies, and even major corporations to take the initiative and send people into dungeons. Afterwards, due to the various items discovered within them, dungeons had gained recognition as something similar to mines for special resources.

During all this, the first skill orb had also been discovered. These items helped guide humanity to an even higher state, granting those who used them the ability to wield magic. In short, skill orbs could transform fiction into reality.

At the moment, serious debates about the heredity of these abilities were ongoing. Soldiers on the front lines would supposedly register their genetic maps before expeditions. Following the use of an orb, these maps would serve as points of comparison.

If the first orb user had conceived a child immediately after finding and gaining their skill, that boy or girl should have already been born. However, no such news had been reported on. It was rumored that less democratic countries were using artificial insemination to mass produce such children.

In any case, skill orbs were in circulation, and if they were used for crime, world order would be liable to collapse. Fearing this, government administrators had immediately established the WDA—the World Dungeon Association—to manage dungeon-produced items. Yet in the end, they hadn't been able to manage skill orbs. Despite being stored under the utmost security, the first few orbs gathered from various regions had disappeared from their warehouses.

Naturally, there had been suspicions of wrongdoing and of employees selling them on the black market. But since this had occurred intermittently across the world, it had been difficult to attribute every case to human action, even if they were few in number.

Later, strict surveillance had confirmed that skill orbs disappeared exactly twenty-three hours, fifty-six minutes, and four seconds after appearing in the world, matching the time of the Earth's rotation. This meant that the transportation of skill orbs was incredibly complex. Likewise, there were many conflicting opinions on how to handle them in a legal sense.

Due to their extreme rarity, an economic value hadn't been determined, and if left unused, their value would drop to zero in twenty-four hours. It had become a matter of debate whether such an item could be independently regarded as property. Various interpretations had been attempted, but at present, skill orbs weren't considered private property due to their uncontrollability. Legally, it had been decided that the free use of skill orbs couldn't be considered a gift or transfer.

Even if skill orbs were considered tangible objects, all of them were products of nature. In other words, they were moveable property without owners. Thus, even if Person A obtained a skill orb, it would remain ownerless property unless he or she claimed ownership. And if Person A transferred a skill orb to Person B, that would simply be a physical means of moving ownerless property. Unless someone in the middle of this process claimed ownership of the orb, it would—in the end—be considered the possession of whoever *used* it, regardless of the route it took.

Obviously, if any buying or selling occurred during this interval, a dungeon tax would be imposed. And so, the world had failed to manage skill orbs. But in the end, global order hadn't collapsed either. After all, very few orbs existed, and the number of users unknown to WDA administrators was even fewer.

And of course, crimes using the power of orbs might not have been recognized as such; consequently, they wouldn't come to light. Likewise, such crimes had probably existed before the appearance of orbs, and as a result, it seemed as though nothing had changed in the grand scheme of things.

Furthermore, people who hadn't materialized a D-Card couldn't use orbs. If someone wished to receive the benefits of one, they would have to defeat a monster at least once. No matter how low the chances of obtaining an orb happened to be, it was best to prepare in advance, as your chance would only last for a day. A surprising number of people thought this way, especially in

developed countries.

When the dungeons had first appeared, each and every government had fallen into panic, their responses always one or two steps behind. Yet within a year, laws and management systems had settled into place. Thanks to various governments and the WDA, many dungeons had become manageable.

“Finding an orb would be one hell of a get-rich-quick scheme,” I said. “But one of those will never make its way to the general public.”

Though rumors of teleportation magic or discovering a mystical item box flew around the web, information about orb users tended to be concealed. For this reason, none of it was very credible. Of course, if someone wanted to publicize their personal information, they were free to do so. Even if it made their lives slightly more inconvenient, they would certainly draw attention.

And thus, groups like Dg48 were born in the entertainment industry. If you gave a skill orb to your favorite celeb, you could go on a quasi-date with them until it disappeared. “The handshake ticket business sure has come a long way,” some people said, mocking the practice. Sure, it might have been unprincipled, but I suppose that was what it meant to live audaciously.

“I could learn a thing or two from them...”

When the traffic light turned green, I stepped on the accelerator, starting the car. Just then, it bounced, the feeling of tires leaving the road traveling up to my hips.

“Wh-What the hell?!”

Multiple cars that had been crossing the intersection now crashed together, causing accidents everywhere.

“Oh crap!”

Trying to get off the road, I yanked the steering wheel, and ended up swerving into some kind of construction site. My front tire caught inside a deep fissure running through the ground, making my car spin. Now that things had come to this, I had no choice but to take my foot off the accelerator and wait.

As my car performed a clean spin, I noticed a small shadow near the tire outside. But the vehicle's movements were outside of my control. Suddenly, I heard a loud thud beneath my car, causing me to break out in a cold sweat.

“Don’t tell me...”

That couldn’t have been a person, right? Judging from the size, it would have been a child.

I’d hit the object pretty hard. If someone had gotten caught up in that, they would have suffered more than a scratch or two. From within my spinning car, I prayed for the person’s safety as I frantically looked around the area.

Right before I crashed into a semi-trailer truck carrying a large quantity of rebar, the car finally stopped. Throwing open the door, I dashed into the rain, searching for whatever I’d hit. As the downpour intensified, I struggled to see through the misty spray. Even so, something black had collapsed next to the truck, just a short distance ahead of me.

“Hey, are you all right?!”

Panicking, I raced over to the shadow, but just as I started to extend a hand, I noticed something odd about it. I’d seen this creature in a number of videos, but this was my first time viewing one in the flesh. And no, it wasn’t a person.

“A g-goblin?”

As I muttered these words, the creature resembling a goblin transformed into black particles before my very eyes. In its place, only a single card of dull silver remained.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Area: 12

Rank: 99,726,438

The first time a person defeated a monster, this card—a Dungeon Card—always dropped. A great deal remained unknown about these cards, such as how they obtained the owner’s name and recorded details. For a short while,

the cards had been rumored to contain rare metal, but they were apparently created from common materials.

The area section displayed the location where the card had materialized. Based on inductive conjecture from the information on dungeon cards, it was speculated that the longitude of 110 to 120 degrees west was Area 1. Thereafter, with every ten degrees of longitude in the direction of Earth's rotation, the area number would increase by one, coming full circle at Area 36. Recently, an Inuit man from Pond Inlet had acquired an Area 0 card. Thus, some people conjectured that the polar regions must be Area 0.

In any case, being at 139 degrees east longitude, Tokyo stood on the eastern edge of Area 12.

"Rank 99,726,438, huh?"

Supposedly, a person's rank used something obtained from monsters to order all of humanity. For convenience's sake, it was called "experience points," imitating video games. Since I'd just killed my first goblin, there were more than ninety-nine million people in the world who had defeated more monsters than I.

One seventieth of humanity had already come into contact with monsters. I couldn't tell if that number was large or small.

Considering this absentmindedly, I let out a deep breath, muttering to myself. "Whatever. Just glad it wasn't a child."

I pocketed the card and started to relax, leaning back against the semi-trailer truck. Confused voices and smoke rose from the intersection. Apparently, a large earthquake had just occurred.

"Is my apartment going to be okay?" I wondered out loud.

After all, I lived in a shabby, two-story apartment building some fifty years old. If it got crushed in a large earthquake, it wouldn't be the least bit strange.

Anyway, I was already soaking wet. Even if I went back to work, I didn't have a change of clothes. I decided to return home for a little while, and—

While thinking this, I slid backwards, hitting the ground.



“Ouch! What just happened?”

Turning around, I found the truck loaded with rebar moving backwards and sinking into something.

“Huh?!”

A large, deep fissure stretched across the ground, consuming the falling truck. I must have given the precariously balanced vehicle one final push over the edge. Fortunately, the truck stopped while only half-submerged in the crevice. Even so, the large quantity of rebar—increasingly long and thick—continued sliding into the hole.

“Um, yeah, that fissure just naturally swallowed up the truck, right? This has nothing to do with me, okay? I can’t possibly pay for—”

Breaking out in a cold sweat, I watched the massive amount of rebar plunging into the crevice. In any case, the pouring rain had already soaked me from head to foot, so what did a bit of cold sweat matter? As similarly incomprehensible thoughts crossed my mind, the sound of rebar hitting the bottom never rang out, no matter how much time passed.

I circled over to the side of the fissure, wondering if maybe the rebar hadn’t fallen after all. Alongside a faint crashing sound, an eerie voice reverberated from the depths of the Earth, like a violent aftershock assaulting me.

“Wha—?!”

From within my body, I felt as if something were forcing me upwards. At the same time, a dizzying sensation overcame me. Once this passed, I opened my eyes, and discovered that a beautiful, rainbow-colored orb had appeared in front of me.

Upon catching sight of the orb, I fled, calculating the rebar’s fall distance in my head. It had been in free fall for around twenty seconds, and I assumed a diameter of four centimeters and a length of about ten meters. In that case, the fall distance would have been more than...a thousand meters.

“Even if the rebar fell vertically, reaching terminal velocity seems unlikely.”

As I muttered these words to myself for no apparent reason, the orb

continued floating before my eyes.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“I’m kind of lost here... What exactly am I supposed to report?”

Miharu Naruse found herself in a difficult situation. The Dungeon Management & Monitoring Section of the JDA—otherwise known as the Japanese Dungeon Association—responded to the formation of dungeons within the country, overseeing their capture status.

Though new dungeons didn’t form too frequently, some claimed they appeared at a rate of one per year in each designated area. Of course, unlike Japan, very few countries had high-precision seismographs installed on a nationwide scale. Thus, many dungeons were presumably still undiscovered. A little while ago, seismographs had picked up the response of a dungeon forming, and yet...

“Reporting exactly what happened should suffice,” said Miharu’s boss.

“Yes, Mr. Furai!”

Lifting her head, Miharu found a young, nervous-looking man with a receding hairline standing in front of her. At twenty-nine years old, his name was Kakeru Furai. As the subsection chief of the Dungeon Management Section, he was Miharu’s boss.

“If you’re feeling lost, just reporting what happened should be even more important,” Furai continued. “Adding your own theories will only confuse the matter.”

“Yes, sir.”

That was true, but if Miharu reported exactly what had occurred, her sanity would likely be called into question. Because of this, she hesitated.

“Why the serious face?” Furai asked. “What on earth happened?”

“Well then, um... I’ll report everything as it was measured!”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you to do from the start.”

Like I care anymore. I'll leave the rest of this to my boss.

Having made her decision, Miharu began speaking fluently. “At 14:32, we caught a tremor that appeared to be a dungeon forming near the New National Stadium.”

“Right next to Yoyogi?!”

Three years ago, Yoyogi Dungeon had appeared between the NHK Broadcasting Center and the second gymnasium of Yoyogi Stadium.

“It formed about one kilometer away in a straight line, I think?” Miharu replied.

“That close? What about its size?”

“Well, um... It was a massive-depth dungeon.”

“Are you serious?”

“If the measurements are correct, it was over fourteen hundred meters deep.”

“Fourteen hundred?!”

Yoyogi Dungeon had a depth of 280 meters—and this one had been five times larger. Undoubtedly, this new dungeon had been one of the deepest in the world.

“Wait,” Furai said. “In that case, the Oedo Line is in serious trouble... Contact the relevant authorities immediately!”

A dungeon suddenly appearing in the center of the city would destroy the underground infrastructure. When Yoyogi Dungeon had emerged three years ago, the Chiyoda Line had been severed from Yoyogi Park to Harajuku, nearly causing a serious accident. Currently, it was early afternoon on a weekday. If a subway line were to suddenly disappear at this hour, it would cause a major catastrophe. Even so...

“Well, um, since this happened near Aoyama Gate, things are probably fine,” Miharu said.

Research had shown the actual space occupied by dungeons to be cylindrical

in nature, having a diameter of several to—at most—ten odd meters. It was known that dungeon tremors were the impact of that “needle” being driven into the Earth. Likewise, vanishing tremors were the impact that took place during the needle’s removal.

From Aoyama Gate, the route to Oedo Line was a little less than two hundred meters. If these measurements proved correct, no damage should have occurred on the line.

“Even so, reports are still necessary,” Furai said. “We need to close the entrance, and some impact to stadium construction is inevitable. Inform the Olympic Committee of—”

“Wait, please.”

“What is it?” Furai asked, not hiding his irritation during this crisis.

“Well, you see... It’s gone.”

“Gone? What’s gone?”

“The dungeon, sir.”

Furai’s expression resembled that of a pigeon hit with a peashooter. *Is that what my face looked like when I saw the data earlier?* Miharu wondered, bracing herself for the coming storm.

“A massive-depth dungeon appeared in Tokyo,” Furai said, glancing at his wristwatch, “and disappeared within an hour? Is this some kind of joke?”

The man wore a thin smile that indicated, “If this *is* a joke, you’re not getting off easy.” *So, it’s come to this,* thought Miharu, her shoulders slumping.

“That’s why I hesitated to make this report,” she said. “In any case, as of 15:20, the massive-depth dungeon that appeared at 14:32 near Aoyama Gate of the New National Stadium had already disappeared. A vanishing tremor, which closely resembled the one in Denver, has also been recorded—and only minutes after the dungeon’s appearance.”

After defeating what had seemed to be the final monster in Denver, the entire team had returned to the surface. A little while later, a vanishing tremor had been recorded. After that, it had been reported that only the vestiges of a

collapsed hole had remained. Similar phenomena had been reported in fully traversed, minor-depth dungeons as well.

“Are you telling me someone captured a massive-depth dungeon minutes after it appeared?” Furai asked.

“I honestly don’t know—but the Olympics are on schedule and Tokyo’s citizens are safe. Isn’t that enough?”

Miharu cobbled together that sentence in the face of her dumbfounded boss. Then she bowed her head; she had nothing left to say.

After hearing her report, Furai regarded Miharu with a grave look. “So, what do you think I should tell *my* boss?”

Yoyogi-Hachiman

Grabbing the orb, I placed it in a bag, and made a quick escape. Still at an angle, the semi-trailer truck was half-buried in dirt. Though the hole had disappeared in the blink of an eye, the fissure still remained, swallowing the vehicle.

Not wanting to carry the orb around while I was soaking wet, I immediately called my company to leave work early. On the other end of the phone, Enoki hurled abuse at me. “Yes, yes, understood,” I answered mechanically, ending the call.

One hour later, I exited the shower in my apartment and sat before my kotatsu, which stood next to my bed all year round.

“All righty then, how much is this thing worth?”

Touching the orb, I learned its name. Apparently, the mysterious number beneath the name—called the orb count—displayed the amount of time that had passed since its discovery. Once this number reached 1436 minutes, the orb would disappear. The world at large already knew this.

“May King—0074. The monarch of spring, eh? Doesn’t sound bad. Wonder if it’s related to agriculture?”

Booting up my laptop, I accessed the JDA’s orb purchase list, entering in “May

King.” However, the search yielded zero results.

The orb purchase list cataloged how much various companies, organizations, and individuals would pay for particular orbs. Whoever found an orb could contact the JDA and use them as an intermediary to make a deal with the buyer.

At any rate, following the discovery of an orb, the finder only had one day to make the sale. Unlike at a regular store, picking out and buying something from a row of products was impossible. Similarly, there was no time to hold an auction. In the end, selling to the buyer through a direct conversation had become the norm.

“Too bad,” I said. “Well, at least I can check out what sort of functions it has.”

I accessed the JDA’s skill database, typing in “May King.” Again, the search yielded nothing.

“Hey, hey, what’s going on here? Is this an unknown skill?”

Of course, the JDA database was connected to the WDA. In other words, up until now, no one in the world had discovered this orb. Unknown skills with vague functions had almost no sales channels. After all, you couldn’t attach a price to them. And obviously, there was no time for investigations or negotiations.

“My get-rich-quick scheme with the dream orb...and it’s a total bust. So much for quitting my job.”

My shoulders slumped, imagining the trouble I’d be in when I went to work tomorrow. After dwelling on these utterly depressing thoughts, I shook my head, and went to the kitchen to boil water. Placing the kettle on the stove, I took out some rather fine tea leaves from the cupboard, trying to cheer myself up.

“Gyokuro from Hoshino village really is the best.”

Located near the prefectural border of Fukuoka and Oita, Hoshino Village was one of the leading producers of gyokuro—a kind of high-quality green tea—in Japan. Generally, it was sold as Yamecha green tea.

After boiling the water, I took the kettle off the stove. While waiting for the temperature to drop, I glanced again at the orb on my desk.

“Guess I’ll have to use it myself, huh?”

Pouring the Yamecha—whose temperature I’d carefully managed—into a cup, I sat down at my kotatsu once more, taking a gulp of tea.

“Hmm? The flavor’s a lot stronger than usual... Did I do something different?”

Well, so long as it tastes good, I thought. Not pondering the matter too deeply, I picked up the orb.

“Yeah, I’ll have to go with the cliché here,” I said, remembering a line from a certain bizarre show. Closing my eyes, I used the orb, shouting just loudly enough to avoid disturbing the neighbors. “I reject my humanity!”

A strange feeling ensued. Something coursed through me, and my body felt as if it were being torn apart and reassembled. Despite being creepy, it wasn’t necessarily sickening.

“Hmm...”

Opening my eyes, I squeezed and opened my right hand, better grasping the sensation. I didn’t feel as though anything in particular had changed. Still, since I’d expected the world to look completely different, I was a little disappointed.

“Maybe it’s like sex. Once you’ve had it, you realize it’s not that big a deal... Whatever, how do I use my skill?”

When in doubt, I always turned to the internet. I searched for the experiences of those who had used skills, but of course, I had no way of discerning truth from fiction.

“No matter how many of these I read, they can all be summarized as, ‘Somehow, I just knew.’ What do you mean by *somehow*?”

Closing my eyes and folding my arms, I gulped down my remaining tea. But the fruits of my labor turned out to be...

Nothing.

Could I have failed to acquire the skill? Then I remembered my D-Card, which

—if I recalled correctly—should have recorded it.

“Wait, where did I leave that card? Think I left it with my pants...right?”

I grabbed my pants from the changing room basket, fished through the pockets, and pulled out a dull, silver card.

“Got it. Now, about that skill...”

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Area: 12

Rank: 1

Skill: May King

“Yep, the skill’s been added to the card...” After spotting something impossible, I did a double take. “What?”

Was something wrong with my vision? Using the thumb and index finger of my right hand, I rubbed the inner corners of my eyes, taking another look at my card. Even so, the results didn’t change.

“R-Rank one?”

The characters shone brilliantly on the card.

“Wait, wait, wait a second! Wasn’t I ranked about ninety-nine million?!”

Yet no matter how many times I examined the card, I remained in first place. According to a leading hypothesis, experience points earned from defeating monsters determined one’s rank. In that case...

“Not long after I dropped the rebar, I heard that eerie voice. Could that have been...?”

Apart from that, I had no other guesses. Not unless I’d unwittingly run over something else on the way home. After zoning out for a short while, I suddenly realized something, raising my head.

“First place? That means I’m strong, right?”

Three years had already passed since dungeons first appeared in the world, and from the very beginning, soldiers had been forced to go on diving expeditions. Currently, there *were* regular explorers, but in all likelihood, the top-ranked people were mostly soldiers or police officers. Had I overtaken their three years of experience in a single, mad dash? I didn't feel that way at all.

"Don't feel like I've gotten any stronger. It's not like I could crush a doorknob just by twisting it."

I gripped the entryway doorknob with all my might, but nothing happened.

"Then what about magic? Wait, that's a skill. It shouldn't be connected to physical strength."

Sitting in front of my computer for the rest of the day, I continued to run meaningless searches.

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**WDARL (World Dungeon Association Ranking List)
Simultaneously Translated Chat**

Rank | Area | CC | Name

1	12	*	
2	22	RU	Dimitri
3	1	US	Simon
4	14	CN	Huang
5	1	US	Mason
6	26	GB	William
7	1	US	Joshua
8	1	US	Natalie
9	2	*	
10	25	FR	Victor
11	24	DE	Edgar
12	26	GB	Tobias
13	25	FR	Thierry
14	24	IT	Ettore
15	25	FR	Quentin
16	24	DE	Heinz
17	11	*	
18	13	JP	Iori
19	24	DE	Gordon

US: Anyone see the World Ranking List?

RU: Yeah, the Russian hero—Dimitri Nelnikov—is now in second place. This is the first time since the WRL went public, right?

GB: So, who's on top now?

US: Looks like they're unregistered.

RU: What? So, King Salmon or the Witch of Campbell are in the lead?

US: No, that can't be right. The anonymous explorer from Area 2 is in ninth place, and the anonymous explorer from Area 11 is in seventeenth place.

DE: I compared the rankings before and after the first-place change.

GB: GJ

DE: At the very least, there's no one in the top 200 who fits the bill.

GB: What?

FR: Breaking news! No one in the entire triple digits fits the bill either!

US: How do you know?

FR: Except for Japan, there aren't any big cities in Area 12, even in Russia and Indonesia. At most, there's Adelaide in Australia.

FR: In Japan, Area 12 includes everything from Fukuoka to Tokyo, so that's a lot of people. Still, their country established a management system early on. So almost all of their initial explorers are registered as members of the Self-Defense Force.

FR: In the triple digits, there are barely any anonymous

explorers in Area 12. I gathered those numbers and tracked them down, but there were no changes.

US: Wait a second! Are you saying this “Mr. X” suddenly appeared from the four digits?

JP: Was his name Luke Thkywalker? Did he use the Fourth?

US: Haha, very punny. This newcomer’s probably in the five digits.

JP: Seems like a bit of a stretch...

FR: For now, I’m going to search the cache as far back as it goes.

GB: Good luck.

DE: Was there a huge dungeon capture of some kind?

GB: One happened in Denver recently.

US: Yeah, but that was Team Simon’s doing.

GB: Then is it someone who tagged along with them?

US: Don’t be ridiculous. You think someone below the four digits could tag along with Team Simon and overtake them? Impossible.

GB: Then what did this person do to suddenly jump to the top?

US:

DE:

JP:

RU: Did they capture a huge dungeon that no one knew about all by themselves?

GB: WDA management’s so widespread now, it wouldn’t be possible. And unless they fully traversed the dungeon in one day, their rank should’ve steadily increased.

US: They must have come from Krypton.

DE: Nah, they're probably from the Messier 78 nebula.

GB: Did they use Blue Water? Or do they have a body that can only fight for three minutes?

JP: You peeps are so knowledgeable about my country's culture. It brings a tear to my eye.

.....

[Omitted]

.....

FR: Hey, everyone. I investigated to the end of the six digits.

US: Pog

[Omitted]

GB: Pog

DE: What were the results?

FR: I found...absolutely no matches.

GB: Out of nearly one million people, there were no matches?

FR: In the six digits, the number of civilians increases rapidly, so in the end, I mainly ran a comparison of the number of unregistered explorers in Area 12. So, I can't say anything for certain, but narrowing down the possibilities any further is pretty much impossible.

DE: So, we've got ourselves a mystery?

US: After three years, a nameless man suddenly appears like a comet! Sounds kinda cool, right?

GB: Hey, what happened to political correctness?

FR: Yeah, this is an inclusive space!

US: Oh, right. Man → Person

September 28, 2018 (Friday)

Tokyo

“Crap...”

I sprinted the short distance from the train station to work. Since I’d been scouring the web for information until late last night, I’d overslept. Huffing and puffing, I somehow managed to press my time card at the last moment. Just then, someone called to me from behind.

“Yoshimura.”

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Enoki.”

Just act cool, Keigo. Brush him off like nothing happened.

“Would you mind coming to the conference room for a minute?” Enoki asked.

“Oh, of course.”

Should’ve guessed.

“Did something happen, Kei?”

The girl sitting next to me—Azusa Miyoshi, twenty-two years old—posed that question in a worried whisper. She was a newcomer to our company, and since I’d been in charge of training her, she’d grown rather fond of me.

A cute sort of beauty, Miyoshi wore her hair in a natural, graduated bob. Her presence reminded me of a small animal scampering around my feet. She excelled at mathematics, particularly in the area of numerical analysis. Despite being considered the bright hope of our development department, she had a terrible wine mania—the single fly in the ointment.

“Enoki’s been on edge since yesterday,” Miyoshi said. “No one’s been able to approach him.”

“He made me apologize to a client for someone else’s mistake,” I explained. “Before I knew it, they’d terminated the deal, and I got stuck with the blame.”

“What? You lost me there...”

“You and me both.”

Miyoshi paused before she asked, “Are you feeling all right, Kei?”

“You know, I’m not sure about that either.”

“Yoshimura!” an irritated voice snapped at me from the conference room, all pretense of civility gone. “Get in here right now!”

“And that’s my cue to go,” I said.

“Right,” replied Miyoshi. “I don’t know what to say, except good luck in there.”

With that questionable support, I headed towards the conference room.

Sighing deeply, I thudded down into my chair.

All morning long, Enoki had continued nagging me, hurling all kinds of nasty abuse. “Do you really have this much free time?” I’d wanted to ask. *If you’re just going to repeat the same thing over and over again, wouldn’t letting me do my job be more beneficial to the company?* Those words had nearly slipped out of my mouth several times.

I can’t do this anymore. I’ve gotta quit.

“Good work in there,” Miyoshi said.

“Yeah, it was rough,” I replied. “And more importantly, I’m *supposed* to be in research and development. Why do I have to play the part of sales guru?”

“Take it easy, Kei. Why don’t we grab a bite to eat?”

“Good old hunger, we can always count on that... Sure, let’s go.”

A few minutes later, we were sitting in a nearby Italian restaurant. Eating here every day would be too expensive—but that also ensured we wouldn’t run into anyone from work. It was perfect for when we didn’t want to be overheard.

“You’re quitting?” asked Miyoshi. She stabbed her fork into a plate of strozzapreti with Bolognese sauce, the goat cooked in white wine. “Don’t you think that’s going a little *too* far? You should have pleaded your case with the department manager.”

“I’m done wiping Enoki’s ass,” I responded. “I’m at my limit here.”

Miyoshi scrunched up her face. “Really? You just had to say it like that?”

True, Bolognese sauce might have shared a passing resemblance with something I’d just referenced. Or a close resemblance. Or perhaps they were identical.

“Sorry,” I apologized, rolling cacio e pepe around my fork.

“But if you quit over this, it’ll be a voluntary resignation. You won’t get three months of unemployment insurance.”

“C’mon, don’t you think a gainfully employed, twenty-eight-year-old has three months’ worth of... Wait, do I have those kinds of savings?”

“How should I know?” asked an exasperated Miyoshi. “More importantly, what are you going to do about today?”

“Well, I’m planning to quit. It’s already Friday, and this is turning out to be a real pain in the ass, so maybe I’ll just head back home.”

“What about all your stuff?”

“Hmm. Miyoshi, can you pack everything up and bring it to my place?”

“I don’t know what you own!”

“Good point. Well then, how about I grab my paycheck on Monday, slap down my letter of resignation, and quickly pack everything up?”

“Are you really doing this, Kei?”

Putting down her fork, Miyoshi stared at me with upturned eyes. Her short bob fell gently to one side, causing my heart to skip a beat.

“Ugh, Miyoshi,” I groaned. “Where did you learn that sort of attack?”

She cackled. “These are the secret feminine arts. But seriously, if you quit, what do you think’s gonna happen to the project we already have going on...?”

Outside the window, I noticed the roadside trees. Their leaves, beginning to change colors, blew quietly in the wind, carrying with them signs of autumn.

“Who knows?” I asked. “Enoki will handle it, right?”

“Not in a million years. Ugh, if he starts making shitty demands, I might quit too.”

“Hey, slow your roll. Do you even have any potential jobs lined up?”

“A senior from my university days created a start-up. They develop medical measurement equipment at the school’s industrial-academic division. She’s invited me to join her several times.”

“...Why did you even bother working at *our* company?”

These days, things were only getting worse for chemical manufacturers. Profit margins weren’t great.

While we talked, a waiter replaced our knives with Perceval 9.47s. In recent years, more and more restaurants had started placing this sort of sharp-edged cutlery in front of meat dishes. Slicing required no effort, and you wouldn’t spill a drop of juice. Truly, what more could you ask for?

Next, the waiter brought our second course. Apparently, we would be having lamb today. The pink meat looked absolutely delicious, and in keeping with the season, trumpet and girolle mushrooms garnished the dish.

“I’m more worried about you,” Miyoshi said. “What will you do after quitting?”

“Hmm. For now, I’m thinking about dungeon diving.”

“Huh?”

Hey, don’t look so dumbfounded. But yeah, no wonder you’re surprised. I’d probably be surprised too.

“Never heard of dungeons?” I asked.

“Of course I’ve heard of them, but... What’s with you all of a sudden? Instead of researching materials, you’re going to start gathering them? Have you always wanted to do this?”

Well, I’d always worked at a computer. I didn’t look like the sort of guy who led a very active lifestyle. Still, I kind of felt like bragging to Miyoshi, and she would probably keep this quiet for me.

“Rude,” I commented. “Do you know anything about dungeon cards?”

“Yeah, I’ve got one.”

“Come again?”

“During my university days, I got invited out to Yoyogi a lot. My first dive was a card acquisition tour, though.”

“Why’d you go?”

“There’s always the chance of finding an orb. But I guess it was just in vogue to do stuff like that?”

Dungeon diving was considered fashionable? College kids these days were crazy.

“What’s your rank?” I asked.

“I don’t really remember... But, maybe somewhere in the ninety million range, I think.”

I chuckled a little. “Ninety million, eh? Truth be told, I have a dungeon card as well.”

“Well, obviously,” said Miyoshi, her knife sinking into the lamb without resistance. “If you didn’t, there’s no way you’d even be thinking about dungeon diving.”

Although the pink slice of meat looked full of juice, she brought it up to her mouth without spilling a single drop.

“Miyoshi,” I said. “Everything I’m about to tell you has to stay between us. Promise you won’t say anything.”

“What should I swear on?”

“Huh? Oh, um, now that you mention it... What about God? Does that work?”

“I’m an atheist.”

“Well, whatever. In any case, this is a secret.”

“Then I swear on this agneau,” said Miyoshi, pointing to her plate with her knife. “...Sorry, it’s already half-eaten.”

“Now this feels like a very cheap promise.”

“What? This counts. Have you seen how expensive this lunch is? And it’s on you, right? *Right?*”

“You’re going to sponge off a soon-to-be-unemployed man? How can you be so heartless?”

“Thank you *so much* for the meal!” Miyoshi teased, before turning serious. “So, what’s the big secret?”

“Don’t forget—you swore on that agnello,” I said. Then I added, “Incidentally, since we’re in an Italian restaurant, I used the Italian word. Don’t know why you used the French one.”

Miyoshi puffed out her cheeks slightly. “Kei, this is exactly why you’re single.”

“Oh, pipe down,” I said, slapping my dungeon card in front of Miyoshi. “Now, look and be amazed!”

“So that’s your D-Card, huh? Just what on earth are you trying to...” Miyoshi trailed off and yelped in shock.

At her unintended shout, the eyes of several other patrons shot towards us. However, when it seemed like nothing had happened, they soon lost interest and returned to their meals.

“Wh-What is this?” Miyoshi asked in a whisper, leaning towards me in a jerking motion. “A counterfeit card?”

“Are you serious? What would be the point in making something like that?”

“Umm... To shock your young coworkers?”

“That would be one abysmal joke.”

“But I mean, this thing has ‘Rank 1’ printed on it.”

“Amazing, right?”

“The card looks like the real deal, and it does have your name written on it... Hold on a second.”

Taking out her smartphone, Miyoshi pulled up a website. “It’s true,” she said, showing me a list displayed on the device. “The top-ranked person on the

WDARL is an anonymous explorer.”

“Oh c’mon, you really thought it was a fake?”

“How could I not? After all, your work schedule is like some sort of exploitative supernova. When did you find the time to go dungeon diving while holding down a job?”

“Exploitative supernova...? Anyway, you’re right about me not having the time.”

“I can only imagine what sort of dastardly means you used to accomplish this...”

“Hey, just who do you think I am?”

“For the past three years, the military’s elite soldiers have been diving every day for work, but now *you’re* in first place? Unless you used some kind of dirty trick, that’s impossible.”

“Well, a lot happened. But keep quiet about this, okay?”

“No one would believe me even if I told them.”

“...Good point.”

The waiter placed the dolce in front of us. This restaurant’s specialty was Mont Blanc—excuse me, Monte Bianco—made from chestnuts, of course. Despite being plenty sweet, it wasn’t sticky. Yep, in my opinion, confections needed the proper amount of sugar.

“You even have a skill!” Miyoshi cried out. “Well, of course you have a skill, you’re the top-ranked explorer, but... May King? Sounds like a title for the royal consort of May Queen potatoes. What kind of skill is it?”

“No idea.”

“Huh?”

For the second time today, Miyoshi looked dumbfounded.

“Do you know how to use a skill?” I asked.

“Seeing as I don’t have one, no.”

“The fault, dear Miyoshi, is not in our skills, but in ourselves...”

“Who are you, Shakespeare? Still, I *have* seen the blog of somebody who used one. Um... If I recall correctly, you press down on your card’s skill title and chant its name. Until you get used to it, that’s supposedly how you practice skill activation.”

“Huh, is that right? Thanks for the info. I’ll try that out now.”

“You’ll *try*? Does that mean you’ve never used it?”

“Hmm? Yeah, not really. And remember to keep quiet about this.”

I made a point of telling Miyoshi not to leak anything about my skill. “And this guy is the top-ranked explorer...?” she muttered under her breath, but whatever.

“Press down on the card and chant the skill name, huh?” I did just that, speaking in a quiet voice. “*May King*.”

Silence.

I feel like I’m still a fourteen-year-old LARPing on the playground.

“You remind me of a fourteen-year-old still LARPing on the playground,” Miyoshi said. “It’s making me blush a little.”

“Gah! That’s the last thing I need to hear right now! Just be quiet!”

“Kei, you’re about to activate a skill whose effects you don’t know in the middle of a restaurant. What will you do if it’s offensive magic?”

Oh, good point.

Wanting to test everything out immediately was a bad habit that I shared with my fellow researchers. Or maybe it was just me.

“Sorry, you’re right,” I said, agreeing with her.

“Still,” Miyoshi said, giggling. “Hearing you mumble ‘May King’ like that...”

“Knock it off already!”

You’re the one who told me how to do it, y’know.

“So, that’s why you’re interested in dungeon diving,” continued Miyoshi.

“Well, if you’re the top-ranked explorer, you’ll probably make a killing.”

“You think?”

“King Salmon of Area 2 flies around the world in his private jet.”

“Who’s that?”

“Until you hit first place, he was the only anonymous explorer in the single digits.”

“He’s anonymous, but you know his name?”

“That high in the rankings, everyone’s famous,” Miyoshi explained. “The area information on the ranking list gives away their identities.”

“So then him being the top explorer of Area 2 led to his identity getting leaked.”

“Yep.”

Potions were the most important dungeon-produced items that could be reasonably distributed. However, the majority of military-sourced potions were either privately consumed or became part of their nation’s strategic resources, never reaching the general public. Any in general circulation were mostly provided by civilian explorers, with buyers paying exorbitant sums for them. Maybe I had a shot at this too.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “I was just looking at the comments, and you’re already driving the internet crazy. A new top-ranked explorer has suddenly popped up, but no one from Area 12 is a good match.”

“Seriously? There aren’t any famous explorers from around here?”

“Since Japan was placed under JDA management in the early days, almost no one raided dungeons of their own volition. So, the SDF ended up occupying most of the top groups, with civilian explorers much, *much* lower. Even their top groups are in the four digits.”

“In the thousands?”

“Yeah. Sometimes they rank into the lower half of the triple digits, but that’s rare.”

“Area 12 has Russia, Indonesia, and Australia too, right?” I asked.

“Due to its exact longitude, our area has a low population outside Japan.”

As I let out a deep sigh, Miyoshi straightened her back, suddenly becoming formal. “Kei.”

“What’s up?”

“If I quit the company, please hire me.”

“Uh, hire you?”

“I mean, you’re going to start earning a living with dungeon diving, right?”

“Yeah, probably. Don’t have anything else lined up.”

“But you don’t want to be famous, do you?” Miyoshi asked with a thin smile.

After a pause, I finally said, “Not really.” *Wow, this girl can read me surprisingly well.*

“Well then, you’ll need an agent.”

“An agent?”

“To sell dungeon acquisitions independently, you need a commercial license issued by the JDA.”

“Is that a fact?”

“And if you buy and sell with that license, your identity’s gonna get exposed. That’s unavoidable.”

“Right,” I said. “There’s a law related to the Act on Specified Commercial Transactions.”

“And so, if I get my hands on a commercial license, and if I’m the one selling what you manage to acquire...”

“Even if we’re traced through that license, it’ll only lead back to you.”

“Precisely.” Then Miyoshi gestured to herself. “She’s a skilled agent and manager, but what exactly is her true form?!”

“Her true form?”

“She’s the parasitic Queen of the Merchants, who fully intends to skim your profits!”

“Why, you little...”

In the midst of my exasperation, the waiter brought us mignardises. They were adorably designed macarons, baked sweets, and small chocolates. Our coffees were double espressos.

“Of course, we can’t hide your identity from the JDA forever,” Miyoshi said, pinching a baked sweet between her fingers.

Due to the existence of dungeon taxes, the WDA exercised strict control over the buying and selling of dungeon-produced items. Therefore, if an investigative agency performed a thorough search, they could trace the flow of money back to its destination. However, even if the money *were* traced, you wouldn’t know for certain if that person had actually acquired the item. From a commonsense perspective, it was merely suspicious.

“Well, I’ll be grateful to avoid standing in the firing line...” I remarked.

Yeah, Miyoshi seems like she’ll keep my secret, and she’s easy to get along with. This should work out pretty well.

“Your proposal’s been duly noted,” I said. “I’ll think it over.”

“Great! Thanks, Kei!”

“Since I can’t guarantee anything, don’t quit your job while you can still deal with it. I can’t start working immediately either. Looks like I need to attend some sort of training course.”

To start dungeon diving, you apparently needed to register as an explorer and take a short course. There, an explorer card—used for administrative purposes—would be issued. Likewise, it would serve as one’s explorer ID.

Then what’s the point of a D-Card?

Fingers still on her espresso cup, Miyoshi wore a curious expression. “...Hold on a second.”

“Hmm?”

“Why do you have a D-Card when you still haven’t registered as an explorer?”

“...Oh, I killed a wild goblin, I guess?”

“You *guess*? What does that mean? More importantly, what the heck is a ‘wild goblin’? If goblins are walking around alleyways, that would be terrifying! Suspicious...”

“Eh, don’t worry. I’ll tell you about it soon enough. C’mon, break’s almost over.”

“...Is that a promise?”

“Of course.”

Miyoshi popped the last macaron—excuse me, *baci di dama*—into her mouth and downed her espresso. “Well then, thanks for the meal!”

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“May King?”

A thin man questioned. He wore leather pants too tight for riding clothes and a high-necked green sweater. While he spoke, the man pushed up the bridge of his nonprescription glasses with the middle finger of his right hand.

“Yes,” his subordinate replied.

The management team of the JDA’s skill database constantly collected search terms. After all, whenever someone acquired a new skill orb in Japan, they usually cross-referenced it with the database.

“Could this be another case of someone searching random names?” asked the man in the green sweater.

“I thought so as well, but only that one item was searched. When someone performs a search out of curiosity, they usually look up several names, don’t they?”

“I suppose they do.”

“Shouldn’t we turn the database into a membership system, forcing people to log in with their explorer IDs? It’s difficult to identify people based solely on the

time and their IP addresses.”

“Come now, what a frightening thing to say. Legally speaking, identifying individuals is a delicate matter.”

“That’s true.”

“But just in case, will you add it to the monitored skill list? If someone possesses this ‘May King,’ we’ll know by checking their D-Card. We need to gather as much information about unknown skills as possible.”

“Understood.”

Thus, May King was added to the monitored skill list—a resource not available to the general public.

A Certain Park, Tokyo

I left work early after lunch with Miyoshi. Sitting on a nearby park bench, I continued repeating my skill name, almost like a chant.

“May King.”

Each time I uttered those words, I felt like people passing by were watching me and snickering. Maybe I was being too self-conscious, but the embarrassment of being a teenage LARPer didn’t go away.

“Damn it...! May King.”

Gah, I’m going to be mistaken for some kind of criminal.

If children had been playing in this park, I *definitely* would have been suspected of wrongdoing. Fortunately it was night, so no one was around.

“M-May King.”

It was a cold night, and at the very least, there were no degenerate couples still hanging around. Or so I hoped.

I tried thinking of something like a spell incantation from a video game: *May the noise be dispelled. May it be purified...*

“May King.”

Shutting out all noise, I endlessly repeated the skill name. Little by little, the phrase lost meaning, the world lost its shape. Finally, when the words felt as if I were emitting nothing but noise, a translucent tablet appeared before my eyes.

“What the hell?!”

Shouting, I leapt to my feet. A woman—who’d been walking nearby—glanced at me before bolting away. Yep, I must have looked pretty damn suspicious.

“Hey come on—don’t be like that—I wasn’t doing anything!” I blurted out.
“Whatever, this is...”

I left the park, heading towards the shopping center a block away. Although I was walking with the tablet screen still open, no one seemed to notice it. On the contrary, the screen slipped through the bodies of those I passed. Apparently, others couldn’t see it, and it didn’t seem to occupy physical space. Returning to the park bench, I investigated the display in detail. All in all, it closely resembled the character creation screen of an old RPG.

NAME: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1200.03

HP: 23.80

MP: 23.80

STR: 9 [+]

VIT: 10 [+]

INT: 13 [+]

AGI: 8 [+]

DEX: 11 [+]

LUC: 9 [+]

Wait, had “May King” been “Making” all along?!

In the katakana syllabary, “May King” and “Making” could be spelled identically. Whose idea was it to not use romanizations for the display? Loan words were confusing enough as it was! What if my skill name had been “cunning”? Sure, that meant “cheating” in Japanese, but in English, it just referred to being sly!

Now, back to our regularly scheduled program.

The user interface looked none too difficult to understand. In fact, it resembled a typical game. As a test, I pushed the + button next to STR once.

NAME: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1199.03 (-1.0)

HP: 24.80 (+1.0)

MP: 23.80

STR: 10 (+1) [+]

VIT: 10 [+]

INT: 13 [+]

AGI: 8 [+]

DEX: 11 [+]

LUC: 9 [+]

Well, that's about what I expected.

In short, I could distribute status points—SP—to each category, and as a result, my hit points and magic points—HP and MP—would increase based on some kind of formula. In all likelihood, you gained SP by defeating monsters, and this value determined your rank. With nothing more than a + button to work with, I could only distribute each skill point once. No takebacks.

With this, I could become stronger. Sure, I understood the logic, but what about all the explorers without my skill? I doubted everyone had access to this

information. If they did, this status screen would be well known, and a means of verifying each status would be available to the public.

Putting aside these unanswerable questions for now, I decided to inspect how each value related to one another. Since this didn't seem to be a particularly dangerous skill, I would start working on it when I was back home.

Things were starting to get a little more interesting.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

When thinking, I liked to write by hand. After returning home and taking a shower, I'd begun my inspection, munching on a pollack roe rice ball I'd bought during the return trip. I was currently flipping a mechanical pencil between my fingers, gazing at the chart I'd drawn.

Although I'd been excited to investigate, the structure had turned out to be incredibly simple. For each status, there was a coefficient used to calculate the value added to HP and MP. To calculate your HP and MP, you multiplied these coefficients by the statuses' values and then added the products together. The coefficients I'd inductively obtained through experimentation were as follows—on the left, I'd written down the HP coefficients, and on the right, I'd written down the MP coefficients:

STR *HP*: 1.0 *MP*: 0.0

VIT *HP*: 1.4 *MP*: 0.0

INT *HP*: 0.0 *MP*: 1.6

AGI *HP*: 0.1 *MP*: 0.1

DEX *HP*: 0.0 *MP*: 0.2

LUC *HP*: 0.0 *MP*: 0.0

Following my investigation, my statuses now looked like this:

NAME: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1173.03

HP: 36.00

MP: 33.00

STR: 14 [+]

VIT: 15 [+]

INT: 18 [+]

AGI: 10 [+]

DEX: 16 [+]

LUC: 14 [+]

Though AGI had very low coefficients, others had a value of zero. As a result, I'd ended up pressing those five times.

"Still, these have to be quantifications of human abilities..." I muttered.

If I increased my original strength of nine to ninety, would I be ten times as strong?

Damn, I really want to measure my punching power while increasing my STR one press at a time! As a researcher, how can I resist?

Suppose someone had physiological measurements taken before and after dungeon explorations. From those two sets of numbers, couldn't they measure how much the exploration had enhanced their statuses? Even so, you'd need access to that kind of facility.

Wait a second. Didn't Miyoshi mention something like that?

"A senior from my university days created a start-up. They develop medical measurement equipment at the school's industrial-academic division. She's invited me to join her several times."

Since tomorrow was Saturday and it was still before ten o'clock, I called

Miyoshi on the spot, filling her in on a few of my discoveries about Making.

September 29, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

“Hi there,” Miyoshi said.

“Hey, thanks for coming.”

Miyoshi had knocked on my door at nine o’clock the next morning, wearing a cute sort of outfit I rarely saw at work.

“You live in a nice area, Kei.”

“Locationally speaking. This run-down apartment building is over fifty years old.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe this kind of building still exists here.”

My apartment complex was located in Motoyoyogi near Yoyogi-Hachiman Station. Certainly, the location itself wasn’t bad.

“What’s up with you today?” I asked. “You’re all dressed up.”

“Huh? You’re taking me to Morille, aren’t you?”

“Did I say that?!”

“I offered to come over if you took me to Morille, and you said, ‘Anywhere is fine, just hurry up and get here.’ And since it’s a starred restaurant, I dressed to the nines for it.”

“Right, I did say that... What was I thinking?”

A chef who’d trained in France had opened Morille—a mushroom-loving, Parisian restaurant—in Hachiman. Speaking of which, we were approaching the season for mushroom bouillon. Though I didn’t mind the characteristic flavor of dried mushrooms, fresh ones were exceptional. Of course, I couldn’t go to Morille very often.

“You win...” I sighed.

With my back to the wall, I sent an email asking for a reservation today. All

the while, I prayed for a full house.

“Yes!” cheered Miyoshi. “So, did you unravel the mysteries of Making?”

“Yeah, more or less. Here they are.”

Gathering the notes scattered on my bedroom’s kotatsu, I handed them to Miyoshi, who examined them with a serious expression.

If you sit on the floor, your skirt’s going to wrinkle...

“Could this be a quantification of human abilities?” she asked.

“That’s what I thought too. These are the values of dungeon-enhanced statuses.”

“What? Making is a skill that allows for the visualization of various statuses?!”

Looking up in surprise, Miyoshi pressed me for answers. What was she so excited about?

“Er, well, that doesn’t seem to be its primary use, but it’s kind of interesting, right?” I asked.

“Kind of interesting...? This is on the level of a national secret.”

“C’mon, you’re blowing this way out of proportion. The formula’s easy. A middle schooler could solve it.”

“Kei,” said Miyoshi, sighing dramatically. “That’s because your skill allows you to measure these numbers.”

She was right. If I’d attempted an investigation without having these numbers quantified, I wouldn’t have understood a thing. I could admit that with full confidence.

“Also,” continued Miyoshi, “this coefficient system will revolutionize the world of skill orbs.”

“How so?”

“After you called me yesterday, I did some more digging and conducted a really thorough investigation of them.”

From the bag she’d brought, Miyoshi took out an ultraportable laptop,

bringing up the JDA database. Though tablets were all the rage, laptops were far more efficient in our line of work. Though Miyoshi and I were both ultraportable laptop fanatics, I'd also seen her swiping away at tablets.

Apparently, there were quite a few orbs with uncertain effects. Even if a person tried using them, they wouldn't gain a skill or feel anything happening. These were called "dud orbs," and among them, there was a group called the xH+ types.

"But with this new information, everything makes sense," said Miyoshi, pointing at the database's search results. "For example, these AGxH+1 and AGxH+2 orbs must..."

"Increase the HP adjustment coefficient for AGI," I finished.

"I won't know for sure without verifying, but if this +1 increases the coefficient you spoke of by 0.1..."

"With a normal person's AGI, their HP would only increase by one or two. They wouldn't feel anything."

"Exactly. Quantification's amazing, isn't it?"

Still, as your statuses increase, the effects will be far more dramatic.

"But here's the important point," Miyoshi continued. "These dud orbs are cheap."

Looking at the screen, most of them seemed to cost around several hundred thousand yen. Likely due to the rarity of orbs, they were still plenty expensive. To better prepare for the future, monopolizing them right now might be wise. If only I had the money for that.

Logging off the database, Miyoshi pointed to my notes, muttering to herself. "Of course, since orbs can't be preserved, there's no way of stockpiling them. If this were known, it would only lead to the 'duds' going up in price. But if we figured out how to measure these statuses, we could make a ton of money."

I thought so too. Quite a few people would buy access to these measurements. Government agencies and private corporations of various countries definitely would, but even freelance explorers would want them.

“I expected no less from the Queen of the Merchants,” I said. “That’s actually why I called you here.”

“Oh, really? Details please!”

“Yesterday, you mentioned knowing someone important from a medical measurement company. It was a university start-up, right?”

“Yeah, Midori Naruse—she’s the company founder. She was one of my upperclassmen at university, and she always doted on me in the lab.”

“So, here’s the thing. The primary ability of Making is to distribute points to my statuses.”

“What?!” shouted Miyoshi. “You’re a walking character creator?!”

“Seems that way.”

“I can hardly believe it... But even with a sample size of only one, you’re the perfect subject for measurement. Simply by choosing a sensor to gauge each status and having you adjust the values, we’ll have a basis for measurement.”

“More or less. Still, I’m not even sure *what* we should be measuring. That’s where your friend comes in.”

“So, you plan on taking comprehensive measurements using Midori’s equipment? And with that extra information, we can figure out how to deduce the various statuses even without Making?”

“How does that sound?” I asked.

“Well, it certainly *sounds* interesting, but physiological values can vary widely depending on physical condition and individual differences.”

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t have any problem with that, right?”

After all, Miyoshi was a specialist in the realm of numerical analysis.

“That’s true,” she replied. “But basically we’re going to run various tests each time you raise a status by one—collecting the numbers, right? And by comparing the values afterwards, we’ll determine what the differences are?”

“That about sums it up.”

“Okay, let’s assume that a physiological change accompanies a rise in

statuses. If an STR increase of one transforms the density of something in your blood at a measurable level, wouldn't an increase of one hundred cause a breakdown of homeostasis, killing you?"

True enough; the soldiers on the forefront of dungeon explorations weren't becoming abnormally bulky. Yet if they were growing twice as strong without any change in muscle volume or density, this more than hinted at some kind of physiological transformation. Thus, Miyoshi's worries could very possibly come true.

"I'll increase my statuses a little bit at a time," I said. "If the changes are too intense, I'll just space them out."

"In that case, I'll try contacting Midori, but...you want me to keep your skill a secret, right?"

"If possible."

"How am I supposed to explain why you're in and out for comprehensive exams?"

"Hmm. How does 'we're testing a newly developed medicine' sound?"

"Doing a clinical study without permission sounds like a good way to get arrested," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Okay then, we want to test the effects of some particular item on the human body. Is that any better?"

"In that case, we'll have to pay an examination fee since there's no incentive for the other party to help us out for free. But if we started developing the measuring equipment jointly, that would be a different story."

"But if we did that now, I'd have to reveal my skill."

For starters, I didn't even know if these changes could be measured. As of right now, a joint development wouldn't amount to much.

"Well, let's save that discussion for later," I continued. "The results could be that nothing changes."

"True enough, but I'll try contacting Midori just in case."

As nimble as ever, Miyoshi typed up an email, sending it.

“So, if this works out...” I trailed off.

“Yes?”

“More to the point, if this measurement device amounts to anything, you should sell it. With a patent, you could probably make a killing.”

“Good idea. When the time comes for that, I’ll register the patent with you. Still, I foresee our test results being heavily disputed. After all, we can’t disclose the basis of our theory.”

“Yeah, from an outsider’s perspective, the product’s just gonna look like the result of inductive reasoning.”

“Thermometers are like that too,” Miyoshi noted. “But since most of the natural sciences came about through inductive observation, I anticipate it being accepted in the end.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“More importantly, it’s already lunchtime, Kei! Let’s go somewhere.”

“I’m begging you, please go easy on me. The reservation for Morille went through.”

An email confirming the reservation had made it to my computer. It blinked red, as if to symbolize the crisis about to befall my wallet.

September 30, 2018 (Sunday)

Ichigaya

On Sunday morning, cold rain fell from the sky, shedding tears for my wallet. As I opened my umbrella to leave Ichigaya Station, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Kei!”

Grinning, Miyoshi stood there.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Since you’re attending the training course today, I decided to retake it as well.”

“Why?”

“Now that I’m your agent, I should at least repay you for those trumpets, chanterelles, and girolles.”

“You only get excited about mushrooms, eh? Well then, you should stick with me. I’m such a *fun guy!*”

“Wow, major dad joke alert! Ouch. Hey now, put that hand down, no need for mock violence here. In any case, I’ll do my best to repay you for the greeneye fish as well. It was so flaky and delicious, wasn’t it? Why are French chefs so good at deep frying?”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. No idea why.”

While having this random conversation, we crossed Ichigaya Bridge and turned left, spotting the JDA Headquarters from afar.

Looking up at the building through her transparent umbrella, Miyoshi cocked her head, making a rather rude comment. “No matter how many times I see it, this place still looks weird.”

To coordinate with the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya, the JDA had bought the Sumitomo-Ichigaya building to use as their headquarters. Apparently, there had been various renovations, but that strange—excuse me, *individualistic*—shape remained the same.

From Ichigaya station, we walked along Yasukuni Street, looking up at the building’s gallant form. Possibly the rush job of some mecha designer, it looked like the bridge of a robot that could transform into a boat or something.

“By the way, I got a reply from Midori,” Miyoshi said.

“Oh yeah? What’s the verdict?”

“Her team has more or less finished developing a full medical examination capsule, and they can put it into operation, but...”

“But?”

“I submitted a summary of the tests we wanted to run, and according to her, each examination will cost around two million yen.”

“Two million?!?” I cried. “If I measure each of the six statuses five times, increasing them by two with each test... That’s sixty million yen!”

“That kind of money doesn’t grow on trees.”

“And the bank... Yeah, they definitely wouldn’t lend me the money either.”

“You still don’t want to develop the equipment jointly?”

“I’m not against the idea,” I said. “But in our current situation, we won’t know if it’ll amount to anything. At least, not until we have the measurements done. Even if we proposed a joint development under these circumstances, we probably wouldn’t convince your school friend.”

“True enough.”

“If we force them to assume that kind of risk, they’ll demand an adequate return. Worst-case scenario, they could just use my ability for their own development. As Queen of the Merchants, you want to acquire the rights to the software, don’t you? If we manage that, we can at least remain on equal footing.”

“Yeah, good point,” Miyoshi said with a sigh. “And here I’d started dreaming of our fortune...”

Quantifying abilities *would* prove lucrative eventually. And undoubtedly, many people would call for public statuses. Even so, how could I get the money?

“Is something wrong?” Miyoshi asked.

“No, it’s nothing. Still, let’s put this conversation on hold for now.”

Miyoshi looked puzzled. “That’s fine with me, but...”

“You said it yourself, right? We might be able to make money from dungeon diving.”

“If you could make sixty million yen in a short period of time, it would be better to concentrate on that. Everything else would seem superfluous.”

"Still," I said, "the superfluous is what gives us researchers a sense of adventure, right?"

"Sure, but an adventurous spirit doesn't pay the bills."

Smiling wryly at each other, we boarded the robot, heading towards the reception desk.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'd like to apply for a dungeon license."

"Of course," the receptionist answered. "The morning session will begin soon. After you fill out this application form, please head to the main conference room on the second floor. That's where you'll take the course."

"Will the license be issued there?"

"For private citizens, there's a paperwork review after the course. But if no problems pop up, the WDA license card will be mailed to you within a few days."

"What exactly is this review?"

"Due to the existence of orbs, those with criminal records might not pass inspection. Also, we'll need to know your age and if you have any chronic illnesses. If nothing in particular crops up, you should be fine."

"I don't have to present my D-Card?"

"No. During the application period, most people aren't in possession of D-Cards."

"Right."

Well, that's convenient.

"If you already have a D-Card from outside the country, you may present it to us," the receptionist added. "That way, we can issue you a higher-ranking license."

Completely separate from D-Card rankings, WDA licenses also had ranks corresponding to one's level of contribution to the organization. Beginners started at G, and the top two levels were A and S. During the WDA's establishment, someone in authority had gotten carried away with creating this

new classification system. The generation raised on video games had spread across all levels of the workforce, making this sort of ranking system possible. One's WDA license rank could restrict the purchase of weapons and armor as well as access into specific dungeons. Furthermore, corporations used them as guidelines for payment when hiring explorers.

The receptionist's explanation continued. "By presenting your license card, you can also enter the public dungeons of various regions."

"What about our D-Cards?" I asked.

"Though convenient for measuring one's skill level, D-Cards aren't very useful for managing people. After all, we don't understand their composition or how they operate."

"So there's kinda never a need to show your D-Card?"

"Indeed. When recruiting a party, they're simply used to prove your rank and skills."

"Got it. Thanks for the info."

The course explained how to enter dungeons and various other procedures. Likewise, it provided a summary of equipment in practical and easily understood terms. Once the explanation had finished, we had time to look over the explorer guidebooks distributed to us and ask questions.

A cute, modern girl sat in front of us, looking over her guidebook. "So, you don't need money to enter the dungeons."

An orthodox beauty—boyish and slender—gave a response. "In exchange, you pay a ten percent JDA administration fee whenever buying or selling items. Also, the dungeon tax takes another ten percent."

Apparently, the two had come as a pair.

"They take *twenty percent*?" the cute girl asked.

"Why so surprised? Compared to public gambling, this is a slightly better deal."

Well, cycle and boat racing both took about twenty-five percent. On average, horse racing took about that much as well. House cut and all that.

"You're treating this like gambling?" the cute girl pressed her friend. "Well, I guess it's not that different."

"Yeah, but for this, we're wagering our lives."

Miyoshi burst into involuntary laughter. The two girls in front of us turned around, looking suspicious. They had clearly heard her.

"I'm sorry," Miyoshi apologized. "That was just too cool."

After exchanging glances, the pair looked at Miyoshi again.

"Are you making fun of us?" the cute girl asked.

"Not at all. I nearly cut in with, 'Every man has a final weapon... His life... And if he's afraid of losing it... He throws that weapon away.' When I tried to contain myself, I burst out laughing."

The boyish-looking girl immediately relaxed. "Charles Gordon?"

"Yep," Miyoshi replied. "But if everyone used their life as a weapon, we'd all wind up dead, right?"

Though Miyoshi and the boyish-looking girl smiled, their conversation sounded like utter gibberish to me and the cute one.

"What was that?" the cute girl asked. "I'm completely lost."

"Same," I chimed in. "I don't get it either."

"It's a line from a movie about the Mahdi war," the boyish-looking girl explained. "I'm Mitsurugi. What's your name?"

"Wow, 'tsurugi' as in sword? Even your name is cool. I'm Miyoshi, and this guy over here is Yoshimura. Nice to meet you."

With immense curiosity, the cute girl looked between me and Miyoshi. "And I'm Saito," she said. "Did you two come together for the Sunday class? You must have terrible taste, taking your girlfriend out to dungeons."

"No, we're just coworkers," I replied, waving my hand in front of my face. "This isn't preparation for a dungeon date."

I'm much more curious about what kind of relationship you two have.

“Coworkers?” repeated Saito. “So, you’re elite soldiers for some major company’s dungeon-related department?”

Elite soldiers?

“No, we’re just researchers,” I said.

“Oh, is that all?”

When Saito acted bored, Mitsurugi came to my defense. “Oh, don’t be like that. If they’re researchers, they must be experts on dungeons.”

“Is that right?” asked Saito, cocking her head flirtatiously. “Well then, when we meet again, you’ll have to teach me everything you know about dungeons!”

“Will do,” I said.

In response to my noncommittal answer, Saito remained frozen with a smile on her face, not speaking a word. As I sat there feeling puzzled, she asked Mitsurugi, “Haru, am I not being charming?”

So, Mitsurugi’s first name is Haru-something-or-other.

Placing a hand to her brow, Mitsurugi shook her head. “No, he’s just clueless.”

Huh? Me, clueless?

“Umm, what are you talking about?” I asked.

Saito puffed out her cheeks sullenly. “Normally, a guy would hand out his business card in a situation like this.”

What? Is that what’s going on? How did I not know about this rule?

Seeking help, I shot a glance towards Miyoshi, but her vague expression seemed to say, “Don’t ask me.”

“Now, now, dunces like him are a dime a dozen,” Mitsurugi said. “According to my grandfather, they used to be called ‘dumb blonds’ in English-speaking countries.”

“Who are you calling blond?” I asked. “And isn’t ‘dunce’ a way older insult?”

“Things go out of fashion almost immediately. Before you know it, even the

latest trends seem outdated.”

I sighed, wondering if the Q and A session would wrap up soon. Shortly after that, the lecturer stood up, beginning his closing remarks. Nodding, the girls sitting in front of us faced forward, readjusting their sitting positions.

And so, our rainy-day class ended.

“Kei, do you want to have lunch and go home?” asked Miyoshi.

Oh, crap. I sense danger looming on the horizon.

“Sure,” I said. “But after I spent so much yesterday...”

“Well then, how about something light and easy like ramen?”

“I don’t know what part of ramen is ‘light,’ but in that case, how about salt broth? In this area, Due Ita has good shio ramen.”

Due Ita was a strange restaurant that served Italian food in the form of ramen. Tomatoes filled their bowls, with mozzarella cheese floating on top.

“No, this is feeling more like a Chinese soba kind of day,” Miyoshi said.

“Well then, how about Oyoshi with its always-refreshing dried sardines?”

Oyoshi was a normal, Chinese soba—not ramen—shop in Ichigaya-Tamachi. As the offshoot brand of a popular ramen restaurant, its straightforward, dried sardine soy sauce had a simple and delicious flavor.

“That sounds good, but I’m not in the mood for a bowl full of char siu,” Miyoshi said. “I’ll have Chinese noodles with seasoned eggs. Plus, a plate of wontons and a midday beer sound nice!”

“Are you for real...?”

Afterwards, Miyoshi actually ordered a goddamn beer at Oyoshi. A medium-sized bottle at that. What was she, a middle-aged man? Then again, I guess that’s what made her easy to get along with.

While slurping down my traditional Chinese soba, I brought up the two girls from earlier. “Still, those two were a good-looking pair. Based on what they said about business cards... Do you think they’re nightlife workers?”

"I don't think nightlife workers have any incentive to go dungeon diving. And since they didn't seem too wily, I'd assume they're in the entertainment or fashion industry. They were drawing glances from the rest of the class too."

"Neither of us knows much about the fashion world or the entertainment biz. If they're famous, I'll feel like an idiot."

"Don't compare me to you. I know as much about fashion and entertainment as the average person."

"The only entertainers you know anything about are some ancient actors," I wanted to quip, but resisted the urge. Keeping unnecessary comments to yourself was the key to getting along with others.

"Still," I said, "even the fashion and entertainment industries have no connection to dungeons, right?"

"You think? Haven't those dungeon idols been popping up lately?"

"Oh, right. 'In exchange for one orb, you can date your favorite celeb for a whole day.' What a rip-off."

Even so, I didn't know if anyone had actually given up their orb. Those could have been staged events.

"But jeez," said Miyoshi. "I could learn a thing or two from them."

"Huh?"

"After all, the person giving up their orb is satisfied, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"And the person on the receiving end is happy as a clam to rip them off."

"Yep."

"In other words, it's a win-win situation! Everyone goes home happy!"

"When you put it that way, sure."

"Kei. If you're that easily convinced, you need to be careful. You'll end up falling for sophistry and advertisements."

I coughed, choking on my noodles. Precisely because she'd hit the nail on the

head, I couldn't think of a single counterargument. I was so weak to advertisements; I'd once bought a bottle of whiskey based on a single old poster that had read, "*Nothing added. Nothing taken away.*" I mean, what a cool slogan, right?

"Hobbies and addictions shouldn't be discussed on the same level," Miyoshi said. "Based on that logic, even drug dealers are in a win-win situation."

She made a good point. Still, I considered asking her to refrain from saying stuff like that since it would just stir up a lot of controversy.

"But take this for example," she continued, changing the subject to skills and tactics. "Without optimizing your actions, swift movements aren't going to do anything."

"Sounds about right."

"Speaking in terms of yesterday's stats, when your AGI rises, your actions *and* reflexes must be simultaneously optimized, right?"

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

"So, DEX must increase your range of movement and precision of body control, right?"

To perform various techniques, that necessity would naturally arise.

"It's definitely a possibility," I replied.

When I considered my physical abilities increasing along with my stats, it struck me as strange. As we'd discussed yesterday, muscle strength didn't seem directly related to stat changes.

"Also, look at your stats—the enhancements gained through dungeon exploration don't appear connected to muscle strength," Miyoshi said. "Instead, they seem like the enhancements of something other than muscularity. Nowadays it's normal for athletes to attend quasi-training camps in dungeons. Or so I've heard."

"Really?"

When a person trained their muscles to the upper limit, becoming even stronger grew more difficult. However, if something other than muscle strength

was being enhanced, that would be a different story. Someone could easily break through what had seemed to be the upper limit.

“Well,” I said. “It might be similar to something like high-altitude camping.”

“Exactly,” replied Miyoshi, slicing through her seasoned egg. “And that’s why I believe entertainers and fashion models would benefit from dungeon diving as well.”

I’d heard something like that once. After expanding their joint flexibility to the utmost limit, first-rate actors could control their range of movements with finesse matching their years of performance. If that were true, the stat increases gained through dungeon diving would certainly help them out.

“By the way,” I said. “I’m thinking of diving early this week. How about you, Miyoshi?”

“You want us to skip work? Well, we could take paid leave, but... If we did that on the same day, our coworkers would get the wrong idea.”

What are you turning red for?

“I-It should be fine,” I said. “I’m quitting, after all.”

“But tomorrow won’t be possible, right? Isn’t your license card still en route?”

“Oh, right. I heard something about delivery taking two business days.”

“Then just to be safe, why don’t we go on Thursday?”

“Sounds good, but what should we do about weapons and armor?”

“I looked over the catalog, but...”

Yeah, I understood Miyoshi’s feelings all too well. Weapons and armor were incredibly expensive. The cheapest were several hundred thousand yen, and at the most expensive, some products even cost a hundred million.

“They’re expensive, aren’t they?” I asked.

“Yes! Way too expensive! What’s up with those prices? If you practice kendo, that’s great, but most of us can’t even wield a sword!”

“Apparently with the right qualifications, you can carry a gun. Still, it’s entrusted to the JDA, and you can only use it in dungeons. But because they’re

so expensive and mostly useless on the lower levels, they're actually pretty unpopular."

"And without training, you won't be able to hit anything with a gun."

"What did you do as a college student, Miyoshi?"

"I used rentals."

"...You can even *rent* weapons?"

"Yes, if you go on one of the D-Card tours."

"Hmm," I mused. "Realistically, something like a hammer, machete, or ax would be the safe choice."

"You've got a point. A one-handed, easy-to-use hammer would do the trick."

"Did you have some sort of plan? The goblins on the second floor are popular with beginners."

"Actually, I want to test something out on the first-floor slimes."

"Huh?"

Slimes were the main monster of Yoyogi's first level. Nevertheless, these creatures were highly unpopular, possessing no redeeming qualities. They were hard to defeat, gave barely any experience points, and never dropped items. Furthermore, in the massive Yoyogi Dungeon, the stairs leading to the second level were right next to the ones leading down to the first. In the end, most explorers headed straight for the second level.

I was caught off guard by Miyoshi's unexpected hunting target. By the time I'd returned to my senses, I'd already lost the contest for the final wonton remaining on our plate.

October 4, 2018 (Thursday)

The first half of the week was a disaster. When I tried to submit my letter of resignation to the company, the higher-ups appeared one after another, trying to keep me from leaving. "Wait," they all said. "Haven't you thought about the other members on the remaining project?"

Could they have been any dumber?

If you care enough to detain someone when they're trying to quit, why not treat them right from the start?

"I heard about your recent mistake," said the Human Resources personnel.
"Regardless, I don't intend to hold you responsible."

I was speechless when I heard this.

"I didn't make any mistake," I eventually replied. "Enoki sent me to apologize for a problem caused by the sales department, and the client terminated the deal. That's it. Since the person who came to apologize was an unrelated subordinate, it's only natural that our sincerity would be called into question."

"...I hadn't heard that."

"Either way, that's a problem on your end."

To sum up, I explained that I "no longer wished to wipe Enoki's ass" in a roundabout manner. As a result, my request for resignation was placed on hold, and I would receive my salary until the end of the pay period.

Yoyogi Dungeon

And so, Thursday arrived. Holding the license card I'd received the previous night in one hand, I brazenly prepared to leave for Yoyogi Dungeon.

"Wow, this license is practically sparkling," I said. "And I'm an undefeated G-Rank. In a way, this is unnecessarily cool."

"Why would G—the lowest of all ranks—be undefeated?" Miyoshi asked.

"Because no one would even think to challenge me."

In response, Miyoshi only sighed.

In most light novels, explorer cards were made of different materials depending on one's rank. However, WDA licenses were ordinary, plastic IC cards. But holograms were embedded into them to prevent counterfeiting. Also, the rank displays had elaborate designs, all of them too cool for words.

"In the land of anime and manga, even a single card has this intricate of a

design,” I noted.

Miyoshi flipped through the explorer’s guidebook that came with the card. She seemed nostalgic, perhaps recalling her visits to Yoyogi Dungeon during her university days. The guidebook looked like the instruction manual for some video game, overflowing with a fantasy aesthetic. I had expected it to be a duller, more bureaucratic document. Even so, the mascot characters on the column page did have names like “Don” and “Gene,” giving the text a misguided element that reeked of bureaucracy. And of course, the actual contents were all common knowledge.

“Well then, shall we head out?” Miyoshi asked.

“Sounds good to me.”

After leaving my apartment early in the morning, we headed straight towards Yoyogi Dungeon.

Despite Yoyogi being rather large, relatively detailed information had been gathered about the dungeon up to the already captured twenty-first floor. A comprehensive map was available on the official website, and using Dungeon View, you could even see parts of the interior. In other words, the dungeon version of Street View. And apparently, you could also spot many explorers walking around with omnidirectional cameras on their heads.

“Unlike on the street, you’re walking up and down in here,” I said. “Plus, the angle of view must change when you’re avoiding obstacles, but those cameras do a good job of tracing and overlapping to create full images.”

“No one uses drones, do they?” Miyoshi asked.

“Monsters on certain floors will just destroy them.”

I’d seen this on the official website’s “Dungeon Stories” page. To counter these destructive monsters, people walked around with cameras on their heads rather than chasing after drones.

“Here’s an idea,” Miyoshi said. “Why don’t they set up cameras all over the place and do real-time monitoring?”

“Since dungeons are pocket dimensions, there’s some kind of spatial severance that prevents electronic signals from reaching inside.”

Perhaps imagining being torn apart, Miyoshi shuddered, hugging herself. “Severance?”

“It supposedly doesn’t affect physical objects passing through.”

“Well, dungeons being strange comes as no surprise. Still, if our bodies can pass through, we could use cables for any cameras, right?”

“Cables just end up as monster food.”

In particular, slimes totally wrecked them. The first cables brought into this dungeon hadn’t lasted a day.

While we talked, we signed in at the reception desk, and then descended into the first level of Yoyogi Dungeon. Most explorers continued on the shortest route towards the second level stairs. Containing slimes and a few goblins, the first level wasn’t the least bit appealing. Moreover, the stairs leading to the second level were right next to the dungeon’s entrance, further contributing to the first level’s unpopularity.

While examining the flow of people from the corners of our eyes, we headed deeper into the first level.

“Since this is our first dive, let’s start by getting the hang of defeating monsters,” I said.

“Kei, I have an idea. Let’s check how much XP the slimes give out.”

“Why?”

“Because our current trend is quantification, obviously! We can even sell the info later!”

“What do you mean by ‘trend’? And won’t people ask how we got those measurements?”

Miyoshi gave a thoughtful hum. “We can claim to have developed a measuring device with new technology.”

“That’s fraud! Plus, people will just ask us to sell the measuring device.”

“Human trafficking might prove somewhat difficult.”

“I’m the measuring device?!”

“This isn’t even close to fraud,” Miyoshi assured me. “After all, there are a decent number of skill-based businesses out there. Sure, we can’t disclose the method of measurement, but researchers around the world will verify the accuracy of our information.”

So you’re just gonna leave it to someone else?

However, as a researcher of the same breed, it was in my nature to follow up on and verify the theories of other people.

“Oh, there’s one now,” I said.

While doing this and that, we discovered Villager No. 1—no, Monster No. 1—jiggling at a bend in the road. It was a slime.

“They move slowly,” I said. “And unlike their fictional counterparts, they won’t spew anything or jump at you all of a sudden. But apparently, weapons aren’t very effective against them.”

We don’t have magic either.

If slimes were our primary target, shouldn’t we have brought a flamethrower? Not that I owned one of those.

Wait, haven’t I seen a video of someone making their own flamethrower by igniting a can of aerosol spray?

Then again, it hadn’t seemed very effective.

“Given that slimes are almost entirely composed of something like water, striking and cutting them yields poor results.” Lowering her small backpack to the ground, Miyoshi withdrew several items that resembled bottles. “If you destroy the core somewhere in their bodies, they’ll die, but locating a bead of about one centimeter in diameter is difficult. Plus, compared to the amount of trouble it takes to defeat them, slimes don’t drop anything. And no matter how many of them you defeat, you never feel the least bit stronger.”

“So, there’s absolutely nothing good about them?”

“Nope. That’s why everyone gives up and goes elsewhere.”

“In that case, won’t the same thing happen to us?” I asked.

“That’s where my secret weapon comes in.”

“Oh, nice.”

Hopping to her feet, Miyoshi placed her left hand on her hip, pushing up the bridge of imaginary glasses with her right hand.

“Listen up,” she said, pointing to the slime right in front of us. “It’s thought that slimes—again, mostly liquid-based creatures—retain their shape because the interfacial free energy of their interior and exterior is destabilized. Thus, a minimization of their surface area occurs.”

“Teach me more, Professor Miyoshi!”

When their surface area was minimized, objects became more spherelike. And that slime was certainly jiggling.

That being said...

“You don’t think it’s dangerous to bring our science straight into a fantasy world?” I asked.

Guns and other small arms were only effective up to the tenth level of dungeons. Afterwards, they gradually lost efficacy, becoming almost completely useless by the twentieth level. This was why mid-depth dungeons were so difficult to capture. According to the most plausible theory, the amount of growth a person obtained through defeating monsters wouldn’t be reflected in attack power when using gunpowder weapons.

“I believe physical traits from our world can be applied to dungeons,” Miyoshi said. “Since slimes maintain their shape in that state, if we lower their interfacial free energy, their forms should break down.”

Is she talking about surfactants?

“You’re going to spray slimes with soapy water?” I asked.

“That’s the plan. For now, I’ve prepared anionic, cationic, amphoteric, and nonionic solutions.” Miyoshi pressed the camera switch on her helmet.

Apparently, she also intended to record a video. “If anything happens, I’m counting on you for defense.”

I waved the thirty-centimeter frying pan that Miyoshi had taken from her bag. “Sure, but you want me to defend you with *this*?”

“Kei, weapons and armor are expensive. And that’s solid titanium. It’s solid, light, and extremely resistant to corrosion. Thanks to its low thermal conductivity, a bit of fire shouldn’t hurt it either. Finally, as a Chinese frying pan, it’s round and can deflect attacks. It’s far superior to your average shield, don’t you think?”

“What’s the point of making a frying pan out of something with poor thermal conductivity like titanium?”

Miyoshi cocked her head. “Maybe it’s for thermal insulation?”

I moved in front of the slime, holding the frying pan up. “Well, whatever. I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Well then, here we go. Let’s start with the anionic type. Firing sodium dodecyl benzene sulfonate!”

“Sounds like a magical incantation.”

The anionic surfactant sprayed from the bottle in Miyoshi’s hand, hitting the slime dead center. The monster simply shuddered, its surface rippling.

“So that one’s a no-go,” I said.

“Agreed. And Mama Lemon works so well against cockroaches.” Looking disappointed, Miyoshi made a note on her tablet. “And now, onto the cationic type!”

“Won’t the surfactant decrease in efficacy if you mix anionic and cationic types?”

“Don’t worry. Besides, it’s not like I can wipe them off, and this is just some half-assed experiment.”

“You’re not taking this seriously?!”

Nevertheless, the effect was dramatic. When Miyoshi sprayed the cationic

surfactant onto the slime, it burst apart without a sound.

“Whoa, what the hell was that?!” I asked. “Alien drool or something?”

“The main ingredient is benzethonium chloride.”

“Wow! Sounds pretty strong.”

“Doesn’t it? But when sold to the public, it’s called Makiron.”

“The disinfectant?”

“Yep.”

“So, slimes are weak against Makiron?”



“Seems that way,” Miyoshi said.

“Think I should buy stock in Daiichi Sankyo?”

“Even if the world found out about this, demand would hardly increase.”

Miyoshi took out a large hammer with a pointed end, striking the slime core lying on the ground. Immediately, the broken core transformed into black particles.

“With this, we can now vanquish the horde of enemy slimes!” Miyoshi cried out.

“If you just ignored them, they wouldn’t have been our enemies in the first place.”

“I’ll say it again, Kei. This is why you’re single.” Miyoshi handed me a hammer and a bottle filled with pseudo-Makiron. “Your skill can also quantify experience points, right?”

“More precisely, it quantifies the value I can add to each status.”

“Well, for the sake of convenience, let’s assume that’s what people call ‘experience points.’”

“Got it.”

In order to measure the experience points given by slimes, we kept plodding along. Presently, no traps had been confirmed inside any existing dungeons. So long as we kept an eye out for monsters, moving around was no problem at all. A little deeper inside, Miyoshi spotted our next prey.

“There’s our second monster,” she said.

“Making,” I whispered, displaying the usual screen. We would confirm my stats before defeating a slime, then see how much they increased after the fight to figure out how many experience points I’d gained.

NAME: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1173.03

HP: 36.00

MP: 33.00

STR: 14 [+]

VIT: 15 [+]

INT: 18 [+]

AGI: 10 [+]

DEX: 16 [+]

LUC: 14 [+]

“All right then, should I get him?” I asked.

“Go for it.”

“Something-or-other-nium chloride! Overflow!”

“Kei... Is that necessary?”

Sprayed with the pseudo-Makiron, the slime burst apart with a *splat*.

“In my country, shouting the name of one’s attack is tradition,” I remarked.

Afterwards, only the simple task of striking the fallen bead remained.

Crack.

NAME: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1173.05 (+0.02)

HP: 36.00

MP: 33.00

STR: 14 [+]

VIT: 15 [+]

INT: 18 [+]

AGI: 10 [+]

DEX: 16 [+]

LUC: 14 [+]

“What happened?” Miyoshi asked.

“Hmm... My SP increased by 0.02.”

“0.02...” repeated Miyoshi, inputting the number into her tablet’s spreadsheet software. “Well then, let’s keep going!”

And so we continued beating the crap out of slimes until her tablet ran low on battery.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

When Miyoshi and I returned to my apartment, she immediately transferred the data we’d gathered on her tablet to her laptop and ran a statistical process... Or rather, she tried to.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Miyoshi handed me the tablet, still filled with the data from our slime experiments. “There’s no need for statistical processing. Take a look, and you’ll understand.”

1. 0.020
2. 0.010
3. 0.007
4. 0.005
5. 0.004
6. 0.003
7. 0.003
8. 0.003

9. 0.002

10. 0.002

11. 0.002

12. 0.002

...

70. 0.002

71. 0.001

72. 0.002

In the end, I'd killed seventy-two slimes, gaining...0.182 SP?

"Okay, they might be slimes, but seventy-two only amounts to this?" I asked.

During the conversation, Miyoshi worked with a five-liter polyethylene tank she'd bought a few days ago, doing or...making something; I wasn't sure what. "No wonder everyone ignores them."

"Still, the first one gave me 0.02 points... Wait a second. Aren't the first ten XP rewards divided by the number of slimes we defeated?"

"Yep. Apparently, as you hunt more of one monster, your XP is divided by the number defeated. And from the tenth monster onward, you'll always receive one tenth of the original."

"Still, if the number stayed at 0.02 the whole time, seventy-two slimes should have given me 1.44 SP."

"Wait, what's SP?"

"Oh, I didn't mention that?" I asked. "What we're referring to as 'experience points' or XP is actually displayed as SP when I use Making."

"Hmm. Does that stand for status points?"

"Probably."

"Then from now on, we'll call it SP."

"Got it. Still, if I *should* have earned 1.44 points, 0.182 is an enormous

disparity.”

“But in games, don’t you earn less XP as you get stronger?”

“As your character’s level rises, the amount of XP necessary to reach the next one increases too,” I explained. “That’s just how it is in video games. Normally, when you defeat the same monster, the amount of XP remains the same.”

“Yeah, sounds right to me,” Miyoshi said. “Well then, let’s move on from XP in games and focus on actual dungeons and their SP. For now, here are my two hypotheses. Number one—when you repeatedly defeat the same kind of monster in a row, SP drops. Number two—the original amount of SP is the value after defeating ten, and the first ten are a bonus.”

“Unless other monsters appear midway through our slime hunt, we can’t confirm your first hypothesis.”

“Goblins also appear on the first level, right?”

“They only spawn around the stairs leading to the second level,” I said with a sigh. “And when they do appear, someone immediately hunts them down.”

“Still, you should check if possible.”

“Huh? You’re not coming with me?”

“I applied for a commercial license class the other day. I’m taking it tomorrow. Since there’s only one per month, it would be a huge pain to miss. After all, I’m aiming to become Queen of the Merchants!”

“Oh, thanks for going the extra mile like that. But what about your job?”

Miyoshi let out a self-satisfied laugh. “Haven’t used my paid vacation days, so I have Thursday and Friday off.”

“How did *that* make it past the higher-ups?”

“Thanks to you, the project has come to a complete stop. Right now, the grunt workers can take as many paid vacation days as we want.”

“Uh, thanks to *me*...?”

Shouldn’t you have said ‘thanks to Enoki’? Well, whatever. I don’t mind this sort of grind. For the time being, I’ll keep going to Yoyogi, and... What’s this?

"Hey, why did the seventy-first slime give out even less SP?" I asked.

"Oh, right. Do you remember me accidentally kicking a stone and hitting a slime? It must have been that one."

"So, if two people attack simultaneously, the SP is cut in half? That's amazing!"

"Amazing? How so?"

"Regardless of how much you contributed to the battle, the SP is divided equally among participants. Basically, you should try to work in as many cheap side blows as possible."

In the middle of someone else's fight, you just needed to kick a pebble in the vicinity and pretend it was accidental. Better than admitting you tried to intentionally steal a portion of someone's SP reward.

"...Yeah, but here's the thing," Miyoshi said.

"Yes?"

"If that were ever announced, it would cause a huge uproar."

Oh, right. With nothing quantified right now, no one would suspect that of happening. If publicized, this information would give rise to even deadlier hunting grounds than those in your average MMORPG.

"Miyoshi," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Quite a few things seem better left unannounced. Before making anything public, let's consult with each other."

"Got it."

Still, if the first explorers dove almost every day, their adventures should have reached about eleven hundred days by now. If they gained more than one point per day on average, they should have accumulated quite a lot of SP. When put in those terms, me being in first place seemed odd.

0.182 can't be the norm, right? After all, those were just slimes.

"By the way, what in the world have you been doing with that thing?" I asked,

indicating the polyethylene tank Miyoshi had been fiddling with.

“Since I’ll still be going to work for a while, I’m making more Alien Drool for you. I have five of these five-liter containers. Think that’ll be enough for now?”

“Yeah, sounds good to me. Thanks a lot.”

At that time, I hadn’t known that defeating seventy-two monsters—even slimes—in a single day was abnormal. Or that people usually formed large parties to go dungeon diving.

October 5, 2018 (Friday)

Yoyogi Dungeon

“Looks like another good day for killin’ slimes,” I said.

Ignoring the flow of people, I headed towards the inner depths of the first level. I hardly even noticed the strange looks from those heading to the second level. Armorless, I merely shouldered my backpack, and marched deeper inside. Slimes were abundant at a short distance from the stairs, if only because no one else came here.

“Something-or-other beam!” I cried.

The “nium” had already turned into “beam,” but either way, no one would care.

“Hammer attack!”

Sure, that one lacked all ingenuity, but either way, no one would... Wait, what was that? By defeating the slime, I’d gained 0.02 SP. Finding this odd, I took down another slime, gaining 0.01 SP.

Hypothesis one: The SP value resets every day.

Hypothesis two: Each time you enter the dungeon, the SP value resets.

I immediately rushed outside to test my hypotheses. After completing the formalities to enter once again, I went back inside the dungeon. Thus, I defeated another slime, gaining 0.02 points.

Excited, I ran to the stairs leading to the second level. What would happen if I

defeated another monster in between two slimes? I wanted to find out. Unfortunately, I couldn't find anything other than slimes. Resigned, I began my descent to the second level, but partway down, something occurred to me.

"Wait a second," I murmured. "The something-or-other beam won't work on anything but slimes, right?"

I had no armor; as for weapons, I only carried a single hammer. For today, I needed to focus on verifying what I could with slimes alone.

"Phew. On the battlefield, those who lose their cool are the first ones to go."

While I muttered that under my breath, I started walking back to the first level. People going to the second floor seemed to shoot odd looks at me.

Nah, I'm just imagining things.

Afterwards, I left and reentered the dungeon fourteen times. But one time, I only gained 0.01 points. I had barely stepped through the entrance then, immediately turning back into the dungeon. Perhaps the area around the entrance was still considered part of the dungeon interior. Considering this, I recalled the first goblin I'd run over. It had been wandering around a fissure, which I'd assumed was the dungeon entrance.

Or maybe the problem is how long I spend outside the dungeon. Hmm.

Over the next five exits, I tested these hypotheses. Upon leaving, I spaced out the time or gradually increased my distance from the entrance. In the end, distance proved to be the determining factor. Apparently, you needed to leave the area in which the dungeon exerted its influence.

The boundary of the dungeon's influence seemed to be halfway across the passageway leading from the dungeon entrance to the reception desk. Also, time appeared unconnected to monsters essentially resetting their SP.

Satisfied with what I had verified so far, I tried entering the dungeon again when an unfamiliar voice stopped me.

"Um... Excuse me, sir."

A slender woman with a refined face and wearing a JDA uniform called out to me.

“Seriously?” I asked. “Suicide?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Introducing herself as Naruse of the JDA, the woman had brought me to YD Café (Yoyogi Dungeon Café, of course), and informed me of something completely unexpected.



“We received reports of an unarmored man repeatedly exiting and reentering the dungeon,” she continued.

In response, I merely sighed.

“People thought you might be trying to kill yourself in the dungeon,” Naruse explained, handing back my license card. “But you kept going back and forth, unable to work up the resolve.”

A man in regular street clothes going back and forth between the entrance and the dungeon would certainly give that impression.

I lowered my head earnestly. “I’m not sure how to say this, but... I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“No, if you’re not contemplating suicide, everything’s fine.” Smiling, Naruse took a gulp of her café au lait, looking directly at me. “So, what exactly *were* you doing, Mr. Yoshimura?”

Yeah. If I wasn’t going to off myself, of course she’d be interested in my actual objective.

“Oh, umm, just verifying a few things,” I replied.

“And what were you verifying?”

“Well, erm. My apologies, but I can’t disclose that yet.”

“You can’t? Do you work for some sort of corporation?”

“No,” I answered. “I *do* work as a researcher, but...am I under any obligation to disclose what I’ve been doing?”

“Not at all. Still, I’d recommend wearing simple equipment. Walking around in street clothes will cause misunderstandings for those unaware of the situation. For now, I’ll let the receptionist know what we’ve discussed.”

“Thank you. I’ll be careful.”

I didn’t comment on the high price of equipment here.

“Here in Yoyogi Dungeon, we have an outlet store that sells products at a discount,” said Naruse. “Please feel free to take a look if you’d like.”

“Right. Again, thanks a lot.”

“Then I should really get going.” Standing, Naruse zipped over to my side. Wearing a lovely smile, she emphasized, “When you’re ready to go public, please let me know what you’ve been up to, okay?”

After that, she left the YD Café.

“Naruse, huh?” I muttered to myself. “She’s intense.”

I opened my notebook, organizing today’s notes. Including yesterday’s hunt, I’d just killed my ninety-ninth slime. When I looked at the clock, the time wasn’t even 3 p.m. yet. Since this felt like a bad place to stop, I decided to keep diving a little longer before going home. So I left my seat, completely unaware of the tumult I was about to cause.

“All right, number one hundred!” I cried.

I swung my hammer down at the one hundredth slime core, likely yielding me 0.02 SP. Just then, a list of some kind appeared in the corner of my vision.

“Huh?”

Even now, it was known that skills possessed a number of inherent functions, and to unlock them, you needed to fulfill some kind of condition. In particular, magical skills would allow their users to wield even greater power.

Making’s initial function had been to distribute status points, but after killing one hundred slimes, a new one had been unlocked.

“You have killed your one hundredth slime,” read the contents of the display. “Please choose a skill.”

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

Skill Orb: Physical Resistance | 1 / 100,000,000

Skill Orb: Water Magic | 1 / 600,000,000

Skill Orb: Super Recovery | 1 / 1,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Storage | 1 / 7,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Vault | 1 / 100,000,000,000

This list of abilities all seemed like something a slime would possess.

Could this be a list of skill orbs they might drop?

Frantically, I copied these details into my notebook. In all likelihood, the numbers on the right showed the probability of appearance. In that case, the rarest of these skills would be the final one—Vault. Quite literally, it was on a completely different order of magnitude. If I trusted these numbers, you would need to defeat a hundred billion slimes to even have the chance of this skill appearing.

I couldn't tell the difference between Storage and Vault. Likewise, I couldn't say if higher rarity corresponded to greater usefulness.

Perhaps it's rare for slimes themselves to possess this function.

"Well, it's in the nature of avaricious gamers like us to choose the rarest of all skills."

Muttering this, I tapped Vault, and an orb appeared before my eyes. It was the same phenomenon as when I'd first acquired Making. I quickly stuffed the item into my backpack. I didn't think anyone had seen me, but just in case, I remained wary of my surroundings.

I had another problem to solve. Under what conditions did this function occur? I immediately searched for another slime, focused on seeing what would happen after I defeated 101 slimes. But after taking it down, I only gained 0.01 SP. A skill orb didn't appear this time. Even if I tried to form a hypothesis, there were too many possibilities. Beating a hasty retreat, I texted Miyoshi.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

That evening, someone pounded at my door. Rushing over to it, I found Miyoshi standing there, gasping for breath. "So, did a skill orb really appear?" Those were the first words out of her mouth.

"Calm down, will you?" I replied. "Just come inside."

As usual, Miyoshi sat down at the kotatsu, looking at me with sparkling eyes. Wearing a bemused smile, I silently took out the orb.

“I never expected to see the real thing,” Miyoshi said, poking the item timidly. “But wow, there’s even a display showing the amount of time since you found it. So, that’s how you recognize a skill orb—just look for the countdown. Sure, it’s convenient, but it’s also in poor taste. It would make a girl panic, y’know? Also, I would appreciate some sort of written explanation...”

I watched Miyoshi mutter from the corner of my eye while I went to the kitchen to brew tea. She quickly opened her laptop, connecting to the JDA Database.

“Yep, it’s unregistered,” she said, apparently having looked up Vault.

“Well yeah, its drop rate is one in a hundred billion.”

“One in a hundred billion? How do you know that?”

“Take a look at this.”

Skill Orb: Physical Resistance | 1 / 100,000,000

Skill Orb: Water Magic | 1 / 600,000,000

Skill Orb: Super Recovery | 1 / 1,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Storage | 1 / 7,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Vault | 1 / 100,000,000,000

Handing Miyoshi the list of orbs I’d jotted down yesterday, I explained the newly discovered function of Making.

Listening to me with astonishment, Miyoshi sighed. “Wow. Even just this could turn the whole world upside down.”

“There are too many possibilities and unknowns,” I said. “There’s still plenty to verify.”

“Is the condition for activating this function the number of monsters defeated, the number defeated in a row, or the number defeated of the same

species? Even if there *is* a ‘magic number,’ will the skill continue to activate in units of one hundred, or will there be some sort of different sequence? Or could the one hundredth monster have been a one-time perk...? There’s just so much we don’t know.”

“Researching ‘magic numbers’ feels way too vague, and there’s no logical way of verifying them. For now, I’ll just defeat another hundred slimes in a row.”

“Sounds good. And afterwards, you’ll try hunting a hundred goblins in a row?”

“Something like that. If all goes well, we’ll even be able to fund those medical examinations, right?”

“From this list, Water Magic seems like it would fetch a good price,” Miyoshi noted, having quickly looked up the other orbs. “The rest are all unregistered.”

“Oh, really? I’m a little surprised that Physical Resistance hasn’t been found yet.”

“Umm, Water Magic is worth...about eighty million yen.”

“Eighty million?!”

“And that’s the buyer’s asking price. If we had more time to sell the orb, think how much its value would increase... If the military got involved, I could see them paying the cost of a cheap fighter aircraft for something like Water Magic. From a cost-effective standpoint, it makes sense.”

Even if the functions of a skill were unknown, they could be—in some cases—enough to render a missile defense system impotent. With the title of “military use” attached to an orb, it could be worth any sum of money.

“So, how do we deal with taxes?” I asked.

“Sales conducted under a WDA commercial license are subject to a unified dungeon tax of ten percent.”

“What, seriously? Isn’t that pretty low for a tax rate?”

“There’s also a ten percent JDA administration fee. The tax rate being nonprogressive is probably one of their measures to promote trade. And unlike with stocks, there’s no carryover deduction.”

“In the case of dungeon diving, the worst possible deduction would be...”

“...Your life?” Miyoshi finished.

“And there’s no way to carry *that* over.”

During this conversation, Miyoshi poked the orb on the table. “So, Kei...”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been thinking about this the whole time. Could Vault possibly be...?”

Honestly, I’d been thinking the same thing.

“Yep,” I replied. “This must be the ultimate entity, the staple of fantasy—the item box. Probably.”

Sighing, Miyoshi leaned back against my bed, looking at my notes once more. “Seeing as Storage is also on this list, one of these *must* be an item box. Still, if we published this list... It would lead to an overhunting of slimes, don’t you think?”

Despite being considered trash, slimes could actually drop one out of five different types of orbs, including the phantasmal item box.

“That being said, even Physical Resistance—the highest probability drop—is one in a hundred million,” I said.

“Yes, and that’s what would cause an overhunting, right?”

“But aren’t slimes ignored because they’re a pain in the ass to kill?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if some jerks poured gasoline all over the first level of Yoyogi and started a fire.”

“I-I see...”

When defeated, dungeon monsters respawned. And so it seemed like their numbers didn’t change. However, if left to their own devices, their numbers would gradually increase. Conversely, if someone hunted the monsters faster than they could respawn, wouldn’t their numbers decrease? Despite these speculations, no researcher had ever come to a definite conclusion.

As a result of being left alone for three years, the first floor of Yoyogi contained an overwhelming number of slimes. No one actively hunted the

creatures, and they didn't seem to have any natural predators. In other words, the place was a veritable slime paradise. If I possessed ranged and offensive magic, I could hunt down several hundred at once in some locations.

"Let's not publish this information for a while," I said.

"Agreed. After all, we can't explain how we figured all this out. Now, what should we do about the Alien Drool?"

"If we published the info about the slimes, that stuff would sell like crazy. But if we don't, no one will be hunting slimes anyway. For now, let's just wait and see what happens."

"Got it."

"So, what should we do with *this*?" I asked, pointing to the skill orb on the table. "Do you want to use it, Miyoshi? In fantasy worlds, item boxes are popular with merchants, right?"

"But if the skill *is* what we think it is, won't the person actually going to dungeons need it?"

"Probably, but... Wait, you don't plan on diving?"

"Even if I do, we'll be together, right?"

"I suppose so."

Looking at the orb, I voiced a single concern. "You can acquire multiple skills, right? I wouldn't want the previous one to disappear."

"I don't know. There are no reports that you *can't*, but there are no reports that you *can* either..."

Among the military's elite, there might have been soldiers with two or more skills, but as a general rule, that information wasn't publicized. Scant information about specific troops with extraordinary skills had leaked out.

If a limit existed on acquirable skills, Making's orb acquisition function could turn out to be a heap of wasted potential. And if acquiring two skills proved impossible, Making itself could very likely disappear. Since I'd been able to select an orb, I could at least hope for a UI to confirm the overwrite.

“Still, let’s think about this rationally,” I said. “Unlike in the medieval setting of a light novel, an item box doesn’t seem very necessary in modern Japan.”

“Setting aside dungeon explorations, that does seem true for our actual lives. For the most part, someone will transport luggage that you can’t carry. And in case of disaster, the SDF will immediately show up. This skill only seems useful for robbery and...smuggling?”

“Whoa, this is starting to feel like an awfully dangerous skill.”

“Wasn’t the reselling of smuggled gold for the consumption tax a hot topic recently? You could take that to a whole new level, making way more than eight million yen a pop.”

Plus, once your possession of this skill became known, you would be suspected of all manner of crimes.

“Should we abandon this skill?” I asked. “Or better yet, bury it in the darkest reaches of space?”

“Kei, regardless of what we just talked about... An item box would be incredibly useful for dungeon explorations.”

Unable to confirm its actual functions, the two of us continued grumbling, sitting on either side of the table where the orb lay.

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431: Anonymous Explorer

Did anyone see that weird old man a little past noon today?

432: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, I did. The guy wearing nothing but street clothes, right? Think he was young, actually. Around college age, maybe?

433: Anonymous Explorer

Oh right, the suicidal guy who caused a commotion.

434: Anonymous Explorer

Suicidal? Did some guy try to off himself?

435: Anonymous Explorer

There was this guy—he looked normal, he was wearing normal clothes—but he just kept on barely entering the dungeon and then leaving immediately, he just kept doing that over and over again.

Then someone from JDA HQ came out to meet him. Someone else must've reported the guy 'cause they probably thought he was working up the nerve to kill himself.

436: Anonymous Explorer

Oh, that's why Miss Mei visited?

437: Anonymous Explorer

lol who the hell is Miss Mei?

438: Anonymous Explorer

She's Miharu Naruse, a popular employee from the JDA's Dungeon Management Section. Her last name is written as "roaring tide," and the first kanji can be read as Naru or Mei, right? During her sophomore year at Keio University, she was crowned Miss Keio. Everyone thought she would become a TV announcer, but she joined the JDA of all places.

439: Anonymous Explorer

Wow, you sure know a lot about her. Do a lot of stalking?

440: Anonymous Explorer

She was famous a little while ago. Her background is posted on last year's newcomer section at the JDA website.

441: Anonymous Explorer

Oh, was she the one having a friendly chat with the suicidal guy in the YD Café? Could they be acquaintances?

442: Anonymous Explorer

Seriously, that happened? Still, Miss Mei is pretty friendly, so maybe she was just lending a hand.

443: Anonymous Explorer

Hey, maybe I should enter and leave the dungeon in my regular clothes over and over again tomorrow!

444: Anonymous Explorer

lol don't be a nuisance.

445: Anonymous Explorer

Come to think of it, someone from Area 12 suddenly became the top-ranked explorer on the WDARL.

446: Anonymous Explorer

It's not me, that's for sure.

447: Anonymous Explorer

Not me either.

448: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, I'm not even close.

449: Anonymous Explorer

Who's the top explorer in Yoyo D right now?

450: Anonymous Explorer

Probably the groups from Asaka, Ichigaya, or Funabashi.

451: Anonymous Explorer

We're talking about the *top-ranked* explorer. Anon probably meant someone from outside the SDF, ya dingus.

452: Anonymous Explorer

Exactly.

And anyway, Iori is the top-ranked member of the SDF.

453: Anonymous Explorer

What about the Kagero guys? I heard they're wandering around the nineteenth level.

454: Anonymous Explorer

I heard that Team Shibu made it down to the twentieth

level, though.

455: Anonymous Explorer

Honestly, none of them sound like the top-ranked explorer.

456: Anonymous Explorer

Inside Area 12, there aren't any famous players in Russia or Australia either.

457: Anonymous Explorer

I've looked at the comment section of the WDARL, and according to someone in France, no one fits the bill down to the six digits.

458: Anonymous Explorer

I hate to say it, but there aren't any in Japan either.

459: Anonymous Explorer

In other words, we should suspect anyone who appeared out of nowhere, and despite being unknown to the masses, they're close to the officials.

460: Anonymous Explorer

Like the suicidal dude!

461: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah!

462: Anonymous Explorer

The top-ranked explorer doesn't even need armor, eh?

463: Anonymous Explorer

Cut it out, guys. This is a hot topic right now, and if any newbies happen to see this conversation, they'll believe you.

464: Anonymous Explorer

Okay okay.

October 6, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi Dungeon

As I had every other day, I returned to the first floor of Yoyogi Dungeon, and as usual, no one else was there. Despite Yoyogi Dungeon boasting the highest number of participants in Japan, its first level was truly devoid of any people. Of course, that suited me fine right now. Finding one of my cute, bouncy slime friends, I sprayed him with a swoosh, and then struck him with a thud. For today's work, I would repeat this over and over again.

“Bounce, swoosh, thud!” I sang. “Bounce, swoosh, thud!”

The other day, I'd seen Hiroko Yakushimaru's old commercial for SOFT IN 1 on YouTube. So, why was I singing the same melody from that ad? Simply because it sounded pleasant. And why did I know anything about an old idol like that? Well, my dad had been a fan of Hiroko's, and at home, we'd even had an old CD of hers.

“Listening to her narrow singing range and the mysterious quality of her voice, I can imagine the composer writhing in pain,” my dad had commented. “And the simplicity of the main melody is addictive.”

Yeah, I hadn't understood that explanation very well.

Feeling like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill, I recorded the number of slimes I'd killed. All the while, I hummed my new song, which seemed likely to induce semantic satiation. Seeing as the SP matched my day one predictions, I merely checked the number, not bothering to record it.

“All right,” I said with a sigh. “That's number fifty-seven.”

While adding another tally to my notebook, I stretched my lower back. Sometimes, slimes would crawl across the ceiling. Whenever prey passed by, the creatures would drop down and feed on them. If one of these genuine slime bombs stuck to a person, they'd have had no luck peeling the monster off. Likewise, striking and cutting proved ineffective.

Scorching the slime with fire packed more of a punch, but the person it had

trapped would also suffer severe burns. Apparently, that sort of accident occasionally happened. After I heard this, I'd done my best to avoid places where the ceiling was too high for the light to reach.

"Well, even if a slime attacks me, one spray of something-or-other beam should get it off..."

Still, I wasn't inclined to test that out with my own body.

At that moment, I heard a faint sound from the other end of the passage.

"What was that?"

Listening carefully, I definitely heard someone shouting deeper inside. I dashed off in the direction of that voice.

"H-Hurry up and get it off me!" the smaller girl cried. "Gross, what is this thing?!"

"I'm trying!" the taller girl shouted in response. "I'm trying, but... Why won't it come off?!"

In a small, plaza-like area a little farther ahead, a two-person party—both wearing beginner's armor sets—were entangled with a slime that had dropped from above.

Even if one of Yoyogi's first-floor slimes captured a person, the victim wouldn't melt at a visible rate. So long as the creature didn't cover their entire head, suffocating them, they would survive. Even so, having a monster stuck to you for a long period of time was dangerous.

The slime had wrapped around the smaller girl from neck to chest, and the taller girl had grabbed the creature, trying to pry it off. However, it wasn't going well, with her hands getting buried inside the monster.

Unfortunately, slimes wouldn't *just* melt clothes and leave everything else intact. More danger than nudity awaited them.

"Are you okay?" I cried, racing over to them.

The taller girl shouted, desperately looking at me. "Help us! Please help us!"

Yanking a bottle from my belt, I faced the slime stuck to them, and sprayed the liquid. While shouting my attack name, of course.

“Take this, you monster! Something-or-other-nium chloride!”

It was tradition, after all.

The effect remained as dramatic as ever. Sprayed with the pseudo-Makiron, the slime instantly burst apart, apparently vanishing.

The girl who’d been struggling to remove the slime froze, stunned by this ludicrous development. “What?!”

“Hey, are you all right?” I asked.

Removing a clean towel from my backpack, I handed it to the smaller girl. She was sobbing.

“Sh-Shank you,” she slurred, taking the towel. She wiped her face and the areas the slime had stuck to. Then she suddenly looked up at me. “W-Wait, aren’t you the researcher?”

“Huh?” Upon closer inspection, I recognized her face. “Umm... Saito, right? Weird seeing you again like this.”

The taller girl—the one with a cool last name, I think?—also looked at my face. “It’s really you!” she exclaimed, surprised. “The guy with Miyoshi. Umm... What was your name again?”

“...Yoshimura,” I replied. “Are you Mitsurugi?”

“Yeah. Thanks a lot for the help. But is that liquid safe to spray on people?”

While all their efforts hadn’t put even a dent in the slime, this liquid had caused the creature to burst apart. In that case, anyone would suspect the pseudo-Makiron of being dangerous.

“So long as you don’t drink it or get it in your eyes, you should be fine,” I replied. “It’s similar to an antiseptic solution. If you’re worried, why not wash it off with water?”

I took out a two-liter plastic bottle from my backpack.

“Thanks again.” Dampening the towel with the water, Mitsurugi placed it

against Saito's neck, following my suggestion. The next time she talked, she sounded embarrassed. "Umm, do you mind turning around...?"

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't thinking..."

Flustered, I turned towards the plaza, staying on the lookout for slimes. From behind, I heard the sound of clothes rubbing together. One quiet voice said, "Don't worry, it just turned a little red." Afterwards, another voice complained, "Ah, that's cold!"

Hmm. Two beauties wiping each other down? This packs a surprising punch.

I'd met these two women at the training course. The tall, boyish, and classically beautiful one was named Haruka Mitsurugi. The girly, likely popular one introduced herself as Ryoko Saito, growing indignant over something rather curious.

"Who names their daughter 'ko'—as in child—in this day and age?! Gah. Even if I get married, my first name won't change, you know!"

Both women were amateur actresses and models represented by the same company.

Yeah, I shouldn't have underestimated Miyoshi's profiling.

"You really showed your worth as a researcher," Saito noted with admiration, having completely recovered. "No matter how much I hit or pulled at the thing, I couldn't defeat it, but you killed it with a single spray of mist. Is that some sort of secret weapon?"

I donned a glib smile. "Something like that."

"Excuse me, is that possibly available on the market?" Mitsurugi asked. Ever since I'd rescued her, she'd been speaking in a polite tone. "When I did some research, I couldn't find anything of the sort."

"No, we made this at my apartment a few days ago. It's not on the market yet."

Mitsurugi bowed her head in disappointment. "Oh, I see."

Her expression pulled at my heartstrings. No wonder Miyoshi had accused me of being susceptible to advertisements. Still, I couldn't change my nature, you know?

"Umm," I said. "If you need this for some reason, I can share it with you."

Jerking her head up, Mitsurugi looked at me with a serious gaze, her red face and watery eyes incredibly childlike. "You mean it?"

"Wow Haru, I'm starting to think you're the better actress of the two of us," Saito said with a pout. "He didn't even give me his business card."

I see. So Mitsurugi is a model, and Saito is an actress. Well, if you must know, Mitsurugi is more my type. Not because I play for both teams and androgyny appeals to me. I'm just into classical beauties.

When I'd mentioned this to Miyoshi some time ago, she'd snorted, replying, "I've done the math. Having a type doesn't mean shit when you have zero options."

"Is it true that gaining experience in dungeons gives you an aura?" Mitsurugi asked.

Her serious expression left me taken aback. "Huh?" I asked.

An aura? Was she talking about plasma descending along lines of magnetic force, exciting oxygen and nitrogen atoms to create a glow? Oh wait, that was the *aurora*.

Mitsurugi's eyes were serious. I needed to answer with...something.

"Right now, Haru is standing at a boundary line," Saito said.

Sitting on a boulder, she brought up this topic with a serious expression, suddenly appearing more mature than usual.

"A boundary?" I asked.

"Yes," Saito agreed. "Boundaries are nice and ambiguous, aren't they? I like them. The boundary between Earth and space, between childhood and adulthood. When you're at a standstill, it seems as though you have to make a decision, at least at a glance. But until that standstill is done, it's okay to not decide anything. That's why I find them so comfortable, I suppose."

So, this is the real Saito, huh?

“But not everyone is like me, right?” she finished.

Apparently, Mitsurugi was a pinup model. For a while now, she’d put a great deal of effort into this line of work, even appearing in Kodansha magazines for young men. However, she’d always fallen behind in the reader polls.

Yeah, her slender, androgynous appearance isn’t really suited towards pinup modeling.

“Your appearance, proportions, and height are a better match for fashion modeling,” I told Mitsurugi. “Rather than men, why not try appealing to other women?”

“Exactly,” Saito chimed in. “You know your stuff, Mr. Researcher. She’s trying to switch course for that very reason, but doing so all of a sudden is difficult, you know?”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine that being easy.”

Not that I knew much about their line of work.

“Recently, some girls have blurred the line between fashion and pinup modeling, so our office *does* have connections.” Saito kicked a pebble at her feet. “When it comes to business, there are no problems with her composite or book, but during the final interview, they often reject her, saying, ‘There’s something missing here.’”

“What are composites and books?” I asked.

“A composite is a file similar to a business card. It contains your work history, physical measurements, and so on. Books are...something like a photo album of yourself.”

“Interesting.”

“So, if people keep telling you there’s ‘something missing,’ you start to wonder—what on earth *is* it?”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Eventually, some idiot replied, ‘Maybe it’s your aura.’ And being so damn

serious, Haru took his offhand comment to heart.”

“Hmm,” I mused. “When I think of an ‘aura,’ I think of something that a person gives off due to a certain level of refinement.”

“Right? There’s no way an aura could *actually* radiate from your body.”

True enough. Even for the most incredible actors, radiating electromagnetic waves that captured people’s hearts would cause nothing but trouble. Of course, I couldn’t deny the possibility of skill orbs such as “Charm” and “Charisma” existing within the dungeons.

“Speaking from another point of view, I have to wonder,” I said. “Could the optimization of movement have anything to do with auras?”

Mitsurugi, who had merely been listening to the conversation, jumped at this. “What do you mean?”

“Basically, whenever you use your body to express some—”

“As in posing?”

“Yeah, posing. Additionally, as an actress, you might use your eyes and expressions to convey emotion. And as a model, the way you walk could highlight the beauty of your clothing’s silhouettes.”

“Right.”

“Well, that’s probably what they’re thinking about,” I concluded.

“Yes, probably.”

“Still, it’s not that easy to make your body move as intended. Take something simple, like reaching for a glass on your desk, for example,” I said. “To accomplish this goal, a person needs to control their body with precision. All the while, information picked up from their physical sensors is being fed back to them.”

“That’s true,” Mitsurugi agreed.

“In that case, here’s what optimization of movement means—your body has memorized how to perform the most beautiful moves at all times. So, as a starting point, try moving your body in ways you find beautiful. Don’t allow for

the slightest deviation. Once you can do so naturally, you'll have optimized your movements."

"The slightest deviation...?"

"Since humans are sensitive to even small details, those slight deviations might catch our attention."

"...Optimization of movement."

"People gain more than strength from defeating monsters," I added. "It also has a strange effect on your agility and how you control your body."

"In other words, I can optimize my movement by defeating monsters?"

"Sure, but I think regular training would do the trick as well."

"If I stick to regular training, some places will remain forever out of reach."

Right. This girl had been the one to say, *"But in this case, we're wagering our lives."* She'd been serious, hadn't she?

Saito added further explanation. "Well, as you might be starting to suspect, she has a slightly important audition coming up in a little less than two months. When she suggested special training in preparation for that, I never would have expected monster extermination. And if she scars her face, she won't just fail the audition—her entire *career* will be over."

Despite mumbling that last part, Saito must have been a truly good person to accompany her friend.

Two months, huh...? Well, everything happens for a reason.

Thinking this, I felt the urge to help them out a little bit.

"What I'm about to say might sound stupid, but would you like to try it?" I asked.

"Of course!" Mitsurugi answered.

When we left the dungeon, I showed them the boundary at the entrance. *Ah, so this is another one of Saito's boundaries,* I thought, entering the dungeon again.

"As soon as you enter the dungeon, go somewhere with plenty of slimes and

no people nearby,” I instructed.

“Okay,” Mitsurugi replied.

After explaining this, we traveled against the flow of people heading for the second level, continuing towards an open area. Once there, we immediately found a slime.

“First, you spray it with a swoosh...” I shot liquid onto the slime, reducing the creature to its core state. I then broke the little bead with a quick, light strike. “And this is how you destroy the core.”

“Understood,” Mitsurugi said.

“How you strike the core is important. Try to do it as quickly and precisely as possible, without putting too much strength into it.”

If a person’s actions raise their relevant stats, striking like this could preferentially distribute SP to AGI and DEX.

Listening to me earnestly, Mitsurugi nodded.

“And finally, this is the most important part,” I said.

“What?” Mitsurugi wondered aloud, looking at me curiously.

“Once you’ve defeated a slime, leave the dungeon immediately, walking at least one step past the boundary. Afterwards, come back and defeat the next one in the same way. Even if there’s another slime nearby, don’t kill multiple ones in a row.”

Both girls looked at me with puzzled expressions.

Just as I expected.

If someone had told me the same thing, I wouldn’t have reacted any differently. Still, if she wanted to see results in two months, this was the only option.

“That seems like nothing but a waste of time,” Saito quipped from the side. “Is there any point to leaving and coming back?”

Of course there is! If you defeat ten slimes in a row, you’ll only gain 0.059 SP. But if you do it my way, you’ll gain 0.2! That’s more than triple the experience!

Nevertheless, I fell silent, unable to tell the truth.

“But it’s necessary, right?” Mitsurugi asked, apparently willing to trust me.

In response, I could only nod.

Though Saito glared at me for a while, she suddenly averted her gaze. “Haru, this guy is super dense, but he seems to be an excellent researcher... I think. Don’t worry. We’ll follow your advice.”

Relieved to hear that, I shared several other precautions with the girls. Afterwards, I asked them not to speak of this to anyone, as it would violate various confidentiality agreements. With that settled, I gave them two spare hammers and two full bottles of something-or-other-nium chloride.

“Why are you giving us two sets?” Saito asked, curious.

“You’re sticking with Mitsurugi, aren’t you?” I replied with my own question.

Saito blushed slightly, appearing vexed.

“Then there’s one more thing,” I continued. “Don’t throw a single stone at the other person’s target. No matter what, defeat the slimes on your own.”

“Got it,” Mitsurugi replied.

“And when your bottles run out, call me, and I’ll prepare some new ones for you.”

I offered Saito my private business card, which contained my cell phone number.

“I knew you’d hand it over eventually,” she said with a mischievous smile.

Afterwards, I tagged along with them for a few more kills.

“Wow, this is a breeze,” Saito noted happily, holding up the bottle.

“But don’t let anyone see you,” I warned.

“I know, I know. Still, going back and forth sure is a hassle.”

Each time we defeated a slime, we left through the entrance, stepping past the dungeon boundary. Despite being a relatively short distance away, it was definitely a hassle. An important one, though.

“And don’t cut any corners,” I said. “Always return to the exact same spot.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Saito replied. “But if this has zero effect, I’ll come back to file a mountain of complaints.”

“Yeesh,” I muttered. *What a frightening thing to say.* “W-Well, you seem to be doing okay. Just keep repeating this process over and over again.”

Mitsurugi offered me a polite bow. “Thank you so much.”

On a fundamental level, her movements were already quite beautiful.

“Oh, almost forgot,” I added. “Do you mind keeping track of how many slimes you defeat?”

“Huh?” Mitsurugi asked. “Sure, I can do that.”

“Well, that about wraps everything up then.”

Telling the girls to break a leg, I left for the day. Since I’d given them my spare hammer, I had no equipment left.

October 7, 2018 (Sunday)

Yoyogi Dungeon

Like I had every other day, I returned to the first floor of Yoyogi Dungeon, and as usual, no one else was there. Meanwhile, Miyoshi was attending a weekend course to receive a commercial license. That girl was a hard worker. As for me, since Mitsurugi and Saito might have been grinding away near the entrance, I went deeper than usual.

“Can’t get in their way!” I sang. “Bounce, swoosh, thud! And that’s number thirty-one!”

At forty-one, I would reach a total of two hundred defeated slimes, and I had high expectations that something would occur then.

But wow, Yoyogi Dungeon is definitely large.

While bounce-swoosh-thudding another slime, I considered the breadth of this place.

During their initial survey, the SDF had created a rough map of Yoyogi

Dungeon. Apparently, it was a circle with a radius of around five kilometers. At that size, it would reach the front of Babashita to the north and Musashi-Koyama to the south. To the west, it would reach Eifukucho, and to the east... Come to think of it, this area of the Yamanote Line was only a little more than five kilometers. At the very least, it would reach Shinbashi.

If Yoyogi Dungeon actually occupied the Tokyo underground, it would have caused far worse than a subway collapse. It was fortunate that it actually occupied its own pocket dimension instead.

As I considered this, silently repeating a series of bounce-swoosh-thuds, a menu identical to the other day's opened before my eyes. Checking the tallies in my notebook, I realized that I *had* defeated the forty-first slime.

"It's here!"

Skill Orb: Physical Resistance | 1 / 100,000,000

Skill Orb: Water Magic | 1 / 600,000,000

Skill Orb: Super Recovery | 1 / 1,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Storage | 1 / 7,000,000,000

Skill Orb: Vault | 1 / 100,000,000,000

85,998,741

Though the contents displayed on the UI were almost the same as the other day, Vault had been grayed out. Furthermore, a new number sat below it, counting down even now.

What could this be? I wondered, jotting down the number.

Since I couldn't select Vault, perhaps I couldn't choose the same orb twice. Or maybe...

"Is it a cooldown timer...?"

In some games—especially those with real-time features—once you used a function, a certain amount of time needed to pass before it became available

again. That was the definition of a cooldown timer.

In any case, I would think about that later. Right now, I was performing an experiment I'd discussed with Miyoshi a few days ago. I tapped Water Magic on the menu, and when another orb appeared before my eyes, I stored it in Vault.

In the end, I'd used the Vault skill orb, prepared to lose Making. "In those light novels you've talked about, time doesn't pass in item boxes, right?" Miyoshi asked. "If Vault is crazy enough to do the same, couldn't we use it to store skill orbs?"

Those words had been the deciding factor.

Orbs weren't in circulation due to their scarcity, but the 23-hour, 56-minute, 4-second time limits made for an even greater barrier. Upon finding one, many explorers probably hoped to exchange this astronomically good fortune for cold, hard cash. However, when faced with this time limit, many would end up choking back tears, unable to find a buyer.

"Well, no use thinking about that now," I muttered to myself.

This skill would probably activate each time I defeated one hundred monsters. In that case, I would collect as many orbs as possible for now. After all, explorers could someday begin hunting slimes in droves.

"Actually, between me, Mitsurugi, and Saito, there are now three members of the slime hunting team."

Still, two months from now, huh?

After adulthood, the base statuses for a person seemed to be around ten for each category. Well, if you could trust a sample size of me, myself, and I. One slime might have netted a mere 0.02 SP, but if you defeated ten per day, you would gain 1.00 SP in five days. In other words, if you continued hunting them for two months, your SP would increase by ten. If you could distribute these points to one status, it would equal twenty years of human experience.

...Hold on. Twenty years?

Furthermore, the first floor of Yoyogi was crawling with slimes and devoid of

people. Here, you could very possibly defeat one hundred in a day with a series of bounce-swoosh-thuds. As such, you would gain two SP a day. In fifty days, that would turn into one hundred. If you could distribute those points to one status, that would equal...two hundred years of human experience?

Wait a second. If this got out, it would be an utter fiasco. Did I make a mistake telling Mitsurugi and Saito this...?

“Nah, I’m just overthinking things! After all, you have to leave and enter the dungeon over and over again! Regardless of how serious those girls are, they’ll never kill a hundred slimes in one day!”

Trying to reassure myself, I continued bounce-swoosh-thudding slimes in a state of intense focus, letting my mind go blank.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

“Miyoshi, you’re working tomorrow, right?” I asked. “Should you be staying out this late?”

Sitting at my apartment’s kotatsu, Miyoshi wrapped pasta around her fork, looking at my notes for the day.

She had showed up at my place complaining of hunger at 7 p.m. Shaking my head, I’d boiled some pasta for her. But now, it was already approaching eight o’clock.

“Kei, you got Vault around 3 p.m., right?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh yeah, I think so. When I was done talking with Naruse, I checked the time, and it was a little before three.”

“Hmm.”

Though I couldn’t tell what she was thinking, Miyoshi was an undeniable genius in the fields of calculation and pattern detection. Even during her training as a new employee, Miyoshi’s ability to find patterns in what appeared to be meaningless rows of numbers had been her best asset.

“Did you get Water Magic around the same time today?” she asked.

“Probably around the same time or a little earlier.”

“If this *is* a cooldown timer, it’s the reciprocal of the orb’s appearance probability divided by one hundred million, calculating a number of days. And it’s displayed in seconds, no less.”

“So, what does that tell us?”

“You should be able to get another Vault in one thousand days. Oh, that would be 998 days as of right now.”

In other words, I could only obtain this skill orb once every three years. However, if we searched normally, with ten million people hunting ten slimes per day, only one person would find Vault every three years. Considering that, the “normal” method seemed surprisingly doable, but I doubted that many slimes existed.

“Well then, what about Water Magic?” I asked.

“It’ll be available in six days.”

The other day, we’d bought vanilla Häagen-Dazs to run an experiment. We had wanted to see if time passed normally in Vault, or even if it just stopped entirely. When we found that the Häagen-Dazs had still been frozen after an hour in Vault, I felt somewhat hopeful. But after watching Miyoshi eat that ice cream, I couldn’t help but wonder if using a watch or smartphone would have given us a quicker answer.

“So, if the orb inside Vault doesn’t disappear after 3 p.m. tomorrow, we’ll confirm that Vault can bypass the time limit on orbs because time just stops inside it,” I said. “If this all works out, we’ll have revolutionized orb storage and distribution.”

“And if things go poorly, that verification will cost us eighty million yen. But that’s what makes you Keigo Yoshimura, I suppose.”

“Yeah, I probably shouldn’t give up eighty million yen while unemployed.”

“Truer words have never been spoken.”

Finishing her last bite of pasta, Miyoshi poured half of a super-carbonated Sangaria beverage into natural water from the Southern Alps. She then gulped

down this incredibly cheap imitation of slightly carbonated mineral water. But speaking from personal experience, I had to admit it was surprisingly good stuff.

“Thanks for the meal,” Miyoshi said. “I had no idea you could cook.”

“Living alone this long will do that to a man.”

“How heartbreaking...”

“Hey, I’m not that pathetic!”

“Still,” Miyoshi considered, “if we can verify this and Vault becomes public knowledge, you’ll be targeted by governments and organizations around the world.”

Oh c’mom. Don’t act like we’re in the plot of some Hollywood movie.

“And I’ll be rich...” she continued. “All the delicious food in the world will be mine!”

“Slow down there, Miyoshi. Your eyes are turning into yen signs.”

“Gah, I want to quit too! What’s with that project? Without you around, we’re making zero progress. I’m dead tired!”

“What’s going on with Enoki?”

“We’d be better off without that jerk. God, I’m getting pissed off just thinking about it!”

“Y-Yeah, my bad. But still, I can’t afford to pay you right now.”

“But if that orb doesn’t disappear tomorrow, I should be able to quit, right?”

Hmm. Well, even if the results of our “magic number” verification prove incorrect, we won’t be strapped for cash... We still won’t have the money for those medical inspections, though.

“You want to quit that much?” I asked.

“Yes. This is way more interesting than the job I’ve got right now.”

“Got it. If the orb doesn’t disappear, you can quit.”

“Looking forward to it.”

The ice cream experiment had shown promising results. But until we tested

this hypothesis on orbs, we wouldn't know if this rule applied to mysterious dungeon-produced items.

At that moment, my phone vibrated. "Huh? Who's calling?"

Seeing as the caller had apparently withheld their number, the display showed nothing. Strange. I picked up my phone, answering the call.

"Hello," I said.

"Good evening. This is Mitsurugi. Am I speaking to Yoshimura?"

"Yep. Your number was hidden, so I was wondering who this might be."

"Huh? Oh, that's right. Sorry. I'll make sure that doesn't happen next time."

"No worries. So, what can I do for you?"

"Well, my bottle is about to run out, so I was wondering if I could get another one?"

What, already?

"Sure," I replied. "When would be a good time?"

"Would tomorrow be okay?"

"That works for me. Do you want to meet at Yoyogi? If you can, what time would be good?"

"Sounds perfect. I can meet you tomorrow morning, in front of the dungeon."

"Works for me," I confirmed. "Well then, I'll be waiting at the YD Café at ten o'clock."

"Thanks again. So, umm, how much should I pay you?"

Speaking of which, how much does one of those bottles cost?

"One moment please," I said, putting the call on hold. "Hey, Miyoshi."

"What's up?" she asked.

"How much does one bottle of something-or-other beam cost?"

"Oh, that stuff? Probably around three thousand yen."

"Three thousand? Doesn't a 75-milliliter bottle of Makiron cost around five

hundred a pop? And a bottle of Alien Drool looks to hold around one liter, so..."

"Yes, but the first-grade solution from FUJIFILM Wako Pure Chemicals costs less than twenty thousand per five hundred grams."

"I don't really understand what you're saying, but so long as you're not losing money, I'm cool with it," I replied, tapping the hold button again. "Sorry for the wait. One bottle will cost three thousand yen."

"Okay," Mitsurugi said. "If you could give me several bottles, that would be a great help."

"No problem. See you tomorrow."

"See you then. Good night."

Ending the call, I set down my phone.

"Kei, did you sell the Alien Drool to someone?" Miyoshi asked.

"It just sort of happened. Do you remember the girls sitting in front of us at the training course?"

"Oh, right. Those two *beauties*."

"That came out kind of bitter, but yeah. So, about those two—"

I gave Miyoshi a detailed recap of the other day.

"Some things never change," she said with a sigh. "You're still a big softy, aren't you?"

"You think? I told them to keep this under wraps... Pretty admirable of me, right? Still, I'm kinda regretting it now."

"How come? Think you could have gotten something *more* from them?"

"Hell no! Do I look like that kind of guy to you?"

Miyoshi pointed to her eyes. "Well, there's nothing wrong with my vision."

Ignoring her, I continued. "Honestly, while beating up slimes, I finally realized that I might have done something terrible."

I gave Miyoshi my thoughts on what might happen after two months of bounce-swoosh- thudding.

“Wow.” Then Miyoshi sighed. “Part of me wants to say, ‘You’re only thinking of this now?’ But...it’ll probably be okay.”

“How come?”

“Because unlike you, they can’t view the results as numbers.”

“But if things take a turn for the worse, they could shoot up in the rankings.”

“No matter how high they rise, breaking into the triple digits in just two months is impossible, right? Even in Area 12, there are a fair number of anonymous explorers in the four digits. I doubt they’ll stand out too much.”

“Yeah... Yeah, you’re probably right!”

At that time, we hadn’t understood what it meant to be ranked in the thousands column of all humanity. Furthermore, we hadn’t understood how closely Japan paid attention to the top-ranked anonymous explorers in our region. After all, our country made up the core of Area 12, which had accepted WDA administration in the early days.

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251: Anonymous Explorer

Hey, has anyone seen a pair of girls walking in and out of the entrance lately?

252: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, the ones with beginner's equipment, right? They also wear ski masks and face guards.

253: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, them.

At first, they didn't wear face guards, just ski helmets. And one of them looked like Haruka.

254: Anonymous Explorer

Who's that?

255: Anonymous Explorer

Haruka the pinup model. She was in a magazine recently.

256: Anonymous Explorer

Seriously? Sure you're not mistaken?

257: Anonymous Explorer

Nah, that can't be right. In that line of work, what would you gain from dungeon diving?

If some sort of injury left a scar, your career would be over.

258: Anonymous Explorer

Well, you're right about that, but...

She seemed pretty cute, so I took a peek at what she was doing.

259: Anonymous Explorer

Hot damn, stalker alert!

260: Anonymous Explorer

This guy's bad news!

261: Anonymous Explorer

I wouldn't do that in dungeons, anon.

262: Anonymous Explorer

Don't twist my words!

What if she wasn't sure about entering the dungeon or confused about what to do? Or what if she had been in trouble? In that case, I could have offered some help, right?

I barely had *any* ulterior motives.

263: Anonymous Explorer

So, you did have *some* ulterior motives?

265: Anonymous Explorer

That's not good, man.

265: Anonymous Explorer

A few ulterior motives won't hurt anyone, right?! So anyway, I followed her.

266: Anonymous Explorer

Did you push her over?

267: Anonymous Explorer

And she ran at full speed in a completely different direction from the second floor.

268: Anonymous Explorer

She must have noticed you following her and fled.

269: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, if she noticed someone stalking her, what girl wouldn't run away?

After all, the inside of a dungeon isn't any different from a dark street at night.

270: Anonymous Explorer

Jeez, you guys are merciless.

271: Anonymous Explorer

But anyway, you lost sight of her there?

272: Anonymous Explorer

More or less. Since she kept glancing behind her, I was afraid of being treated like a criminal if I followed any longer.

273: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, talk about gutless!

274: Anonymous Explorer

I'm perfectly fine without those kinds of guts, thanks!

275: Anonymous Explorer

Speaking of which, the suicidal dude without any equipment didn't head to the second floor either. Is this a new trend?

276: Anonymous Explorer

Oh yeah, I still see him from time to time. Since he wears normal clothes with nothing but a backpack, he stands out like a sore thumb around the reception area.

277: Anonymous Explorer

Not a trend I've ever heard of.

278: Anonymous Explorer

Still, I've never seen him around the second floor. When they first start diving, you'll catch sight of most beginners around there.

279: Anonymous Explorer

Hold on a second.

280: Anonymous Explorer

What's up?

281: Anonymous Explorer

Could this be a lover's tryst?

282: Anonymous Explorer

Huh?

283: Anonymous Explorer

We've got a certified genius over here.

284: Anonymous Explorer

Come to think of it, there aren't any serious threats or onlookers on the first floor of Yoyogi Dungeon. It might be perfect for a secret rendezvous away from prying eyes.

Plus, the slimes will take care of any hidden cameras.

285: Anonymous Explorer

A pinup model going on a date with her boyfriend inside a dungeon?

lol what kind of story are we talking about here?

286: Anonymous Explorer

And there are two girls in the group, right?

287: Anonymous Explorer

The other one must be a chaperone.

288: Anonymous Explorer

Or a manager.

289: Anonymous Explorer

Or they're having a threesome.

290: Anonymous Explorer

lol no way

291: Anonymous Explorer

And considering how frequently they come in and out, they must be fast as hell lmao

292: Anonymous Explorer

You guys are insanely vulgar.

In any case, it's a weird rendezvous, that's for sure.

293: Anonymous Explorer

lmao so we're sure it's a rendezvous?

October 26, 2018 (Friday)

Party Formation

A month had passed since I'd suddenly become the top-ranked explorer. As a result of continuously hunting slimes within the depths of Yoyogi's first floor, I'd accumulated quite a few skill orbs inside Vault.

Skill Orb: Storage x 1

Skill Orb: Super Recovery x 2

Skill Orb: Water Magic x 4

Skill Orb: Physical Resistance x 5

Thanks to this, I'd been able to officially quit my job, and Miyoshi had also submitted her letter of resignation. According to her, the company's methods of delaying her had been far more intense than those during my resignation. Apparently, a frightened Miyoshi had been forced into a cramped room, and much like a stress interview, she'd been hounded for answers.

Nevertheless, with the profits from selling Water Magic, Miyoshi and I would be able to get by for the time being.

"Kei, in modern Japan, it's going to be incredibly difficult to do business while hiding your name," Miyoshi warned.

The allocation of profits made this difficult. In modern Japan, no matter what you did, moving profits around would result in all kinds of taxes. As such, you either had to reveal your name or be taxed an unreasonable amount of money.

Imagine establishing a corporation, creating a register of shareholders, and distributing dividends all while unlisted. Only the shareholders and creditors would be able to view this register, and your taxes would only be a little over twenty percent, right? Well, if you thought as much, you'd be gravely mistaken. Large unlisted companies were taxed on aggregate income, and dividends were subject to super-progressive taxes, which included both income and resident

taxes.

In other words, you'd be taxed fifty-five percent.

"No wonder people want to use tax havens!" Miyoshi cried out.

She'd considered establishing a company in a foreign country and carrying out mail order transactions there. Yet due to her timid nature, she'd suspended this plan, citing the reason, "I'd just feel kind of guilty, you know?"

"And so, I've decided to use the party system," she concluded.

When exploring a dungeon together, the party system allowed groups to share profits. Originally, the assumption had been that parties would use this system when purchasing expensive weapons and armor for the whole team. I didn't understand exactly how their taxes worked, but apparently, an entire party held the position of a legal entity.

The party leader managed the member list, which was treated similarly to an unlisted corporation or a shareholder register.

"You won't believe how much work I had to do," Miyoshi huffed indignantly. "Even when I asked an accountant, I barely understood anything. The tax system shouldn't require using your wits to save as much money as possible. To me, it just sounds like the government's thinking, 'Well, it's okay to take from idiots,' doesn't it?"

"I suppose, but aren't there historical circumstances, legal consistencies applied during those times, and so forth?"

"Or rather, there were occasional pushes to support desirable outcomes through the tax system," Miyoshi began to lecture me. "Because those resulted in demands completely opposite from previous ones, lawmakers had to contrive some sort of legal consistency. Plenty of tax structures like that are in place. I have to say, the end result reminds me of liberal arts logic. So long as an ultimate consistency is preserved, even illogical, conflicting systems are acceptable. Still, I've always thought that taxes should be simple enough for anyone to calculate."

"If that were the case, tax accountants everywhere would lose their jobs," I remarked.

“Even fast food restaurants combine separate orders into one set, giving you the lowest possible price. Looks like the tax office isn’t willing to do that, or they’re champing at the bit to rip you off.”

“Well, Japan’s state finances are deep in the red.”

Furthermore, it was surprisingly expensive to form a party, leading to Miyoshi’s groans of “My savings, my precious savings...”

Biting the bullet, we ponied up three hundred thousand yen each. This money covered legal expenses and the cost of creating an officially registered seal. Due to our plummeting savings, Miyoshi planned to set up a website to sell orbs in the near future.

“The orbs will definitely sell,” she said. “And even with all these unexpected expenses, it looks like we’re going to make it, if only just barely.”

Man, she’s one hell of a hard worker.

We listed our party’s address as Miyoshi’s apartment building, but the actual work took place in my dining room. Though she suggested moving once we made a profit, I shrugged this off, finding this arrangement agreeable for the time being.

Our party’s name? Dungeon Powers.

It was all Miyoshi’s fault. After getting sloshed on wine, she’d hit the *Enter* key near the break of dawn and submitted this corny, half-assed name. But surprisingly, she seemed quite pleased with it.

And so, with the application process completed (crying emoji), we set sail with Miyoshi as our leader and me as a member.

Chapter 02: D-Powers, Activate!

November 1, 2018 (Thursday)

Dungeon Agency, Kasumigaseki

“Yes, I understand. Thank you for contacting us. We’ll look into it.”

Sighing, a man at the Dungeon Agency hung up, done with a citizen’s call.

As its name suggested, this department managed dungeons in Japan. That being said, the WDA had jurisdiction over dungeon interiors. Thus, the Dungeon Agency tended to act as a liaison for the JDA, various ministries, and other government offices.

Shortly after The Link’s appearance, the WDA had been established, and departments to manage the dungeons had become necessary. As this would entail having direct authority over the dungeons, various ministries and government offices had reacted with alert attention.

From a natural resources perspective, the METI—or the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry—had tried to place dungeon management under the jurisdiction of the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy. And from a research perspective, the MEXT—Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology—had tried to create a Headquarters for Dungeon Research Promotion, similar to the Headquarters for Earthquake Research Promotion.

With dungeon rescue in mind, the MIC—Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications—had planned to establish a dungeon administration department within the Fire and Disaster Management Agency. Currently, said agency didn’t have unified command over public institutions during emergencies. Instead, these rights belonged to the Damage Control Headquarters or the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary for Crisis Management. Thus, the MIC had used this opportunity to plot legal reform, which would grant centralized control whenever disaster struck. Perhaps they’d been plotting legal

reform all along, and the dungeons had merely served as the perfect opportunity.

Even the Ministry of Justice had attempted to create a dungeon administration department within the Immigration Bureau of Japan. Of course, they'd cited immigration control within dungeons as their reason. Still, who on earth would leave their country to live in a dungeon?

In the end, a wide range of ministries and government offices had needed to coordinate, and reconciling their various interests had proven difficult. As such, the Dungeon Agency Establishment Act had been enacted, with said office starting out as an independent entity.

The man who'd received the call sighed.

"Why the long face?" his coworker asked.

"We've received numerous versions of the same call since this morning. That would tire anyone out, right? We're an insignificant agency meant to relay messages. No matter how many people contact us, there's not much we can do."

"Oh, everyone's calling about that auction, right?"

"Yep. They keep asking me, 'Do you think it's a scam?' How the hell should I know? Just call the police department's Cybercrime Division, for god's sake."

"The seller's JDA commercial license ID is being displayed for anyone to see... Should we pass this along to the Public Safety Bureau?"

Thinking about this for a moment, the man who'd received the call nodded. He liked nothing better than off-loading hard work on other people.

"Sounds good. Seeing as this *could be* a matter of public safety, report it to the National Public Safety Commission along with the number of inquiries we've received. Oh, and please do the same for the JDA's Dungeon Management Section."

"Yeah, that place handles a wide range of work too."

"Since a wide range of incidents occurs within dungeons, that's to be expected. I don't envy them at all."

Until the system subdivided and stabilized, a “Get Shit Done Now Division” would need to be created as a single point of contact. *But so long as no one holds centralized command, I absolutely don’t want that to be me*, the man thought with a sigh.

And so, the irksome information about the auction was sent from the Dungeon Agency to the National Public Safety Commission.

Cybercrime Countermeasures Division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, Shinbashi (Minato Ward)

The Cybercrime Division of the Metropolitan Police Department received a steady stream of calls about possible violations of the law. Today in particular there were an inordinate number of inquiries, all about whether a certain auction was a scam.

“No, I don’t know about that, but if they’re not selling illegal goods, there’s no crime. Huh? A scam? There haven’t been any victims, right? Ugh!”

In response to not getting their way, someone had cursed out the officer before hanging up the phone.

“What was that about?” asked his coworker. “Another call about the auction?”

The man who’d answered the call slammed down the receiver. “Pretty much.”

“Why is our consultation service only available by phone? It does nothing but add stress and needlessly cut into our staff’s time... Shouldn’t email be enough for this sort of thing?”

“Our reception desk is only open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. on weekdays—that enough of an answer for you?”

In response to this blunt reply, the man who’d posed the question simply shrugged. “Our division deals with cyber *crimes* such as unauthorized access, fraud, defamation, intimidation, extortion, obscenity, child pornography, and malicious business practices,” he said, scratching his head. “If no crime has occurred yet, there’s not much we can do.”

“In other words, they’re demanding we investigate this auction because it *might* be a crime.”

“If we decide that this warrants an investigation, we’ll have to look into all online auctions, won’t we? ‘Is what you’re selling authentic? This isn’t a scam, right?’ What kind of dystopia do they think we’re living in?”

“Still, given what the items are, I *do* understand everyone’s suspicion, but...simply plotting fraud isn’t a crime.”

“Plotting” referred to the stage in which a crime hadn’t been committed yet. If a crime did occur, the offender could be charged with conspiracy as well. But at this point, a plot would usually fall short of an attempt to infringe upon legal interests. As such, it wouldn’t turn into an actual crime.

“What they’re putting up for sale might seem impossible, but so long as the goods aren’t illegal, we can’t charge them with anything.”

“For now, I’ll send a report and inquiry to the JDA. Seeing as the commercial license ID is clearly specified, they should be able to identify the seller right away.”

As he finished speaking, the phone started ringing again. “Pick me up right now,” it seemed to be threatening.

Let this be about something other than the auction, the man prayed, lifting the receiver. But of course, the gods were deaf to his pleas.

Yoyogi Dungeon

Like on every other day, I headed to Yoyo D on another slime hunt. Since the formation of D-Powers, I’d steadily acquired one more Water Magic and two more Physical Resistances. Today, I would be able to add another Water Magic to that collection of skill orbs. While I hyped myself up, someone called out to me from in front of the reception desk.

“Yoshimura!”

“Oh, hey there, Naruse.”

I’d met Naruse during the suicide commotion. When Miyoshi and I began

establishing D-Powers, she'd accommodated us in various ways, allowing the three of us to grow closer. I hadn't said this to her face, of course, but she was a wonderful person, both intelligent and beautiful. Excluding the officials, only she knew I was a member of D-Powers, with Miyoshi as the face of our party.

"Hello," Naruse said. "May I have a moment of your time?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

Naruse practically dragged me into the usual café. No sooner did I have a cup in my hand than she broke the ice without any preamble. "It's come to my attention that D-Powers launched a sales website yesterday."

Oh, so Miyoshi finally published that thing.

"Miyoshi did mention launching a website in the next few days, but she already took care of it, huh? Seeing as we went through all the formalities, there shouldn't be any problems. Is something wrong?"

"You didn't mistakenly publish next year's April Fool's site by any chance?"

Yeah, I get how she feels. I would think the same thing.

"No, this is the real sales site," I confirmed. "But according to Miyoshi, one section will be auction-style."

"I see. So, about the product..."

"Yes?"

"To be frank, the JDA has received many inquiries about this being a possible scam."

"That'd be pretty outrageous."

"You are aware that orbs disappear the day after their discovery, right?" Naruse asked.

"Of course."

"In that case, you created the website with this knowledge in mind, and it's neither a joke nor a scam?"

"That about sums it up."

I hadn't checked yet, but presumably, our website would only sell skill orbs for now. The initial products were probably three Water Magic orbs and one Physical Resistance orb. After all, the latter was an unknown skill. Sure, I could imagine its effects from the name, but I didn't know the details.

An WDA affiliate would almost certainly place a bid. For our first auction, we were testing the waters. Therefore, Miyoshi wouldn't have listed Super Recovery or Storage yet.

"Um..." Naruse hedged. "This is just speculation, but..."

"Yes?"

"Have you discovered an orb preservation method?"

In response to her overly direct question, I couldn't help but smile. "That's a difficult question to answer."

If such a method had been established, it would cause a huge uproar. Everyone from the JDA to the Japanese government would demand that we disclose the information.

Most Japanese people wouldn't want to disclose winning a huge sum of money in the lottery. Even among explorers, that fact didn't change. Of course, Naruse—who'd approached me in the field—understood this.

"Hypothetically, if such a method did exist..." Naruse trailed off.

"Yes?"

"What would be the likelihood of you applying for a patent or selling it?"

"We're speaking hypothetically, right?"

"Of course."

"We probably wouldn't do either. This is Miyoshi we're talking about, after all."

Slumping back in her chair, Naruse wore an expression that seemed to say, "That's what I thought."

"But you know," she said aloud. "There are some places that might pay a hundred billion yen for such a method..."

“That’s enough money to make my legs shake, but a party of two can’t possibly hold on to that much cash.”

Yeah, that’s not going to convince anyone, I thought, wearing a dubious smile. Eh, whatever.

One hundred billion yen was certainly tempting, but I myself was the storage device. I would much prefer a reasonable amount of money *and* my freedom.

Still, if this information spread, we would receive a large number of party member applications from various sources. Primarily for the purpose of spying. What did Miyoshi plan to do about new members?

“Again, hypothetically speaking...” Naruse said.

“Yes?”

“If the JDA asked you to store a skill orb, would you accept our request?”

I considered this for a moment. If I answered “yes,” it would prove we had the technology to do so. Yet if I answered “no,” we would be subjected to all manner of irksome probing.

“Hypothetically,” I said, “if we possessed that sort of technology, I would only do so if certain conditions were met.”

“Understood. My boss will likely pay you a visit soon, but—”

“If possible, I would prefer if you continued acting as our intermediary, seeing as you’ve been so helpful already. You can add that to the list of conditions.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll take that into consideration.”

After that, Naruse returned to the JDA. The situation was about to start moving, and in order to deal with it, I put my dungeon expedition on hold and headed back to my apartment.

Central Government Building 2, Kasumigaseki

Central Government Building 2 stood alongside Sakurada Avenue, the splendid autumn leaves of horse chestnut trees painting the street red. Inside a stately, windowless room, a nervous-looking man received a report from

another strikingly ordinary man with a medium build. All in response to the same problem—the man's report had come from the JDA, the Dungeon Agency, and the Cybercrime Division.

"What's so significant about this case?" the nervous-looking man asked. "Just sounds like another criminal launched a fraudulent website."

"The real problem is if this site turns out to be legitimate."

"Legitimate?"

"The commercial license of this auctioneer belongs to a woman named Azusa Miyoshi. If this auction proves legitimate, her value will be immeasurable."

"Hmm." Considering this, the nervous-looking man posed another question. "In that case, what are your *friends* asking of the Cabinet Information Research Office?"

"If this isn't a scam, the website's founder has technology that could be one of two things. A treasure or a threat."

"News about Otherworldly Language Comprehension has reached my ears as well. Are you saying she could be the key to solving this issue?"

"It's a possibility."

"For the time being, I'll advise placing a travel ban on them. Assuming this is real, of course."

The ordinary-looking man bowed his head, affirming the suggestion. "Marvelous. I'll lay the groundwork with the Dungeon Agency's chief executive and the Minister of Foreign Affairs."

"Thank you."

"Don't slack off on your end either."

"Of course. After all, our mission here is to maintain order and public safety."

Chuckling, the ordinary-looking man bowed his head, turning to leave the room. "Come now, I can't have you forgetting the first part."

Article 5 of the Police Act defined this organization's mission. It read, "To protect the rights and freedoms of individuals as well as maintain order and

public safety.”

Yoyogi-Hachiman

“Huh?” I asked. “Aren’t you here early?”

When I opened the door, Miyoshi—who stood in front of the coffee dripper, acting like she owned the place—turned around with a startled expression.

The dining area in my apartment had already been remodeled by Miyoshi’s demonic hand to resemble a small office. Though the inner bedroom was the only private area left for me, she sometimes used the kotatsu there as well.

Ah, living in a one-bedroom apartment is such sweet sorrow.

A unique fragrance filled the room. Those must have been the coffee beans Miyoshi had been enjoying lately, which reminded me of a girl wearing an ornamental hair piece. What were they called again—Geisha beans? Hailing from Panama, they might have come from the Something-Or-Other Farms,⁽¹⁾ whose name sounded like an old vertical-scrolling shooter. Or perhaps they came from the Slipped-My-Mind Farms, whose name sounded like a female pirate in search of Tochiro.

Due to their difficult-to-control roasting time, this variety of coffee bean needed to be handled by a skilled artisan while still green.⁽²⁾ Though Miyoshi’s obsession with food bordered on frightening, the final product was certainly delicious.

“Mind making me a cup too?” I asked.

“Coming right up,” Miyoshi replied, preparing a new drip.

“So, you finally put the orbs up for sale?”

“Wow, news travels fast. Where did you hear?”

“Naruse caught me in front of the dungeon’s reception desk.”

“I see,” Miyoshi said with a sigh. “Well, she didn’t come here directly. Maybe she just wanted to see you, Kei.”

What’s this girl on about?

"You're not even staying at your registered address," I quipped. "That aside, according to Naruse, the JDA is being flooded with inquiries about this being a possible scam."

Miyoshi sighed again. Still, who could blame the skeptics? If I hadn't known any better, I would have thought the same thing.

"So anyway, I did my best to explain things, but..." I trailed off.

"What happened?"

"Well, you can probably guess how things went. Rather than playing the sly official, she just threw a fastball at me. How am I supposed to keep up with that?"

I described the exchange with Naruse to Miyoshi.

"Well, that's the price of our business," she said. "Eventually, everyone will suspect us of having preservation technology. If we're not scamming people, what's left to think?"

"How about this explanation? We've built up an amazing network of explorers, and we're having them collect the orbs for us."

"That's a little too far-fetched."

"Yeah, you're right."

"So, about storing orbs for the JDA," Miyoshi said. "What conditions are you planning to propose?"

"Hmm. First of all, Naruse will be our intermediary."

"Oh, so you *do* have that sort of relationship with her. She's the former Miss Keio, you know?"

"You've completely got the wrong idea! We wouldn't want some jerk who's oozing slyness to take her place, right? I don't need another Enoki in my life."

"Wow, what a nostalgic name. What do you think happened to that company?"

"Don't know, don't care," I deadpanned. "Oh, and another condition should be the orb's remaining time. At the very least, I'd like to provide it to the client

with four hours remaining.”

“That would mean an orb count of less than twelve hundred minutes, right?”

“Yep. And last, there should be some sort of handling fee.”

“Inject that handling fee directly into my veins!”

“Queen of the Merchants indeed.”

“Hmm.” Miyoshi considered. “Why don’t we store the orbs for twenty percent of their selling price? The actual cost of our service and the handling charge will be ten percent each.”

“Twenty percent? If the orb costs fifty million, that would amount to ten million in storage fees. You don’t think that’s a rip-off?”

“No, it’s completely normal. If you go to a slightly upscale restaurant, they’ll easily take twenty percent in service charges and consumption tax. Same goes for taxes on stock trading profits. Even the taxes and handling charges taken through your commercial license come out to twenty percent.”

“I’m sensing a wave of misplaced resentment.”

Miyoshi rolled her eyes. “You must be imagining things. But if we’re providing storage services, perhaps a system based on duration would be better.”

“Yeah, clients might use our storage services for purposes other than selling the orb. At the same time, someone could store an orb for twenty thousand yen, then turn around and sell it for one hundred thousand. We can’t have those idiots thinking they’ve gamed the system.”

“That sort of client is banned from doing business with us. Don’t let them through the door. After all, we’re the only ones who can provide this service in the entire world. Let’s give this everything we’ve got!”

“Still,” I said. “Wouldn’t it be safer to ask each individual client about the orb’s value and storage period? Then we could hash the details out later.”

“I suppose. In that case, how would we calculate the storage fee?”

“How about one million yen per day?”

“Are you just throwing out random numbers?”

"We can always talk to the other party and ask what they want. That way, we'll gradually establish a market price."

"Sounds good to me!" Once the coffee had finished dripping, Miyoshi poured me a cup. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

Inhaling the unique aroma, I took a sip. After the clear acidity had spread through my mouth, a rich sweetness washed over my tongue. Delicious indeed. Being particular about something always made a difference.

"So, were you able to sell one of our orbs?" I asked.

"We've arrived at their prices, more or less. To increase our credibility, I've forced the bidders to display their IDs for the first two days, acting like I forgot to hide them."

"Now that's just cruel."

"I'll hide their IDs on the last day. Being identified wouldn't put a smile on many of the bidders' faces."

"So in the end, you went with an auction format?"

"Yep," Miyoshi replied. "We're only selling a few items, after all. And as of right now, we're the only ones in the world who can auction off orbs! Not even Sotheby's or Christie's can do this!"

Well yeah, orbs tend to disappear after twenty-four hours.

"I started the bidding for each of the three Water Magics at sixty million yen," continued Miyoshi. "Once someone placed a bid, I kicked off the auction with a generous time extension. Last I checked, they were at 108 million."

"What? Didn't you say Water Magic is worth eighty million?"

"Up until now, buyers independently set their prices. But with a bidding war, who knows how much the value will increase?"

I didn't know much about Water Magic, but if it granted the user incredible offensive magic, the military would purchase the orb with change to spare. Even if it cost more than a fighter aircraft.

“What’s the time limit?” I asked.

“For now, three days.”

“Whoa, that’s incredible. Three whole days to bid on an orb. The 24-hour barrier is starting to feel like a forgotten dream.”

“This is going to rock the world.”

Yeah, I don’t doubt it.

“So, what happens after the auction?” I asked.

“Well, since we can’t ship the orbs, we’ll hand them over in person. We’ll issue the winning bidders a cipher, which will be encrypted by public keys on each end. When they arrive at the conference room borrowed from the JDA, we’ll have them hand over the encrypted data. Once our private key decrypts the cipher and we’ve confirmed the payment, we’ll hand over the orb.”

“Sounds good. Outside of a direct delivery, we can’t ensure the orb’s survival once it’s left our hands.”

Apparently, Miyoshi had posted the orb’s minimum guaranteed count on the product explanation section.

Imagining the price of the winning bid, she grinned, draining her coffee. “I can’t wait to see how much money we make.”

For the Queen of the Merchants, that might have been satisfactory, but I worried about what would happen after the sale. *Maybe we should flee to another country and wait for things to blow over.*

“Hey, once we reach a good stopping point, why don’t we vacation in a foreign country this winter?” I suggested. “Think of it as a company trip.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful! I’ve always wanted to visit Machu Picchu or Angkor Wat.”

“Wow, talk about the sticks. For the cuisine, wouldn’t you prefer France or Italy? Maybe even Spain?”

“Yeah, those countries would be great too...”

“Well, let’s not count our chickens before they’ve hatched.”

“Of course,” Miyoshi agreed.

Seeing as Miyoshi and I both lacked divine foresight, neither of us could have imagined what would happen next. Nevertheless, traveling abroad would soon become a distant dream.

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[Message Board](#) [What's This?] D-Powers 1 [Is it a Scam?]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-2932

From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appears and begins auctioning off orbs.

Are they swindlers? Or saviors of the world?

Next thread at 930.

2: Anonymous Explorer

Is this for real?

3: Anonymous Explorer

It's obviously a scam. How are they preserving orbs for three days?

4: Anonymous Explorer

Maybe they'll procure them *after* three days?

5: Anonymous Explorer

Unless there's a monster or location that reliably drops orbs, that's impossible.

6: Anonymous Explorer

Still, reputable agencies are bidding on them.

7: Anonymous Explorer

How do you know? >>6

8: Anonymous Explorer

When you place a bid on their site, you have to use a WDA

license ID. Try doing a search.

9: Anonymous Explorer

Holy crap, the Ministry of Defense and the National Police Agency have placed bids!

10: Anonymous Explorer

You don't think they're spoofing IDs?

11: Anonymous Explorer

Not possible. When you enter your ID, it's verified by the WDA.

12: Anonymous Explorer

Seriously? You tried it yourself?

13: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, I did.

14: Anonymous Explorer

You have sixty million yen in the bank?!

15: Anonymous Explorer

If you have a commercial license and customers, sixty million is enough to stay afloat.

16: Anonymous Explorer

That's true.

17: Anonymous Explorer

Aren't all these agencies bidding because they have nothing to lose?

18: Anonymous Explorer

Maybe, but considering how hot a topic this is, the JDA must have looked into it.

And since the auction hasn't been banned...

19: Anonymous Explorer

There's a good chance this is real. But in that case, where are they getting the orbs from?

20: Anonymous Explorer

The mysteries of D-Powers:

1. Where are they getting these rare orbs from?
2. How have they broken through the twenty-three-hour, fifty-six-minute, four-second barrier?

21: Anonymous Explorer

>>20

First question aside, they must have developed a method for preserving orbs, right? I can't think of anything else.

22: Anonymous Explorer

Is that even possible?

23: Anonymous Explorer

Looking at the site owner's ID number, they acquired their WDA license quite some time ago.

24: Anonymous Explorer

Still, I've never heard of them.

25: Anonymous Explorer

Googling their ID only brings up stuff related to D-Powers.

26: Anonymous Explorer

What about a company address or contact information?

27: Anonymous Explorer

Not posted anywhere.

28: Anonymous Explorer

Huh? Isn't that a violation of the Act on Specified Commercial Transactions?

29: Anonymous Explorer

So long as your dungeon-related commercial license is specified, you don't have to provide that information.

30: Anonymous Explorer

Well, if your products are crazy rare and expensive, you run the risk of being robbed.

31: Anonymous Explorer

I see. That makes sense.

32: Anonymous Explorer

In any case, I'm looking forward to what happens three days from now.

Do you think the winning bidders will announce anything?

33: Anonymous Explorer

No, they won't. The winning bidders will want to keep their identities secret.

November 2, 2018 (Friday)

Simon Gershwin

“What are you doing, Simon?”

The question echoed throughout the house, which served as the team’s base. The speaker, a tall and slender man with ash blond hair, descended from the second floor into the living room, scratching his stomach. He had just woken up.

“Oh hey, Joshua,” Simon replied. “You’re up early. So, remember how Mason got blown back during our dive into Evans?”

“Yeah. If we come across swarms of those monsters in the future, it’ll be annoying as hell. If our own guard wound up in that sorry state, no one else stands a chance.”

“Exactly. So we need to do something about it, and I’ve been looking into various options, but...”

As Simon stared at his laptop screen, Joshua sensed something was off. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you think of this?” Simon asked, showing him the English website for D-Powers.

“What the...? An auction for skill orbs? With a bidding time of three days? What kind of idiot made this site? It’s too crude to be a scam.”

Joshua’s views on the matter were correct. Everyone knew three things about skill orbs: they were rare, they disappeared within a day, and attempting to gather them was impossible.

“It’s been a day since the auction started, and the website still hasn’t been shut down,” Simon explained. “Plus, a lot of reputable organizations appear on the list of bidders—Japan’s Ministry of Defense, their National Police Agency, and even large corporations attempting to capture dungeons.”

If the auction was a scam, the JDA would have shut it down immediately. But more importantly, all the big-timers were unanimously placing bids.

“Could this party have found a method for preserving orbs?” Simon mused.

Though Simon found orb preservation hard to believe, humanity never stopped progressing. The discovery of such a method always remained a possibility. Even so, this website appeared to be independently operated by private citizens.

“Suppose this party *has* found such a method,” Simon continued. “Right now, it would still be their private technology, wouldn’t it?”

“Dude, if that’s true, we should recruit them right away!” Joshua cried out. “This would be way more valuable than an aircraft carrier.”

“Everyone in the world who’s seen this website is thinking the same thing. And Japan isn’t full of idiots. We won’t be able to recruit them so easily.”

Currently, everyone associated with dungeons must have been in a massive uproar. Yet at the moment, no one knew if the auction was real or not. Even if a third party attempted to identify the responsible individual, all they knew was the site founder’s WDA license ID. For now, everyone had probably decided to wait and see how things played out.

Simon pointed towards the Physical Resistance listing. “That aside, here’s the real issue.”

“Physical Resistance?” Joshua asked. “I’ve never heard of a skill like that.”

“I made some inquiries. Just like you said, it doesn’t seem to exist.”

“An unknown skill?!”

Simon nodded firmly, tapping the LCD screen with his index finger. “Mason’s going to need this going forward, don’t you think?”

“An auction lasting three days, *and* one of the skill orbs is unknown? That’s insane,” Joshua said. “Does the person who decided to throw this party understand what they’ve done?”

“Who knows? In any case, I’m going to bid on this one. Looks like I won’t have enough money, so if you don’t mind, get the team’s permission to use our party bank account.”

“You think it’s going to be *that* expensive?”

“Take a look at who we’re going up against.”

Simon showed one of the current bidders to Joshua. Just like Simon’s, it was a well-known ID.

“Junxi Huang, huh?” Joshua asked.

As the fourth-ranked member of the WDA, Huang was China’s top explorer.

“If I win the auction, we’ll go to Yoyogi for a while,” Simon said. “The world’s top-ranked explorer suddenly appeared from around there, remember? This must be related. If it’s not, I’ll eat my hat.”

“I doubt Mason’s up for that yet.”

“The occasional vacation to Japan shouldn’t hurt.”

“Vacation? At a time like this?”

Due to that damnable language orb, every explorer connected to the US government was being worked to the bone. Yet in response to Joshua’s words, Simon merely smiled.

“No matter what I say, you’re not gonna listen, are you?” Joshua said with a sigh. “Fine. I’ll contact the others.”

“I’m counting on you,” Simon replied, returning his gaze to the computer screen.

November 4, 2018 (Sunday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

After waking myself up with a shower, I exited the bathroom. Just then, the front door opened, Miyoshi rushing inside. Panicked, I covered myself with a towel.

“We might be using this place as an office, but it’s still my house...” I grumbled. “Even if you have a spare key, at least knock first.”

“K-K-K-K-Kei! That’s not important right now!”

“What do you...?”

“Here, take a look at this!”

Glancing at the smartphone Miyoshi held towards me, I saw D-Powers’ sales website.

Oh right, the auction was supposed to end at midnight in Japan. And those look like the final bidding prices for the orbs. Let’s see...

“Two hundred million?!” I cried. “Incredible. That’s three times what we expected, right?”

“Kei, look at the digits. You’re off by an order of magnitude!”

“Huh...? One, ten, one hundred, one thousand... Wait a second. Two *billion* four hundred and eighty-two million?”

2,482,000,000 JPY

2,643,000,000 JPY

2,562,000,000 JPY

The three Water Magic orbs displayed on Miyoshi’s phone had sold for over two billion four hundred million yen each.

“Plus, all three have the same winning bidder...” I noted. “Wait, is that a government ID?”

WDA IDs consisted of four blocks. The left-hand corner block was formatted as classification plus Area ID plus country ID. “P” stood for “personal,” as in individuals. “C” stood for “company,” “G” for “government,” and “D” for any organization related to the WDA. Thus, an individual from Area 12, who was under the JDA’s jurisdiction, would have an ID of P12JP.

“It’s the Ministry of Defense,” Miyoshi said.

Oh, wow.

We lived in an age in which fighter aircraft cost ten billion yen each, while still requiring plenty of maintenance. If Water Magic could create a warrior of comparable strength, this might have been considered cheap.

“More importantly, look at this!” Miyoshi cried out.

Where she pointed, I saw the winning bid for Physical Resistance.

3,547,000,000 JPY

“Th-Three billion five hundred million?!” I exclaimed.

Although Physical Resistance was an unknown skill, the name alone had warranted this price. Furthermore, the buyer had a personal ID.

What kind of ultra-wealthy fat cat bought this one...?

“He’s famous enough that the filter converts his ID into his name,” Miyoshi said. “Look. It’s Simon Gershwin.”

“Famous, you say? Is he some ultra-wealthy foreigner? The name does sound kind of familiar...”

“What are you talking about?” Miyoshi asked, pointing to the WDARL’s third-ranked explorer. “It’s this guy.”

“Oh, the leader of the team that captured Evans Dungeon! His last name is Gershwin, huh?”

Letting out a heavy sigh, I thudded down into a dining room chair. The whole thing was a shock.

“After taxes, we’ve made 8,987,200,000 yen,” Miyoshi said. “What should we do with it?”

“Well, our only expense was the cost of Alien Drool. As for what we should do next... Have the inspections performed at your friend Midori’s place, I suppose?”

Miyoshi chuckled. “You’re really something, Kei.”

“How so?”

“I mean, you were one step away from begging on the streets, but now you have almost ten billion yen in the bank. I half expected you to be brain-dead.”

“C’mon, that’s our party’s money. I’m still the same old pauper.”

Obviously, an employee couldn't spend their company's money as they pleased.

"Seeing as we're the only two members, half of this money is definitely yours," Miyoshi said.

"If you say so. Still, I don't have any particular plans for this money... Oh, wait. We should at least move our company somewhere better."

Staying in my room indefinitely would cause too much trouble. Specifically, Miyoshi would cause too much trouble for me.

"With this kind of money, we could buy a whole building," Miyoshi said.

"Oh, that sounds nice. Kind of like a secret hideout. Can't pass that up."

"Secret hideout? Are you nine years old? Anyway, your party card is ready. Here you go."

Miyoshi handed me an IC card with a matte, carbon black base. It had my party and member IDs engraved in small, golden letters. All in all, a pretty sleek design.

"A D-Card, and WDA license card, and now a party card, huh?" I asked. "Can't these be combined into one?"

"D-Cards transcend human understanding, and parties can change. Also, if these were combined into one license card, your identity would be revealed during its use."

The party ID was just a serial number, but if combined with a license card, it could be connected to a person's WDA ID.

"In other words, secret plots require a lot of time and effort, don't they?" While fiddling with my party card, I asked a question that suddenly occurred to me. "By the way, how much can I spend per month?"

"Neither of us has a monthly salary."

"Err, come again?"

"This card is something of a fusion between a corporate cash card and a corporate credit card," Miyoshi explained. "Because the WDA issues it, the

credit card portion is similar to an AmEx card. Apparently, it'll be usable right after the first deposit. Also, there's no upper or lower spending limit."

"And that means?"

"Basically, you can withdraw as much money as you have in your account. And since there's no credit limit, you can use it however you like."

"That, uh, doesn't sound good," I noted.

"It's only the two of us, and the WDA immediately deducts taxes. Fundamentally, the credit limit of an AmEx card is set by the individual. So, even if we don't have an actual credit limit, we can decide on one for ourselves."

Oh, is that how it works?

"Well, if either of us is going to make a big purchase, let's discuss it beforehand," Miyoshi continued. "But if we're only spending around ten million yen, why don't we use the money however we please?"

"Uh, I would like to put some of it in savings..."

"I had the same thought, but the card itself is a bank account. It's similar to putting money in savings."

"Oh, is that right...?"

At that moment, we both burst out laughing.

"Could we be any more middle class?" I asked.

"Well, we *are* middle class. While I take care of the particulars, you keep on raking in the dough! Those slimes won't kill themselves!"

"You got it. But wow, having an agent sure makes things easy."

"Right? As the parasitic Queen of the Merchants, I'm also thrilled with how profitable my host has been."

At that, we shared another laugh.

"Still, I have rent and other monthly payments," I pointed out. "Won't having no personal assets cause problems?"

"When money is deposited into a party account through the JDA, the money

can be divided and transferred into the personal accounts of registered party members, which are linked to their WDA cards. We'll use this system for now, transferring one percent into our accounts through automatic installments. Still, don't withdraw cash and deposit it into your personal account, as you could run afoul of the tax office."

Yeah, that makes sense. After all, you'd be dividing after-tax income between the party and individuals. That being said...

"One percent?" I asked. "I spend more than one hundred thousand yen per month. Will that be enough?"

"Kei. One percent of the first orb alone is almost ninety million yen. And that's after taxes."

"Huh...? I have a monthly income of ninety million?"

Miyoshi laughed. "For this month, yes. Also, you'll have to pay ten percent in resident taxes later, so watch out for that."

Hearing all this at once, I felt somewhat dizzy. I needed to put this out of my mind for now. At any rate, I wouldn't have any trouble making payments, and that's what mattered for now.

"So, have dates been set for the transfers?" I asked.

"We'll be handing over the Ministry of Defense's orbs tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?! Are you prepared for that already?"

Miyoshi cackled. "Check out these cool titanium chests I had made! I even had their interiors lined with dense silk velvet."

Rummaging through the cardboard boxes piled in the kitchen, Miyoshi withdrew a single chest, showing it to me. It was the perfect size for storing an orb, and two shades of silk velvet lined the interior. One was such a dark blue, it was almost black. The other was a low-saturated crimson. Furthermore, a pair of eerie magic circles were engraved on the inside of the lid and the bottom of the chest.

"Oh, so that's the reason for the cardboard boxes," I said. "Still, this chest looks kind of expensive."

“Of course it does. I custom ordered these. There are one hundred chests per batch, and each one costs one hundred twenty thousand yen.”

“One hundred twenty thousand for a box?! That’s insane!”

“If the payment had come before we sold the orbs, I never would have been able to afford them.”

And she spoke with such confidence.

“So, what’s with the magic circles?” I asked.

“They’re a big ol’ bluff. I had these made so that the various lines would have interesting mathematical values. Doesn’t the thought of some research agency earnestly analyzing these magic circles put a smile on your face?”

“Sounds a little sadistic to me...”

“Not at all!” Miyoshi assured me. “But before I hand over these chests tomorrow, I’d like you to place the orbs inside.”

“Got it. So where’s the transfer happening?”

“I reserved a rental conference room at the JDA for eleven o’clock. Oh, that reminds me.”

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I received a call from the JDA a few days ago. They want to meet with us.”

“About preserving orbs?”

“Most likely. So anyway, I also promised to meet with the JDA tomorrow afternoon. After all, we’re already meeting with the Ministry of Defense in the JDA headquarters. Will you come with me, Kei?”

Hmm. Even if I don’t want my identity exposed, everyone at the JDA already knows our party makeup. Tagging along shouldn’t cause any problems. Plus, I’m worried about Miyoshi going alone.

“Sure, I’ll attend as a party member,” I said. “Just in case.”

“Got it.”

“All righty then, I’ll go get a good night’s sleep to be ready for tomorrow.”

Miyoshi sighed. “You know it’s still morning, right?”

“Guess sleep will have to wait. Maybe I’ll go dungeon diving instead.”

“I’m leaving to look at a few offices for our company. Also, I’m checking out buildings and houses at a few real estate agencies. Do you have a preferred area?”

“Do you mind staying around here? It’s close to Yoyogi, and I’m kind of attached to it.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture

JGSDF Camp Narashino

The primary mission of the Japanese Dungeon Attack Group was to capture dungeons and respond to disasters within their interiors. Due to geographical conditions, the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force carried out most dungeon raids. In the beginning, JDAG members had been recruited from police organizations and the SDF at large. However, much like the JGSDF Special Forces Group, the unit had been established with the 1st Airborne Brigade as their parent organization. Thus, Camp Narashino had been the most natural choice for their stationing. Currently, the JDAG was headquartered at said base, operating as a subordinate unit of the Ground Component Command, which had been established in the past year.

On that day in Camp Narashino, First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu finished her voluntary training and headed back to her government-provided housing. Doing voluntary training on a Sunday felt a little lonesome, but after finishing cleaning and laundry, she had little else to do. While going for a light jog, she’d gotten fired up for a harder workout. Also, she would undoubtedly be given a new mission within the next few days. That being said, this next mission seemed more likely to be a search than a raid.

“Otherworldly Language Comprehension, huh...?”

A few days ago, she’d seen this orb’s name in a file.

“Orbs rarely ever appear by chance. I doubt we can obtain one by targeting it...”

Since the appearance of dungeons, Iori had witnessed only two orb manifestations. She had caused the first orb to drop herself, which had pulled her onto this path. While she considered this absentmindedly, a voice called to her from a distance.

“Iori!”

“Master Sergeant Hagane?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

Master Sergeant Hagane was an elite veteran who had worked his way up the ranks. He’d been assigned to Team I in a role equivalent to a warrant officer—the JGSDF’s highest noncommissioned rank. Since he had been in charge of training Iori’s squadron, she spoke to him like a superior outside of missions.

“Perfect timing,” Hagane said. “I received a call from Ichigaya. We’re to appear there at fourteen hundred tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll report to Ichigaya at fourteen hundred tomorrow! Speaking of which...”

“Yes, the order came from Major Terasawa... Wait, has he become a lieutenant colonel yet?”

Despite being close in age, Hagane and Terasawa had taken completely different career paths. However, while assigned to the same squadron for a brief period of time, they’d been strangely compatible. Ever since, they’d become something like friends in their private lives.

“He’ll probably wait until the New Year’s promotions in January,” replied Iori. “Speaking of which, aren’t you eligible to take the SLC, Sir?”

Hagane, who’d spent his career in the field, had already turned thirty-six, making him eligible for C candidacy. Among the officer candidates in the SDF, those who passed an internal selection exam at the rank of sergeant were called B candidates. C candidates included officers aged between thirty-six and forty-nine who passed a screening exam and completed the Second Lieutenant Course.

“I suppose so,” Hagane said. “But for now, I still have to babysit you.”

Iori smiled wryly. “What a terrible thing to say.”

Though Hagane loved working in the field, he couldn’t do so forever. Iori wanted the man to use his abundant knowledge to advise the other officers.

“In any case, this is a direct order from Major Terasawa,” Hagane said.

“The major issued a direct order on a Sunday?”

“He did. As orders go, it’s quite unusual.”

If the major had known the schedule in advance, he would have notified Iori’s team on Friday at the latest. Undoubtedly, a matter requiring urgency had arisen.

“Is this about Otherworldly Language Comprehension?” Iori asked.

“No, but I’ve been ordered to bring Kaiba and Sawatari as well. Apparently, the Ministry of Defense winning that auction turned out to be more than a rumor.”

“That thing was real?!”

“Well, we won’t know for sure until tomorrow.”

At the beginning of the month, a party with the ludicrous name of D-Powers had set up an auction site. For parties with a commercial license, that wasn’t particularly rare, but the items for sale had caused quite the stir. The JDAG had received a flood of inquiries from the Ministry of Defense and other related institutions regarding the auction. All of them had asked if the JDAG possessed the means to perform the same kind of sale. The answer, of course, had been a resounding “no.”

Anyone in the position to place a bid would have known such an auction to be impossible. Iori hadn’t anticipated anyone taking the bait. Yet contrary to most people’s expectations, the site had remained up and running even three days later, without the JDA recommending its closure. In other words...

“It must have been real,” Iori muttered.

“Hmm?” Hagane asked. “Did you say something?”

“No, it’s nothing. Are you coming with us tomorrow, sir?”

“Indeed. Should we all go by car? We’ll exit the C1 at Kitanomaru and travel via Kudanzaka for an hour.”

Iori laughed. “If we get stuck in traffic, the major will kill us.”

“Well then, let’s meet in front of the main gate at 12:30 tomorrow. We’ll take a car to Tsudanuma, but we’ll finish the journey using the Sobu Line.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll meet you in front of the main gate at 12:30 tomorrow.”

“Excellent. Now go home and get some rest. What are you doing volunteering to train on a Sunday? You could at least find someone to go on a date with.”

“That *could* be perceived as sexual harassment, sir.”

When Iori donned a frightening smile, Hagane responded with a model salute. “Well then, that will be all for today!”

Having said that, he beat the hastiest of retreats.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

I went dungeon diving around noon. When I got back home and opened the door, I found Miyoshi sitting with her face down on the dining room table.

“Keee,” she groaned.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I can’t tell if buildings are cheap or expensive.”

“Come again?”

After searching the web for offices and places to live, Miyoshi had apparently visited a number of real estate agencies.

“Except for truly enormous buildings or ones in ritzy places like Ginza, they cost around two hundred million to one billion yen,” she explained. “But most of them have tenants.”

“That makes sense.”

Unless it was newly constructed, a building without tenants was worthless.

"And so, after looking around for a while, I started to feel exhausted..." Miyoshi continued. "In the end, I considered buying a whole mess of buildings and living off the real estate income. Scary thought, right? Then something else occurred to me. Wouldn't a single floor of an office building with tight security work just as well?"

"I suppose so. The only reason to have a company building is because it's cool. Like a secret hideout."

"So next, I looked into that. But in buildings with tight security, the floors are three to five hundred square meters. How many people do they expect us to employ?"

"Hmm," I mused. "The two of us working alone in the middle of such a massive floor sounds kind of cool. Or maybe just sad. I can't tell."

"But when you go dungeon diving, I'll be all by myself, remember? I can't deal with that."

I pictured two solitary desks in the middle of a three-hundred-square meter office, only one person working there. Yeah, that would definitely be rough. Simply put, that much space was meaningless.

"And so," Miyoshi said, "due to my crushing exhaustion, I bought a relatively large house just behind here."

"You *already* bought it?"

"It's a temporary hold. Seeing as the land is over four hundred square meters, the place is somewhat expensive. It was originally a two-family house with a strange design. The first floor is a shared space, and the second floor has two full apartments with two bedrooms each. We can each live in one of those sections."

"Uh, hold on a second," I said. "You just decided where I'd live?"

"The first floor will be our office. Alongside a western-style, 315-square foot bedroom, it also has a combined living, dining, and kitchen area. Since the living room is over 590 square feet, it's more than enough space for an office. There are also three separate entrances into the house."

I sighed.

While sitting with her face down on the dining table, Miyoshi flailed her legs. “You’re going to like this house, Kei! That’s an order! I’m exhausted, and I can’t bear to look at another room!”

“O-Okay, I understand,” I replied. “Should I call a moving service then?”

“Do you want to bring along any furniture with sentimental value?”

“No. I basically only own a bed, a worn-out kotatsu, and some hangers. Can’t say I’m attached to any of those things...”

“In that case, I’ll buy everything new. Since we’re treating this as a company-owned house, that won’t cause any problems, right?”

“Are you going out to buy furniture then?”

Jerking her head up, Miyoshi looked at me with a grave expression. “Kei. In the past, I didn’t understand why coordinators existed, but after these recent experiences, I’ve seen the light.”

“And what is that?”

“In our modern world, making decisions and choosing things is extremely, incredibly, ridiculously difficult! There’s so much information and way too much stuff!”

“Y-Yeah.”

“But now, someone else can take care of this job!” Miyoshi exclaimed. “I’ll explain my vision, cast off all responsibility, and have them coordinate everything! All I have to do is complain a little! What a wonderful world we live in!”

“I-Indeed.”

“After searching online, I found out that people in this line of work *actually do* exist. Incredible, isn’t it? So anyway, I passed the job on to a place with a good track record. Take a look at the proposal, and offer any complaints you like.”

“W-Will do.”

“Being a researcher sure is nice,” Miyoshi said with a sigh. “The whole world

consists of only you and the subject, remember? I don't want to think about anything else for a while."

It would seem that even the Queen of the Merchants had her share of hardships. Later that afternoon, Miyoshi and I went shopping, and we threw a party in her honor that evening. She'd earned it.

November 5, 2018 (Monday)

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

The next day featured absurdly good weather.

"The sky is so blue, you can almost see into eternity," Miyoshi said. "Whenever this happens, it feels like I've been transformed into a minuscule insect."

Having drunk far too much wine at last night's party, she squinted at the bright sky.

I think you're just hungover.

"Do you feel like a shiny black bug with a pink head and pink spots?" I asked, unable to resist referring to an old American novel.

"Our office is only two stories, though," Miyoshi pointed out, managing to get my hint even while hungover.

"Well then, my friend and good luck charm, whom I carried down to the flower bed below," I said, continuing to tease her with literary shout-outs. "I'll wait for you to reach the second story. It's much closer than the eighteenth floor."

"We don't have a flower bed either."

Miyoshi, you're so nice. Who else would reenact a scene from a Raymond Chandler novel with me?⁽³⁾

I looked up at the JDA's strange headquarters. "And unfortunately, this building only has seventeen floors."

"Kei, I've had enough of this schtick," Miyoshi said, cutting me off.

Speed walking into the lobby, she headed towards the third floor.

“Well then, here it is.”

A man named Terasawa handed Miyoshi a memory card. Appearing to be in his thirties, he wore a military uniform and possessed sharp, dauntless features. Taking the memory card, Miyoshi placed it in her laptop, quickly checking the cipher.

Afterwards, Miyoshi opened the lids of three titanium chests, displaying the orbs. “I’ve confirmed you as the buyer. Here are your items.” She then turned towards Naruse, who was acting as the JDA’s witness. Miyoshi was lining up the chests. “If you would, please confirm the authenticity of the products.”

She wouldn’t let the buyer directly confirm the items’ authenticity. If the client touched the orb and ended up using it, everything would be over. No matter how much we protested, the item wouldn’t come back. Thus, the witness would usually guarantee the contents, confirm the bank deposit, and then hand over the orb.

Wearing a meek expression, Naruse touched the three orbs in order.

“Confirmed,” she said. “The JDA guarantees these three items are Water Magic orbs. As for the orb count, all of them are...under sixty minutes. About an hour old.”

Upon hearing this, the client stirred somewhat, an air of disbelief settling over him and Naruse.

“May I confirm as well?” Terasawa asked.

“Please wait until after you’ve transferred the money,” Miyoshi said. “We can always return the bank deposit, but you can’t unuse an orb.”

“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders,” Terasawa said with a laugh, operating a device used for money transfers. “Take a look at your bank account.”

All dungeon-related transactions performed with WDA licenses were carried out through a management agency. In Japan’s case, that agency was the JDA.

After the dungeon tax and the JDA administration fees were deducted from the payment, the money would be deposited into the other party's account linked to their license. They would never lose a single yen of their taxes.

"I've confirmed the deposit," Miyoshi said, lining up the chests in front of Terasawa. "You're now free to use the orbs."

Touching the orbs, Terasawa nodded. "Indeed."

"Well then, this concludes the transaction," Naruse announced. "Everyone, thank you so much."

At her words, a relaxed atmosphere enveloped the room.

"Ms. Miyoshi," Terasawa said.

"Yes?" she replied.

"How did you bring three orbs from a dungeon to this conference room within an hour?" the man asked with sincere curiosity. "If you didn't use a fighter aircraft, these must have come from Yoyogi, but..."

Miyoshi smiled. "Sorry, trade secret."

Folding his arms, Terasawa frowned. "Yes, I suppose that would be the case."

Fearing things might turn messy, I spoke to Naruse. "Our next meeting is with the JDA, right?"

"Oh, yes," she responded.

"That will need to wait," Terasawa interrupted. "We have another matter to discuss. If you please, sir."

Terasawa handed the floor over to a man who'd been sitting next to him, not saying a word. Dressed in a suit, he had no distinguishing features.

"Pleasure to meet you," the man said. "Please call me Tanaka."

"Uh, okay," I replied.

"I can't reveal my affiliation, but I've attended this meeting at the behest of relevant agencies and ministries."

Relevant what now?

“In other words, you’re someone important from the government?” I asked before Miyoshi could.

Without answering me directly, the man held out a stack of documents, relaying their shocking contents. “Azusa Miyoshi, Keigo Yoshimura. At the moment, you are asked to refrain from traveling abroad.”

“Come again?”

Checking the documents, I found the names of the Dungeon Agency Director, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Chairman of the National Public Safety Commission.

Hold up. These names seem far too...grandiose?

“Umm, I’m a little confused about what’s happening here...” I mumbled.

“Following the recent skill orb auction held by D-Powers, intelligence agencies across the globe have started taking action,” Tanaka explained.

“What?”

“In other words, letting you two travel abroad could pose a serious threat to national security.”

“Not even to America or Europe?” I asked. “You must be exaggerating.”

“No, I’m not.”

“That’s ridiculous. You know they’re our allies, right?”

“If you must travel abroad for some reason, please contact me,” Tanaka said, handing over a card with only his name and number. “We’ll send members of the Security Bureau with you.”

“Huh? But we’re just civilians...”

The Security Bureau usually provided protection for VIPs. Nevertheless, Tanaka didn’t elaborate on this point.

“I sincerely hope you will follow these recommendations,” he said. “Now, I must be on my way.”

After giving these unilateral instructions, Tanaka stood, bowing to Terasawa and leaving the room.

Utterly baffled, I turned to Terasawa. “Umm, what just happened?”

“This doesn’t concern me,” he answered curtly. “I merely allowed his presence at the behest of my superiors.”

“I see...”

“Now then, I’ll be heading out too,” Terasawa said, holding out his hand to Miyoshi. “I’m glad the transaction went off without a hitch. Should the occasion arise, I look forward to working with you again.”

“So do I,” Miyoshi replied, gripping his hand. “Thank you for the purchase.”

Once the two had finished shaking hands, Terasawa left the conference room in a hurry.

“In the end, he didn’t use any of the orbs here,” I noted.

“That’s true,” Miyoshi said. “But the Ministry of Defense is here in Ichigaya too, so it’s just right around the corner for him. He’s got plenty of time left.”

“I suppose so.”

“More importantly, Kei...”

“Yeah?”

“Our plans to eat delicious food in Europe... They’re ruined...”

“Do you want to visit while surrounded by secret police?” I asked.

Pretending to bawl crocodile tears, Miyoshi lay face down on the conference room table. “Farewell, my Angkor Wat...”

“Umm,” Naruse cut in. “Is everyone okay?”

“Oh, right,” Miyoshi responded, still looking down. “Good work today, Naruse.”

“It was my pleasure.”

“Still, now that I think about it, you just did something incredible.”

Naruse tilted her head, wearing a curious expression. “What do you mean?”

“In a mere thirty minutes, you earned over 760 million yen for the JDA.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Mmm, can’t get enough of that delicious commission...”

“Um, you know this isn’t my money, right?” Naruse asked.

“After earning so much for your organization, you’d better get a big, fat bonus.”

“I see... Incidentally, we have some time until the next meeting. Shall we go out for lunch?”

In response to Naruse changing the subject, Miyoshi jerked her head up. “Yes!” she cried cheerfully. “How about Minamiteiji?”

I sighed. “Listen here, Miyoshi...”

Minamiteiji was an addictive, incredibly masculine French restaurant in Yotsuya. They also handed out plenty of souvenirs. While the restaurant did serve lunch, you could also order the grand menu, like a true man would. Going there with Miyoshi would be very, very dangerous.

“We don’t have that kind of money,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Miyoshi asked. “We just made a fortune.”

“Oh, that’s right... Still, we don’t have the time.”

Glancing at the clock on her laptop, Miyoshi nodded disappointedly.

“Let’s go to Suragawa,” I suggested. “It’s right behind the JDA.”

“You really like that place, huh?”

“It’s normal, and I can relax there. Being so close and easy on the wallet doesn’t hurt either. Oh, and the building name and logo give off a Morohoshi vibe, which is great.”

“What does *that* even mean?”

The building had the same name as the protagonist of *Yokai Hunter*. Furthermore, the building’s logo was written in Mincho-style katakana. Though slightly distorted, the text looked incredibly refined. Especially if you liked subdued, hidden locations.

If you live in the area, please go check it out. For reasons totally unrelated to Sugarawa.

“Umm,” Naruse said, sounding apologetic. “If you don’t mind, we can have lunch in the JDA’s cafeteria.”

You could only enter the JDA cafeteria if accompanied by an employee. The food was rumored to be quite delicious, but neither Miyoshi nor I had ever tried it. Exchanging glances, we nodded to each other fervently.

After the meal, Miyoshi walked down the hallway, fuming. “The JDA doesn’t play fair. How does a tonkatsu meal set with that much food only cost five hundred yen? What is this, a dirt cheap beef bowl?”

“Yeah, it was pretty good,” I said.

“It was more than ‘pretty good.’ They should open the cafeteria to normal explorers with WDA licenses. I would visit three times a week!”

“We’d end up spending way too much on train fare.”

If you took the Odawara and Sobu Lines from Hachiman to Ichigaya, it would cost 290 yen. With a card, it would cost 278 yen. In total, a round trip would cost 556 yen. Sure, one thousand yen for tonkatsu wasn’t that expensive, but would it be worth the price three times a week? Doubtful.

“Oh, you’re right,” Miyoshi said.

In response to our conversation, which didn’t account for our current wealth, Naruse giggled.

“Naruse, who are we meeting with from the JDA?” Miyoshi asked.

“I think it’ll be my boss’s superior, but... I haven’t heard the details.”

“Oh, wow. What kind of person should we expect?”

“Saiga is the section chief of the Dungeon Management Section. He’s a very understanding person.”

“Well whatever the conversation ends up being, that’s good to hear,” I said.

Opening the conference room door, we found an old man in his sixties sitting

there.

“Executive Director Mizuho?!” Naruse yelled in surprise.

Executive? That sounds important.

“How does one hundred million yen sound?” were the first words out of Mizuho’s mouth.

“Huh?” I asked.

Unable to understand what was happening, Miyoshi and I stood there dumbfoundedly.

“One hundred million yen,” Mizuho repeated himself. “That’s a lot of money for you two, right?”

Well, that might be true, but what are you talking about, old man?

Beside me, Naruse paled.

“Sir,” said a nervous-looking man next to Mizuho. Despite being relatively young, he had a receding hairline. “One hundred million is too much for a starting offer. Wouldn’t ten million have sufficed?”

“You think so? In that case, let’s go with ten million. I’ll arrange to have the money available at accounting right away, so—”

“S-Sir!” interrupted Naruse, her expression frantic. “Executive Director, please!”

Mizuho looked somewhat indignant over being interrupted by an underling. His face reminded me of a blowfish I’d caught at a breakwater when I was a kid. Those puffy guys.

“What is it?” Mizuho demanded.

“What happened to Section Chief Saiga?” Naruse asked. “I heard that he would be attending today’s meeting.”

“I told him to take care of other business. We’re buying the orb preservation technology today, right? In that case, we needn’t deal with all the complicated formalities. As the one in charge of this meeting, I’ll make the purchase. Simple as that.”

Hearing this, Naruse was speechless.

“We don’t have much time,” Mizuho continued. “Let’s hurry up and get the formalities over—”

“Forgive me,” I cut in politely. “But you seem to have misunderstood something.”

Mizuho looked at me suspiciously, as if he’d stumbled upon some abomination while strolling down the road. “Misunderstood something?”

“Yes,” I replied. “We don’t have any technology to sell to the JDA. We’re ordinary people, after all.”

“What? I don’t know how you accomplished it, but you’re here to sell us the orb preservation technology, aren’t you?”

Wearing a confused expression, I looked between Mizuho and the nervous-looking man beside him. “Huh? Where did you get that idea?”

“Weren’t you just finalizing a deal with the Ministry of Defense?”

“Oh, and how do you know that?” I asked, casually interjecting a comeback. “Did the details of a trade conducted in one of your conference rooms leak? If so, that would be terrible.”

“Oh, um, I noticed Ministry of Defense members in the lobby. If I’m mistaken, never mind.”

“I see.”

“But didn’t your party auction off orbs?”

“Yes. And coincidentally, we managed to find everything our winning bidders purchased. What a relief.”

“Coincidentally?” Mizuho repeated.

“Correct. Imagine if we hadn’t been able to get our hands on those items. We would’ve been treated like a couple of scam artists. Orbs sure are difficult to acquire and transport.”

“And what about their preservation?”

“You’ve developed that kind of technology?” Still wearing a surprised

expression, I spread out my arms, feigning my most sincere curiosity. “The JDA never ceases to amaze me. When will you announce it?”

“...Furai,” Mizuho said. “What’s going on here?”

“What?” asked the man next to the executive director. “But according to the section chief... What the hell is going on here, Naruse?!”

When the man named Furai handed the floor to Naruse, she began to panic. “Huh? I’m totally lost here. What are you talking about?”

“Furai!” Mizuho spat, the red-faced blowfish clenching his fists. “Come to my office after this!”

He stormed out of the conference room.

Flustered, Furai chased after him. “E-Executive Director!”

“Did I just witness a sketch comedy skit?” Miyoshi asked.

“Embarrassingly enough, Furai is my direct superior...” Naruse said. “Originally, his boss—Section Chief Saiga—and I were supposed to hold today’s meeting, with me as the intermediary.”

In other words, Furai is the JDA’s Enoki. Everything’s starting to make sense.

“Interesting,” I said. “Something like a struggle for the next company president must be taking place. Or in the JDA’s case, the next chairperson. Basically, the executive director’s faction went on a rampage, plotting to gain an advantage through a single, grand achievement.”

Miyoshi looked at me curiously. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve read *Shimako*.”

“You can’t learn everything from manga!” Miyoshi cried, karate chopping the back of my head.

Naruse glanced at the clock. The meeting should have started a little while ago.

“Umm, I’m going to look for the section chief,” she said. “Do you mind waiting here for a little while?”

“No problem,” I replied. “Either way, we have nothing planned for later.”

Bowing her head to us, Naruse jogged out of the conference room.

“Kei, you’re pretty nice to her,” Miyoshi noted.

“Oh, and I’m not nice to you? When we went shopping for your celebration yesterday, who casually bought a bottle of Bâtard-Montrachet on my card?”

Ducking her head, Miyoshi turned towards me, her neck seeming to creak.

“How can something be *that* expensive?” I asked. “When I saw the receipt, I almost fainted.”

Miyoshi laughed nervously. “I-It was from the year Henri Clerc retired and sold the vineyard to Girardin. Without trying it, how would I know how inspired the vintners were that year? For a bottle of Bâtard, it was incredibly cheap! A super good bargain!”

“Yeah, I’m sure it was.”

“I mean, c’mom. I wanted to try it, and I didn’t have any money in my wallet. Plus, you said it was a party in my honor!”

“When faced with such dilemmas, giving up would be the adult choice.”

“Kei. This world is overflowing with once-in-a-lifetime encounters.”

Thinking she’d said something profound, Miyoshi leaned back in her chair, looking smug.

“Thankfully, we’re now in a position to never miss those encounters,” I answered with a sigh.

“Yeah, but without the fun of worrying, life might feel a little dull... But anyway, you’re the one who earned all that money. Those encounters should be yours, not mine.”

“No, I never could have turned those orbs into a profit. The money and the Alien Drool are both thanks to you.”

“...Kei!” Like a small, overemotional animal, Miyoshi looked at me with tearful eyes. “If you always acted like this, you could definitely get a girlfriend!”

“You never know when to stop, do you?!”

As I jokingly karate chopped Miyoshi on the head, the door opened and

Naruse reentered the conference room. “S-Sorry for the...wait?”

Seeing Miyoshi cradling her head while hunched over, Naruse wore a vague smile that seemed to say, “What happened here?”

“Good day,” said a man’s voice. “I apologize for our executive director’s poor behavior.”

A solidly built, somewhat short man appeared from behind Naruse. At a glance, he reminded me of a square. Yes, the geometrical shape.

“I’m Saiga,” he introduced himself. “Pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. I’m Yoshimura, and the girl hunched down over there is Miyoshi. She’s our party leader.”

After shaking hands, we both took our seats.

“Forgive my abruptness,” Saiga said, “but I’d like to discuss leaving orbs in your care.”

Apparently, this section chief cut straight to the point. In business dealings, this sort of person was easy to get along with.

“Let’s use Yoyogi as an example,” Saiga continued. “Do you know what currently happens to the orbs discovered there?”

“No, not precisely,” I replied. “The recipient could check the waiting list, rush home with the orb, and contact any potential buyers. Or the recipient could just use the orb themselves.”

“Along with those two options, the JDA will sometimes buy orbs directly,” Saiga added with a nod. “In these cases, we can’t pay exorbitant amounts of money, but even for the measiest of orbs, we can still provide fair compensation. For many explorers seeking a payout, that seems to be enough.”

“I see.”

“As a whole, the JDA produces a fair number of such orbs. In Yoyogi alone, at least four orbs are found each year, despite their rarity.” Pausing there, Saiga donned a mischievous smile. “Of course, if the orbs sold by D-Powers come from Yoyogi, that would mean a far greater number are being discovered.”

I laughed nervously.

“Yet once the JDA acquires these orbs, the problem is where to sell them,” Saiga explained.

While speaking, he took a sip of the coffee brewed by Naruse. Considering that the beverage had been poured from a machine at the press of a button, it tasted pretty good. Despite being Team Japanese Tea myself, Miyoshi had forced me into drinking coffee lately.

“To make our sales quickly, we must prioritize the buyers, but over the past few days, D-Powers has proven what could happen when conducting a leisurely auction.” Here, Saiga paused for a breath, continuing with what he assumed to be effective timing. “In short, the JDA wishes to auction off our orbs as well. We would also like to use them whenever the need arises.”

Hmm. He’s simply informing us of his desire to auction off orbs? Naruse’s mediation might have helped, but this section chief seems to understand us fairly well.

When I looked at Miyoshi, she nodded silently.

“Allow me to ask a few questions,” I said.

“By all means,” Saiga replied.

“First of all, could you bring those orbs to here or Yoyogi with an orb count of less than twelve hundred?”

At this count, less than twenty hours would have passed since the orb’s appearance.

“I believe that’s possible,” Saiga said. “Even if the orb takes ten hours to reach the surface, we’ll have another ten hours to reach Tokyo. You can cover a vast distance in that time.”

“At most, I could receive orbs with a count of 1260. Anything more than that might be a little difficult. Also, whenever you need the orb, could you please contact us at least forty-eight hours in advance?”

“That also seems possible, but why?”

“Oh, it’s very simple,” I replied, explaining a load of nonsense that had just

occurred to me. “Before the orbs in our care disappear, I’d like to use them for something.”

Publicly, I would continue bluffing about how we acquired and stored orbs.

“What?” Saiga asked, sounding surprised.

“Whenever you need the orb, I’ll find another one by ‘coincidence’ and deliver it. At that time, the orb count will be no more than sixty plus whatever I received.” Raising the plastic cup to my mouth, I paused for a single breath before continuing. “No matter how much God favors us, I’ll need at least that much time to find a new one, right?”

For a moment, Saiga wore a suspicious expression, my statement confusing him. However, he soon nodded, grasping my intent. “Understood.”

“Of course, if I can’t coincidentally find the orb, I’ll reimburse you.”

“Well then, on to the matter of payment. Because there’s no comparable service in this case, we’ll decide on something close to your asking price.” As if in surrender, the section chief raised his hands. “Even with the added expense of transportation, the JDA will earn greater profits than ever before. If your price remains within that profit range, we’ll probably agree to anything. After all, the value of the orb isn’t the only merit here.”

True enough. With this revolution, orbs would become bargaining chips. Politically and militarily, their impact would be unfathomable. The SDF hadn’t come to us with this same offer simply because numerous members of their organization required skill orbs for actual dungeon exploration.

“We’ll take each orb for one hundred million yen or thirty percent of the sale price,” I said. “Whichever one is greater. Oh, and please don’t register your orbs at any auction house outside of ours.”

I didn’t want to become a subcontractor for famous auction houses.

“Hmm...” Saiga mused. “Understood. Those conditions should be fine.”

Despite my blatant overcharging, he’d agreed at once. Based on our auction, Saiga might have considered this easy money. Still, no one could guarantee these sales would last forever. Did he not mind taking risks?

Let's find out.

"There's one more important thing you need to know," I said.

"What is it?"

"Due to a technological problem, both Miyoshi and I are needed to deliver the orbs. If either one of us dies, the orbs in our care could possibly be lost. You'll need to accept this risk."

"I see."

"However, we may be able to solve this problem in three years."

"Three years?" Saiga repeated.

"It's just a possibility. Still, no matter how much money you might want to invest, there's no way to shorten this time period. I appreciate your understanding."

"I don't quite grasp your meaning, but...okay. That will do for now."

"For the time being, that's all I can tell you. Now, you'll need to decide whether to accept—"

"We'll accept, of course," Saiga cut me off. "Within the next few days, I'll draw up a contract and have it delivered. Please look over the details."

Seriously? Despite the very real possibility of the orbs being needlessly lost, he's making a snap decision? What the hell is going on here? Does a section chief even have this kind of authority?

"Thank you," I said. "Still, large contracts written in small print are difficult to read. If you could, please prepare a document with a succinct summary of this conversation. Also, this service will remain in the personal realm rather than a legal one. I would appreciate your understanding on that."

I needed to emphasize this last point.

"...Understood," Saiga replied. Seeming to remember something, he continued, "So, on to the matter of our intermediary. Naruse."

"Yes?" she asked.

"You should receive an official report from HR later, but as of today, you've

been appointed as D-Powers' full-time supervisor. Apparently, you'll be treated as an assistant section chief and work at your own discretion. Congratulations. You're now the most successful employee of your contemporaries."

"Wh... What?!"

In response to Naruse's surprise, Miyoshi kept a straight face. "You earned the JDA more than seven hundred million yen in thirty minutes. Did you expect anything different?"

"You're quite resentful, aren't you?"

"Those who bleed the people dry through taxes are the enemy."

"Well then," Saiga said with a laugh. "Please speak to Naruse about any further details, as she will be in charge of you. I'll be on my way now."

Bowing, the section chief left the room.

"He seems good at his job," I noted.

"Yeah, but he's a walking square," Miyoshi said. "The geometric kind."

Hearing her perfect description, everyone burst out laughing.

"Speaking of which," Miyoshi continued. "Naruse, what does being our full-time supervisor entail?"

"I'm not too sure, but perhaps I'll work to accommodate your party."

"What will you do at the JDA?"

"Since I'll have discretionary powers, there's no need to be at my desk. Maybe I'll go to your office and spy on your secrets."

"Did you just admit to spying...?" I asked.

"Once we've set up our new office, feel free to stop by," Miyoshi said teasingly. "But at our current office, you'll run the risk of being tackled by Kei. After all, his bed is right next to the sliding door."

"I see," Naruse responded vaguely.

C'mon, I would never do that!

"Oh right, we need to go check on the designer's plans!" Miyoshi cried. "We

did have something else to do, Kei!"

"You seem rather busy," Naruse said.

"To an extent. Speaking of which..."

"Yes?"

"Before too long, we'll be putting the next orbs up for sale. I look forward to working with you again."

"...Huh?" Naruse asked. "You're holding a second auction?"

"Well, yes," Miyoshi replied. "But keep this a secret until the orbs go on sale, okay?"

Despite sighing in exasperation, Naruse responded with a defeated nod.

Come on, Naruse. If your job is to spy on us, you shouldn't have agreed to that.

Ministry of Defense, Ichigaya

It was 14:00 on November 5, and as ordered, Iori's team had arrived at the Ministry of Defense. Inside Terasawa's office, they stood in awe before the orbs.

Seeing an orb for the first time, Sawatari—the most serious member of the squadron—hesitated. "Major, is it really okay for us to use these?"

After all, each piece of equipment had cost two billion yen, and once used, it would become the sole possession of one person. Quite possibly, none of them would ever be able to quit the SDF.

"Indeed, there *were* conversations about letting the younger soldiers use them, but..." Terasawa trailed off.

Currently, Sawatari was thirty-two years old. Despite being in the prime of his career, he wasn't exactly young. Even Hagane was thirty-six. Thus, Sawatari nervously waited for the major to continue.

"I argued against that," Terasawa concluded. "By the time any young soldiers grew capable of using these orbs, they would be your age."

“Fair point,” Hagane said with a chuckle.

Merely giving young, untrained soldiers supernatural abilities wouldn’t allow them to survive on the battlefield. That was a simple fact of life. The number of troops who had died in the dungeons far outnumbered those who had lost their lives in war zones.

Kaiba—a relatively young member of the team—used one of the orbs without hesitation, checking for any bodily transformations.

“You don’t dawdle,” Terasawa said. “How does it feel, Kaiba?”

“Well, standing around with somber looks on our faces won’t get us anywhere. Since this is my first time using an orb, I have nothing to compare it to, but...it feels like something inside me was born again.”

While watching this conversation from the corner of her eye, Iori mentioned her misgivings to Hagane. “Still, I thought there would be more disputes over how to choose the users.”

“Due to the short life span of orbs, there’s no time for disputes,” Terasawa answered in his stead. “And because skills turn soldiers into living weapons, veterans are better suited to their use. Furthermore...”

When Terasawa hesitated, Iori sensed something off, urging him to continue. “Furthermore?”

“Looking at *them*, I had a strange feeling. Compared to these past three years, we’ll be able to obtain orbs more easily. Because of that, we can use them without any hesitation.”

“By them, do you mean D-Powers?”

“I do.”

“Just how many members make up their party?”

“Only two are registered with the JDA.”

“What? Only two?”

Iori was stunned; she had been imagining a large party. How had they gathered so many orbs with only two members? In the past three years, the

entirety of the JDAG had only found six orbs.

“Does this bother you?” Terasawa asked.

“Well, yes...” Iori replied.

“Apparently, the higher-ups are bothered too. After the transaction, Tanaka—the man I’d been ordered to attend the meeting with—handed them instructions to refrain from traveling abroad. What’s more, these documents had been signed by the Dungeon Agency Director, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Chairman of the National Public Safety Commission.”

“Tanaka?”

Despite him being entrusted with such an important matter, Iori didn’t recognize the man’s name.

“I don’t know him either,” Terasawa said. “Regardless, I received direct orders from the Chief of Staff not to ask anything. I simply allowed Tanaka to attend the meeting with us. Still, based on his completely unremarkable manner and how quickly the government offices coordinated, he’s probably from the CIRO.”

To bar a single party from traveling abroad, the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office had painstakingly gathered those three signatures? Iori thought it best to avoid this particular landmine.

“Isn’t D-Powers just an average party?” she asked doubtfully, furrowing her brow.

Terasawa waited a beat before answering. “They are. If you can call a group capable of delivering three Water Magic orbs with a count below sixty minutes to a JDA conference room an ‘average party.’”

“Does...that mean they’re capable of creating orbs at will?”

Terasawa could have mistaken Iori’s words for a divine revelation. Upon hearing about D-Powers, most people had suspected orb preservation technology, a network of high-ranking divers, or the mysterious top-ranked explorer’s involvement. But the ability to *create* orbs? If that were possible, one could explain everything D-Powers had accomplished.

“Major?” Iori asked. “Major Terasawa?”

“Sorry,” he responded. “Please hold your questions for a moment.”

Come to think of it, I received something from the JDA recently...

Using his desktop computer, Terasawa brought up last month’s monitored skill list. It contained an overview of notable searches that users had performed on the JDA database.



After obtaining a skill orb, people usually searched two databases. One was the JDA's wish list, and the other was the JDA's skill database. When searching the wish list, people would use the name of known skills. After all, one used this list to learn the price of a given orb. However, when searching for an orb they had read about in a piece of fiction or dreamed up themselves, people primarily used the skill database, as it contained the data of all publicly announced orbs.

If a person couldn't find an orb on the skill database, they wouldn't check the wish list, knowing it to be unregistered. So, what if a person checked the wish list first, searching the skill database with the same name immediately afterwards? In these cases, the searcher had most likely discovered the skill in question.

When searches of this nature occurred, the names would be added to the JDA's monitored skill list. At least, those previously unregistered on the skill database.

That being said, people weren't always logical. They would regularly search the list of databases in order from the top-down. Likewise, the monitored skill list contained so many orb names each month, it was hard to imagine all of them being acquired. Based on Japan's standard syllabary order, "Item Box" usually appeared at the top of the list.

Therefore, this list wasn't considered too important; it was merely one part of the statistical data.

Nevertheless, First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu's words had jogged Terasawa's memory. Last month, the monitored skill list had included all the names common to fantasy worlds. Healing, Item Box, Teleportation Magic, and so on. Yet a much simpler name had found its way to this list, appearing on the display with a bizarre sense of realism.

"Making..." Terasawa muttered.

Around the same time, a single IP address had searched this singular skill name on both databases. In other words, this person hadn't searched for a list of orbs. Likewise, this particular name hadn't been searched again since September 27. There was a good chance this was an actual skill.

Even so, one thing still bothered Terasawa.

“First Lieutenant Kimitsu,” he said.

“Yes?” she replied.

“If you could create skill orbs at will, what kind would you produce?”

In response to Terasawa’s casual question, Iori gave a lighthearted response. “Let’s see. An item box or teleportation magic would be nice. Oh, and recovery magic. Our training can be pretty hard on the skin, after all.”

Yes, those skills were described at length within the realm of fantasy. Naturally, a person would start by creating those first. In that case, why was D-Powers selling Water Magic and Physical Resistance? In comparison, these skills were much more ordinary.

“If you obtained one of those three orbs, wouldn’t you want to use it?” Terasawa asked.

“Well, of course,” Iori agreed.

And wouldn’t the creator use those orbs to gain recognition from others?

“...Is there some sort of restriction?” Terasawa muttered to himself.

“Major Terasawa?” Iori asked, curious.

Returning to his senses, Terasawa glossed over the issue, announcing an end to the meeting. “No, it’s nothing... Good work today, everyone. Please devote yourselves to mastering these new skills, and continue to fulfill your duties.”

“Yes, sir!” everyone cried in response. “We understand, sir!”

Once Iori’s team of four had bowed goodbye and left, Terasawa remained alone with his thoughts.

Without a criminal investigation, tracking this person through their IP address won’t be possible...

Recently, the monitoring of private communications had drawn a great deal of attention from the public. Doing anything on his own would prove difficult.

“But perhaps there is *one* measure I can take,” Terasawa mumbled aloud.

On his phone’s display, he brought up a business card. He then called the Dungeon Management Section, making an appointment with the section chief.

Vicinity of Nezu Museum, Aoyama

After our meeting with the JDA, we headed to Aoyama and met the designers we’d hired to furnish our office. The person in charge of the business asked us various questions. Because Miyoshi hadn’t set a limit on the budget, the lead designer had been incredibly motivated. Even so, outside of nice chairs and beds, we had few requests. As for any particular luxuries, Miyoshi had asked for several wine fridges in the dining room.

“After that, I’m fine with anything that’s easy to use,” I said.

Yeah, we must sound like the most uninspired clients ever.

No matter how many suggestions the designer made, we remained unresponsive. Well, that’s what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. Yet in a very pro-like fashion, the designer managed to unify our office space and two living areas into a single concept.

Apparently, the wallpaper and flooring would be delivered through extremely expedited shipping. On the other hand, the windows and furniture would require five days to arrive. Allowing for some leeway, we would be able to move into our new home on November 12. With this in mind, we left the designer’s place of business.

“We’re replacing the windows too?” I asked.

“Yep,” Miyoshi said. “The new windows will have protection against laser listening devices.”

Uh, come again?

“Wow, Miyoshi. What kind of facility are you planning to build?”

“Kei, you’re the one who wanted a secret base.”

Yeah, back when we were planning to buy a building... Well, no harm, no foul.

From Nezu Museum, we plodded towards Omotesando Station.

“We have our trade with Simon on the tenth,” Miyoshi said. “But for now, this could be a good time to take a break.”

“Yeah. Until we move, let’s take it easy. I’ll even keep my dungeon diving at a leisurely pace.”

“In the meantime, we can visit Midori for the medical examinations,” Miyoshi said. “Once I finish setting up the computer and all the cables, I won’t have anything left to do.”

“Sounds like you still have plenty of stuff on your plate.”

“Well, most of it is for my own enjoyment.”

The sky had begun turning red. Waiting for a signal to change, we stopped before a watch store on our left. Across the street, I could see people happily clinking their glasses through the window of Brasserie, a well-established restaurant.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said.

“Yeah?”

“I went to the ATM with my card just now, and I had a balance of sixty million yen.”

“Wow.”

“That’s your response?” Miyoshi asked. “Your bank account should be the same.”

“Oh, right. The one percent you mentioned earlier.”

“Exactly. Even if we decided to do nothing from here on out, we would have enough money to goof off for the rest of our lives. What will you do, Kei?”

Good question. Around six billion yen had been transferred into our party account, after all.

“Miyoshi, do you want to quit?” I asked.

“No, I was just wondering how you felt about it. Until a month ago, the two of us were stuck at an exploitative workplace, sobbing into our pillows each night,

remember?"

Yeah, I did remember. Though Enoki and all my other troubles seemed like the distant past, I'd only quit a month ago. With that in mind, goofing off for the rest of my life didn't sound too bad. Still, if I spent every day cooped up in my room playing online games, I would eventually grow bored.

"Quitting now would make for a boring life, don't you think?" I asked.

"I do!"

When the traffic light turned green, people began moving all at once. Following the crowd, I crossed the intersection beside a cheerful Miyoshi.

"Speaking of which, what does your family do for a living?" I asked.

"We're pretty normal. My dad is an office worker, and my mom is a full-time housewife. Since I have an older brother, I'm free to do what I want. What about you, Kei?"

"Both my parents are dead, and I don't have any siblings... After graduating from high school, I didn't keep up with my relatives either."

"Seriously? Being a lone wolf is just sad, Kei."

"Rude. Well, considering how far we've come, why not send your parents some money?"

"Hmm... If I told them the truth, my entire family would probably turn into deadbeats. I'll keep this a secret for now. Not everyone in the world is like you."

Passing by a Prada boutique, I couldn't tell if its building was garish or in good taste. Similarly, I couldn't tell if I'd just been dissed or praised.

"Anyway, I'm starting to feel hungry," I said. "Wanna grab something to eat and go home?"

"Really?" Miyoshi asked. "Your treat?"

"Listen here. Weren't we just discussing our newfound wealth?"

"Oh, that's right. Still, most of Aoyama's best restaurants are in the opposite direction."

"Really?"

While walking, Miyoshi appeared relatively deep in thought. “Well then, how about sushi?” she suggested, seeming to remember something.

“Yeah, that sounds fine,” I replied.

“We’re pretty close to Matsuda. If you take a left at the Comme des Garçons, it’s right there.”

“Over here? I’m getting major back-alley vibes.”

“Kei, this area is absolutely packed with popular restaurants.”

“Wow. People around Aoyama and Omotesando must love the feeling of hunkering down in a secret hideout.”

“You’re being prejudiced,” Miyoshi chastised me. “All Japanese people love that feeling, right?”

“Indeed we do.”

When I called Matsuda, they agreed to prepare a table for us. According to Miyoshi, if you called restaurants with hard-to-obtain reservations on the day of, you could find a table surprisingly often. Perhaps there were always cancellations.

“How lucky,” Miyoshi said.

We arrived at a strange building, its oddly jutted-out sections rivaling the JDA headquarters. Down in the basement, we were served acidic sushi that dissolved in our mouths. Despite its incredible flavor, I still felt dizzy when the bill arrived a few hours later. Miyoshi—the little moron—merely stuck her tongue out at me.

And thus, Matsuda became a commemorative restaurant, where we first used our D-Powers card.

November 7, 2018 (Wednesday)

Edogawa City

“Here?” I asked.

“Yep,” Miyoshi replied.

Located near the Edo River, this site appeared to be the remains of a small, abandoned factory. Chinese silver grass surrounded the area, its flowers swaying forlornly in the autumn wind.

“This feels like the end of Tokyo,” I said.

“Ichikawa is on the other side of the river, after all.”

Because it had been operational until recently, the factory remained in good condition. However, in its old parking lot, there stood another building. This second building looked like a square warehouse constructed of large, white containers strung together.

“Apparently, the abandoned factory once belonged to Midori’s family,” Miyoshi said.

“Wow. When you said medical measurement equipment, I imagined a more fashionable building.”

“No one asked for your opinion,” called an unfamiliar woman’s voice.

“Hey there, Midori,” Miyoshi greeted her friend. “It’s been too long.”

“Little Azusa! Thanks for coming. I missed ruffling that cute hair of yours.”

Midori wore her hair in an even length bob. Bangs swept to the side, she was a bespectacled beauty with sharp features.

I’ve met an alarming number of short-haired women lately. Maybe it’s fate?

Of course, she wore a traditional, white lab coat. Even so, she seemed somewhat familiar...

“So, what exactly did you want to measure?” Midori asked.

“Well,” Miyoshi said, “like I explained in my email, we want you to measure anything and everything possible.”

“What a vague request... But if we measure everything, it’s going to cost a fortune. I’d love to give you a discount, but we’re completely broke. We could go bankrupt any minute now.”

“Bankrupt?” Miyoshi repeated. “What happened to your loan?”

Seeming furious, Midori glared at the sky. “Banks in Japan won’t lend you

money without collateral! And even if a bank *did* invest, no one's providing us with a single yen of venture capital!"

Whenever researchers became executives, they took on a number of unfamiliar responsibilities, depleting their time and energy. Acquiring funds was the most obvious example of this. Japanese banks wouldn't lend money to ill-defined projects.

"Repressing your feelings isn't healthy," I said without much thought.

Glancing at me, Midori turned back to Miyoshi. "Azusa, where did this jerk come from?"

"Oh, he's the subject for today's measurements."

"I'm Yoshimura. Nice to meet you."

"Call me Naruse," Midori said. "You haven't laid a hand on Azusa, I presume?"

"Naruse?" I repeated.

"Yes, that's my family name. What about it?"

Oh, right! She looks just like our full-time spy!

"Um, by any chance, do you have a relative in the JDA?" I asked.

"Are you talking about Miharu Naruse? She's my older sister."

Hearing this, Miyoshi was the one to act surprised. "Are you serious?! Then again... Come to think of it, you two do look alike!"

Jeez, Miyoshi. Between going to school with one and working with the other on D-Powers, you should know both of them pretty well, and you're just figuring this out now?

"But after graduating from college, we only see each other back home during New Year's," Midori explained. "Are you and my sister acquaintances?"

"We're a lot more than acquaintances," I answered.

I talked about Naruse becoming our party's full-time supervisor, describing how much she'd assisted us.

"Huh," Midori said. "Small world, isn't it?"

“You’re right about that,” I agreed.

“Well then, once you’ve signed the contract, we can start taking the measurements immediately.”

“Sounds good.”

“So, we’re measuring all categories,” Midori said. “How many examinations will we be running in total?”

“Thirty for now,” Miyoshi replied.

“Thirty?! That’s going to cost you roughly sixty million yen. Are you okay with that?”

“Of course. Think this will revitalize your company’s cash flow?”

“Don’t be silly. Once we pay for the reagents, the cost of using the computer, and the other fees, we’ll have barely anything left. I’m just grateful that we can run the tests.”

That being said, these tests were still pretty expensive. Just out of curiosity, I asked a question. “Even if you put this tech into practical use, will there be any demand for exams that cost two million yen per round?”

“Listen up,” Midori said. “Usually, we don’t run every variation of our tests since that would just be pointless. Also, the exam fees are so expensive *because* this field has such a small demand. Most people would never undergo this sort of test, right?”

If you divided a development cost of ten thousand yen by ten thousand people, the quotient would be one yen each. However, if the equipment only had one user, you would have to charge the whole ten thousand. Otherwise, you wouldn’t earn your money back. Honestly, seeing a company implement such a test surprised me.

Midori had another thing to add. “Of course, there’s one major reason why we can charge so much,” she said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Medical insurance.”

Yeah, that made sense. Long live the reimbursement system for high-cost medical care.

“In any case, we won’t have any trouble paying for the exams,” I said. “Right, Miyoshi?”

“No worries there,” she replied.

“Azusa, is your company that profitable?” Midori asked.

“Oh, this isn’t for our workplace...” Miyoshi admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“Yoshimura and I are paying out of pocket.”

“Seriously?!”

“Well, think of it as research and development expenses.”

Midori turned an envious glare on us. “Wow, I’m jealous. You made the right decision not coming to work with us.”

Shaking her head, she opened the door to the examination room. It was a small space with an orderly grid painted on the walls, with the squares tightly packed together. A somewhat futuristic pod occupied the center of the room, which Midori made me sit inside while wearing only my boxers.

“This is a reference machine,” Midori explained, attaching various sensors to my body. “To make the corrections easier, we attach the cables and such by hand. With each measurement, you’ll have blood drawn. Your arm might prickle, but don’t worry about it.”

Once this tech transformed into a finished product with clearly defined functions, I could imagine this process becoming much simpler.

“Understood,” I said.

“And afterwards, I’d like to hear your impressions of being measured,” Midori added.

“I’ll submit a report to you.”

“That would be great,” she said with a laugh, “but I still can’t give you a discount.”

“By the way, can I indicate the timing for each measurement?”

“Huh? Yeah, that won’t be an issue.”

“How should I give the signal?”

“We can talk to each other through the speakers.”

“Got it.”

Once Midori exited the room and left me alone in the pod, I covertly activated Making.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1178.307

HP: 36.00

MP: 33.00

STR: 14 [+]

VIT: 15 [+]

INT: 18 [+]

AGI: 10 [+]

DEX: 16 [+]

LUC: 14 [+]

“Also, could you make sure to submit the measurement results in order?” I asked.

“That should be fine,” Midori replied. “The data is time stamped.”

“In that case, let’s do the first measurement.”

“Understood. Starting now.”

When the rumbling of a spinning CT scanner filled my ears, a stinging pain shot through my arm. Other than that, I felt no discomfort or major stimuli. Relaxing, I lay down in the pod, increasing my stats every few minutes.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1176.307 (-2.0)

HP: 38.00 (+2.0)

MP: 33.00

STR: 16 (+2.0) [+]

VIT: 15 [+]

INT: 18 [+]

AGI: 10 [+]

DEX: 16 [+]

LUC: 14 [+]

I would start with STR. For the time being, I planned to increase my statuses in increments of two.

“Next,” I called out.

“Beginning the second measurement,” Midori answered.

When the thirtieth measurement had been taken, over two hours had passed.

“Thanks for all your hard work,” I said.

“So, what are your impressions of being measured?” Midori asked.

“I’ll send a report later, but all my blood was drawn from around the same area. No matter how thin the needle is, my arm feels like it’s going to swell up a little.”

I must look like a drug addict.

“Normally, we don’t draw blood thirty times in a row,” Midori replied. “Anyway, here are the results of your examinations.”

She then handed Miyoshi a single memory card. Immediately, Miyoshi inserted the device into her tablet, checking its contents.

“Huh?” I asked. “You already have the results?”

“That’s one of our selling points,” Midori answered proudly.

Midori’s start-up could have taken the easy route, merely sending the data to an inspection company. Still, before receiving the results from said company, Midori’s team could sift through the data themselves. This would be an effective means of reducing the inspection company’s workload.

“So, did you find anything odd?” I asked.

“No,” Midori said. “Our system automatically detects problems from physiological values, and it didn’t find anything particularly odd. Nakajima.”

“Coming.”

From the other side of the room, a man named Nakajima brought a stack of papers.

What an odd guy, using paper in this day and age.

“Over thirty examinations, we found nothing strange in your physiological values,” Nakajima said. “Honestly, I don’t understand why you would even undergo thirty exams in the first place. Were you measuring something over the passage of time?”

“Umm, something like that,” I replied.

“However, I do have to mention your brain waves...”

“What about them?”

“Overall, as the measurements progressed, the basic rhythms of your brain waves increased in speed, albeit only slightly.”

“Increased?” Midori asked, her expression doubtful. “Not decreased?”

“Increased,” Nakajima confirmed. “The rhythm of one’s brain waves are dependent upon the standard membrane potential of neurons in the thalamus. However, input seemed to increase at a level incomparable to an upsurge of awareness through visual stimulation. Furthermore, as time progressed, the increased speed of your brain waves occurred in different locations in six distinct stages.”

Six stages? That must mean...

“Umm, I’m not quite sure what you’re saying,” I said.

“We aren’t doctors, and we don’t give medical opinions here,” Nakajima replied. “I’m simply stating what happened. That being said...”

“Yes?”

“This degree of change might indicate a mental disorder.”

“Mental disorder?” I repeated. “Sounds serious...”

“Still, most mental disorders cause brain waves to decrease in speed, not increase. As such, I can’t say anything for certain. Also, these waveforms don’t resemble epilepsy.”

“I see...”

“After that, there’s not much else to... Oh! This is interesting, but it’s not related to any physiological phenomenon.”

“What is it?”

“How should I put this? We observed some strange fluctuations in electromagnetic waves.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “When were you observing electromagnetic waves?”

“Well, since you asked us to measure anything and everything possible, we observed the electromagnetic waves through the room’s minimum grid.”

“It wasn’t an effect of using the machinery?”

“We’ve more or less ruled out that possibility.”

Another question occurred to me. “By the way, what’s a minimum grid?”

“Here, it’s a general term for the sensors laid around the room in roughly three-centimeter increments.”

“So, what were the fluctuations like?”

“Good question,” Nakajima said. “It was almost like energy-containing fields were being generated.”

“From where?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it was a magical aura of some sort.”

Nakajima laughed, but to my surprise, he might have struck the heart of the matter.

During the train ride home, Miyoshi stared at the numbers on her tablet. After a while, she suddenly looked up, posing a question. “Could the strengthening that results from dungeon exploration be an exoskeleton of some sort?”

If only the force behind a punch increased in power, striking an enemy would damage your fist. However, that didn’t seem to happen. I could also imagine one’s cells being strengthened, but in that case, the lack of any physiological change would be hard to explain. Conversely, if some kind of exoskeleton field covered one’s body, explaining this phenomenon would be much easier.

“There are barely any changes to your physiological values,” Miyoshi said. “That makes me reluctant to say your cells are being strengthened.”

If one’s cells strengthened enough to double their power output, energy expenditure or efficacy of use would also double. If that occurred within the body of a living creature, its physiological values would have to change.

“Apparently, my brain waves also fluctuated,” I noted. “Nakajima mentioned it happening in six stages. There being six different statuses can’t be a coincidence.”

“You’ve got a point.”

“In other words, the physical strengthening gained by defeating monsters must be a psychic ability. Maybe it’s some kind of mysterious field created by

the brain.”

“Well, if you believe these measurements, that would be one plausible explanation.”

Finished speaking, Miyoshi dove back into the sea of contemplation.

November 9, 2018 (Friday)

Yokota Air Base

“Wow, so this is Japan, huh?”

A well-built man stepped off the Patriot Express,⁽⁴⁾ speaking with enthusiasm. His brown hair was styled in a crew cut. He had matching brown eyes that were amiable, hinting at a humorous nature.

A tall, slender man with ash-blond hair found a way to nitpick this statement. “Simon, isn’t the inside of this base still considered America?”

Joshua Rich—Team Simon’s exceptional scout—exuded an air of shrewdness.

“So, where can I find tempura, geisha, and Mt. Fuji?” asked a large man with a sturdy build.

A strap hung from Mason’s neck, his left arm suspended in a medical sling. Bending over slightly, he stepped through the passenger entryway.

“Dude, it’s 2018,” Simon replied. “Right now, Kobe beef is all the rage. Are we anywhere near Kobe?”

Always in the mood for protein, Simon directed this question at Natalie, his team’s only woman.

“You guys,” she said with a sigh. “Mt. Fuji is farther west. Kobe beef and Kyoto’s geisha are in the Kansai region as well. In other words, everything you’re talking about is far, *far* west of here. We’re in Yokota right now.”

Frowning in disappointment, Simon shrugged his shoulders. “Too bad. But I have to say, it feels colder here than in Nevada. Isn’t Japan supposed to be a humid country?”

“Only during the summer.”

Seeming anxious, Joshua cut into the conversation. “Simon...”

“What’s up?”

“Are you sure we should be here? The higher-ups really want us searching for that language orb. They were so pissed about us leaving, I thought their heads might explode.”

“Yeah, no way I’m going along with that stupid plan. Killing random monsters to find a specific orb will never work.”

Many of the monsters inhabiting the Kiryas Kul’yegan Dungeon had been confirmed to exist in America as well. Thus, dungeon exploration teams across the US had been directed to collect orbs from those monsters. It had been a top priority order.

“You’re talking about Otherworldly Language Comprehension, right?” Natalie asked. “Over twenty types of monsters were designated as the possible drop source.”

“Even if we dove for a year straight, we’d find—at most—two or three orbs,” Simon said. “I don’t know the exact number of dungeon exploration teams, but with that method, we have almost no chance of finding the orb.”

“Yeah, but if we don’t dive at all, our chances are zero,” Joshua pointed out.

“Don’t worry. That’s part of the reason we came all the way to Japan.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember that website we looked at together?”

“Oh, right. That insane auction.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Could you gather so many copies of the same orb?”

“Definitely not,” Joshua answered immediately.

“Yeah, me neither,” Simon agreed. “In other words, that party must have some means of acquiring whatever orb they target. Thoughts?”

“...That would make sense. I was completely focused on the idea of orb preservation. But without the orbs themselves, there’s nothing to preserve.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Placing his right hand to his stomach, Mason gestured to indicate his hunger. “Well, let’s not sweat the small stuff right now. I’m starving. Let’s get a move on.”

Exchanging glances, Joshua and Simon shrugged at each other.

“We’re going to the JDA tomorrow, right?” Natalie asked. “What will we do today?”

“For now, let’s head to our hotel,” Simon answered.

“Oh, we’re not staying on base then,” Joshua said. “Where’s the hotel?”

“In Shinjuku. I’ve made reservations at the Park Hyatt. Think of this as a vacation.”

Joshua whistled. “That’s mighty generous of you, Captain.”

“Compared to the orb we just bought, the rooms were chump change.”

Planning to meet the base commander, the team of four headed towards the control room.

Lieutenant General Martinez—who also served as the base commander—looked out the window. Grimacing, he folded his hands behind his back. According to a report he’d received, four troublemakers would be arriving on the Patriot Express today.

“Certainly, they are capable...” Martinez muttered to himself.

Team Simon’s recent capture of Evans Dungeon had been the primary subject of conversation lately. In the realm of dungeon explorations, they’d traveled deeper than any other humans, reminding the entire world of America’s superiority. Their accomplishments rivaled the success of the Apollo program. Nevertheless...

“They’re also a band of rogues.”

Refolding his arms, Lieutenant General Martinez stared up at the ceiling. Team Simon had caused trouble on countless occasions. After all, they were the sort of ruffians who would level an entire building to protect it from terrorists.

Whenever someone rebuked them for such actions, they would reply, “We’re simply tools of the state.” By implication, they were just bullets, and the problem lay with whoever pulled the trigger. As a result, they’d earned the nickname HESPER,⁽²⁾ in honor of a rogue AI from some old sci-fi novel. Whenever Team Simon involved themselves in an operation, someone going off the rails and metaphorically firing a mass driver became a very real concern.

Unfortunately, the Dungeon Strike Force reported directly to the president. Many of its members had been transferred from the DEA, CIA, Department of Justice, and other intelligence services. Martinez had no authority to issue them direct orders.

At that moment, a knock resounded throughout the quiet room.

“Enter,” Martinez said.

“Coming through!”

Four people dressed like your average backpackers walked into the commander’s office, saluting.

“I’m Lieutenant Simon Gershwin, and these are my three teammates. We just arrived and wanted to meet the base commander.”

“Ah, yes, thank you,” Martinez answered. “Well then, what is your reason for visiting Japan?”

“We’re here on vacation, sir.”

“Is that so?”

According to a report, Lieutenant Gershwin had placed the winning bid on a skill orb. Undoubtedly, they’d come to retrieve that item, but in reality, that wouldn’t be their only business.

“So, how long will this ‘vacation’ last?” Martinez asked.

“Sir,” Simon replied. “For now, we plan to stay a month, but depending on how the situation develops, we could be here longer.”

Depending on how the situation develops, eh?

“I’ve been asked to accommodate your team during your stay,” Martinez said.

“If something comes up, please contact my secretary.”

“Thank you,” Simon replied. “We’ll take our leave now, sir.”

Saluting, the team of four left the room.

“If the Dungeon Passage Theory turns out to be true, those four rogues could become the heroes of Earth...” Martinez muttered to himself again.

Lord, if you’re up there, please don’t let them cause any friction between the US and Japan while I’m in charge here.

The lieutenant general—who also currently served as the Fifth Air Force commander and the USJF commander—offered a small prayer to God.

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Message Board [Divine Beings?] D-Powers 57 [Or Swindlers?]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-0199

From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appears and begins auctioning off orbs.

Are they swindlers? Or saviors of the world?

Next thread at 930.

...

11: Anonymous Explorer

To everyone's disbelief, each of the orbs ended up selling for over two billion yen. But in the end, who placed the winning bids?

12: Anonymous Explorer

No one knows. Later on day two, the IDs were hidden.

13: Anonymous Explorer

Why?!

14: Anonymous Explorer

Usually, auctions don't announce the winning bidder. Having the IDs displayed at the start was crazy.

15: Anonymous Explorer

Man, that's a whole lotta dough.

16: Anonymous Explorer

Were the IDs displayed at first due to a system error?

17: Anonymous Explorer

Perhaps they're pretending it was a mistake, but it was actually intentional.

Since there were large organizations among the bidders, people thought the auction might be real. But if no one had seen their IDs, it would have ended with everyone just being suspicious.

18: Anonymous Explorer

Despite being valuable due to their rarity, orbs have been difficult to trade up until now. On the buyer's wish list, Water Magic is only valued at eighty million yen. But if you could auction one off, you could become wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. D-Powers just proved that.

19: Anonymous Explorer

True enough, but "auctioning one off" is the biggest hurdle.

20: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, but couldn't you just ask D-Powers to do it for you?

21: Anonymous Explorer

>20 You're a genius.

22: Anonymous Explorer

Sure, but how would you request that of them? And for starters, do we know if they can actually preserve orbs?

23: Anonymous Explorer

If they couldn't, how would this auction be possible?

24: Anonymous Explorer

How should I know?

Everything up until this point could have been a huge scam to steal orbs from people who believed D-Powers could preserve them.

25: Anonymous Explorer

In other words, D-Powers had their conspirators bid on nonexistent orbs in preparation for a scam?

If so, that's incredible. I mean, they made almost ten billion yen in total.

26: Anonymous Explorer

This is definitely getting a movie adaptation, right?

Still, the JDA acts as an intermediary during the handoff. If D-Powers don't have the orbs, they're busted.

27: Anonymous Explorer

Hey, everyone! Team Simon is in Shinjuku!

28: Anonymous Explorer

Huh? As in the Simon who captured Evans? Sure you're not seeing things?

29: Anonymous Explorer

Here, I took a photo.

30: Anonymous Explorer

Hey, don't take pictures without people's consent.

31: Anonymous Explorer

No, he was taking pictures with fans. He's a really

friendly guy.

32: Anonymous Explorer

I looked at the picture. This guy's serious lmao

33: Anonymous Explorer

For real? But why are you posting in this thread?

34: Anonymous Explorer

Considering the timing of his visit to Japan, this must be related to the auction, right?

35: Anonymous Explorer

Oh!

36: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah!

37: Anonymous Explorer

It's definitely possible.

38: Anonymous Explorer

Think his team will dive in Yoyogi while they're here?

39: Anonymous Explorer

According to the man himself, he's going to be here for a while. So yeah, probably.

40: Anonymous Explorer

Damn! I need to get his autograph.

November 10, 2018 (Saturday)

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

While we walked through a hallway of the JDA, Naruse posed a question. “Are you two okay with the language barrier?”

Today, our trade partner would be Simon Gershwin. Since he was the third-ranked explorer in the world, I’d been immensely curious about his aura. As a result, I’d completely forgotten about his American nationality until a little while ago.

Well, this is just going to be a simple trade. I should be able to manage.

“If everyone sticks to more academic English, I should be fine,” I said.

“My English is about average,” Miyoshi added. “Oh, but maybe I’ve forgotten it all.”

“Yeah, if you don’t use a foreign language, it gets rusty.”

“I know, right? Anyway, I’m feeling kinda nervous about the finer details of this sale. So we’re counting on you, Naruse.”

“Understood,” Naruse replied.

Opening the conference room door, we found the world’s greatest dungeon exploration team sitting there. A well-built man with a soldierly crew cut raised a hand towards us. “Hey there,” he said in English. “I’m Simon Gershwin.”

“Hello, Mr. Gershwin,” Miyoshi replied in English. “It’s an honor to meet you. I’m Azusa Miyoshi. Do you mind if I check your cipher?”

Simon handed over a memory card, which contained a cipher encrypted with his private key. “Not at all.”

“Wow, Miyoshi, you’ve really got this,” I whispered in Japanese.

“The key to pretending you know English is to avoid unnecessary conversation,” she whispered back.

Taking the memory card, Miyoshi inserted the device into her laptop. Using Simon’s public key, she confirmed the cipher was correct.

Note: From here on out, lines spoken in foreign languages will be written in italics.

“Everything seems to be in order,” Miyoshi said. “Naruse, do you mind verifying the item’s authenticity?”

Just like last time, Miyoshi opened the case’s titanium lid, showing its contents to the JDA witness.

Wearing a meek expression, Naruse touched the orb, confirming its contents. *“Finished. The JDA confirms this to be a Physical Resistance skill orb. It also has a count of less than sixty minutes.”*

The tall, ash-blond man sitting next to Simon spoke up in surprise. *“Did you say less than sixty?”*

That part shocks everyone, doesn’t it?

“Indeed,” Naruse answered with a nod.

“If you would, please transfer the money,” Miyoshi said.

In response, Simon used the transfer device he had on hand. *“Sending the money now.”*

“Thanks. I’ve confirmed the deposit.”

After taxes and the JDA’s “commission,” we would receive an actual total of 2,837,600,000 yen.

Miyoshi held out the case in front of Simon. *“Here you go.”*

Giving the case a gentle touch, Simon nodded slightly. *“Thanks.”*

Afterwards, Naruse announced the end of the transaction. *“Thank you very much, everyone. That concludes our business.”*

Signaling to Miyoshi with my eyes, I stood from my seat, trying to leave the conference room at once. However, a voice called to me from behind, as if to block my path.

Damn it, the enemy circled around us! Metaphorically speaking.

“May I have a minute of your time?” Simon asked.

“What for?” I replied.

“Just a short conversation.”

“Oh, um, I no speak English very good.”

“Kei, are you having a stroke?” Miyoshi asked.

“If I pretend to not understand, I can dodge their questions.”

“In that case, I can serve as an interpreter,” said the only woman on Team Simon. *“I grew up in Yokosuka until the age of twelve.”*

Shit.

“I’m Natalie,” she continued. *“Nice to meet you.”*

With blonde hair and blue eyes, she looked like every Japanese person’s stereotypical view of Caucasians. Her growing up in Yokosuka had to be against the rules.

“I see...” I said with a sigh.

Once again, Miyoshi pulled back one of the conference room chairs. *“No use delaying the inevitable.”*

Resigned, Miyoshi and I both sat down. At the same time, Naruse pushed a button on the coffee machine. Immediately, a fragrant aroma began wafting throughout the conference room.

“Well then, what can we do for you?” I asked.

“You sound pretty fluent to me,” Simon noted.

“I can only speak formal English, though.”

“As long as we can understand each other, I won’t complain. So, how on earth did you two do it?”

“What do you mean?”

Of course, Natalie responded in perfect Japanese. *“How did you bring an orb with a count of less than sixty minutes all the way here?”*

In other words, we wouldn’t be able to feign ignorance.

“Oh,” I said. “By sheer coincidence, we managed to obtain this orb an hour ago.”

“Coincidence?” Simon repeated.

“Believe it or not, yes. Good thing we didn’t commit fraud.”

“Then what’s with these suspicious looking magic circles?” asked the tall, ash-blond man. While speaking, he examined the back of the case’s lid. “Oh, I’m Joshua, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

Wearing a nonchalant expression, I shrugged my shoulders. “Sorry, trade secret. Still, it creates quite the ambiance, don’t you think?”

“Ambiance?”



"That's right. If you see the 'Made in Japan' label on anything, you know we paid special attention to the details."

Afterwards, Team Simon asked us various questions, mixing in small talk about Yoyogi Dungeon. Since the group would be in Tokyo for a while, they wanted to explore the dungeon, and asked us to escort them. However, since we had only been to the first level, we had to decline their invitation.

"You've only explored the first level?" Simon asked.

"Yeah, but we've also been to the stairs leading to the second level," I replied.

"How long have you been diving?"

"Less than a month."

"Then how did you... No, never mind. I'll ask someone else to show us around."

Presumably, he'd been about to ask, "Then how did you find the orb?"

If the SDF didn't escort them, they could also ask other teams such as Kagero and Shibu T to act as their guides. After all, explorers across the world admired Team Simon. Anyone would be overjoyed to show them around.

When the conversation reached a natural stopping point, Miyoshi cut in expertly. *"We could talk all day, but Keigo and I have another appointment soon. If you'd please excuse us."*

"Yeah, we'll have other opportunities to discuss things," Simon said. *"I look forward to seeing you then."*

"So do I. It was an honor speaking with you today."

Wearing our best sales smiles, Miyoshi and I shook hands with Team Simon. However, as we opened the door to leave, Simon called out to us once more.

"Oh, just one more thing," he said.

Is this guy a lieutenant with the LAPD's homicide division? [\(6\)](#)

"Recently, someone from Area 12 became the WDA's top-ranked explorer," Simon continued.

With the door still opened, I turned around. *"Yes, so I've heard. What about*

it?"

"Is this person a friend of yours?"

Wow, that smile isn't reaching his eyes at all.

"Don't be ridiculous," I answered.

Shrugging my shoulders, I closed the door, leaving the conference room.

Section Chief Saiga of the Dungeon Management Section was waiting for the recently appointed full-time supervisor of D-Powers. During that time, he looked down at the documents in his hand.

"Damn," he muttered to himself. "The Ministry of Defense just sent me one hell of a bomb."

At the end of the day, the JDA existed to manage dungeons. Saiga didn't want the bookishness of international politics brought into their midst. But as a practical matter, he couldn't look away from the gray areas.

A few days ago, a man named Terasawa from the Ministry of Defense had contacted Saiga, wanting to meet with him. Because the matter had seemed important, Saiga had set aside the time to do so. Nevertheless, the confidential documents he'd received had been loaded with international politics, all of them concerning a certain skill orb originating in Russia.

Seeing as Terasawa had brought the files, Saiga—who worked in a JDA managerial position—also possessed the right to view them. Yet until that moment, he'd never seen those documents. After all, the translation of inscriptions had nothing to do with dungeon management. If anything, this was in the domain of linguistics or cultural anthropology.

Still, why did Terasawa want the JDA to deliver these documents to D-Powers? Simply because he'd seen the auction? Or had the Ministry of Defense acquired some kind of information unknown to the JDA? If so, how did they plan on using it? Honestly, Saiga had little interest in these troublesome matters. Even so, he couldn't allow secret information regarding dungeons and explorer parties to pass over the heads of *his* management section.

“Is this how local police feel about the FBI?” Saiga wondered aloud.

With a sardonic chuckle, Saiga placed the documents on the desk in front of him. At that moment, there came a knock at the door and Miharu Naruse, the supervisor of D-Powers, finally entered the room.

“What did you wish to discuss, sir?” Miharu asked.

“No need to be so tense,” Saiga replied.

If you call me out of the blue, I’m obviously going to wonder what’s up.

Keeping these thoughts to herself, Naruse followed her boss’s instructions, taking a seat.

“Naruse,” Saiga continued. “Do you know why you were appointed as D-Powers’ full-time supervisor?”

“We’re ingratiating ourselves to a party from whom we can extract a lot of value. That’s what I’d like to say. But in reality, I’m supposed to investigate their orb preservation methods and any other unknown technologies, right?”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“Am I missing something?”

Saiga refolded his legs. “Have you heard of the Dungeon Passage Theory?”

“What? Um, more or less. I read about it in some crazy book.”

“As of recently, Russia claims to have proven this theory.”

“...Come again?”

“This hasn’t been made public yet, so don’t speak of it elsewhere.”

“Yes, sir...”

“Due to certain circumstances, related agencies across the world can’t verify their findings,” Saiga explained. “Though convincing, we can’t be certain if Russia’s claims are true. Currently, that’s how the matter stands.”

“I see.”

“Also, despite D-Powers selling so many orbs, we have no idea where their

party is acquiring them from.”

“Based on the process of elimination, Yoyogi is the only possible location,” Miharu said. “Even so, no one has seen Yoshimura descending to the lower levels, and Miyoshi doesn’t appear to dive at all. Most likely, someone is entrusting the orbs to D-Powers, or D-Powers is buying them.”

“Precisely,” Saiga agreed. “If we simply look at the facts, they have some means of procuring orbs from seemingly nowhere and delivering them with impeccable timing. Nothing else makes sense.”

“Yes... You’re probably right.”

“So, back to the previous subject.”

Miharu furrowed her brow. She had no idea what the section chief was trying to say.

“To verify Russia’s claims, we need a certain skill orb,” Saiga revealed.

“In other words...”

“In other words, could you convince D-Powers to procure Otherworldly Language Comprehension from seemingly nowhere?”

According to Saiga, this skill orb had recently dropped in Russia’s Kiryas Kul’yegan Dungeon. Supposedly, its user would be given the ability to understand texts written in the dungeons’ otherworldly language. After obtaining this orb, a Russian laboratory had quickly published a partial translation of a known inscription.

“How sensational were the contents of the translation?” Miharu asked.

“Enough to shock every country on Earth,” Saiga replied. “But other researchers can’t confirm those contents in the first place.”

By comparing the translation to the inscription, others had attempted to decipher the otherworldly language. However, vocabulary across languages never corresponded perfectly, and the inscription probably contained a large number of unknown nouns. Had Russia published the translation without alteration, or were they hiding something? Currently, answering either of these questions was impossible.

“Suppose the translation is bogus,” Saiga continued. “When the second orb is found, Russia will lose all credibility on an international scale. As such, it’s probably not utter nonsense. On the other hand, they’re most likely concealing important information to gain an advantage. After all, they only published a partial translation of the inscription.”

“This is turning out to be quite troublesome, isn’t it?” Miharu grumbled.

When nations start scheming, the world gets way more complicated than necessary.

“So, which monster drops the orb?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” Saiga answered.

“Well, that’s inconvenient.”

“That being said, D-Powers has found multiple unregistered orbs. Do you think there’s a possibility of them acquiring this one as well?”

“In other words, you want me to entice them into doing so?”

“Yes, that’s what this boils down to.”

“You can’t be serious...”

D-Powers had secrets. Miharu was certain of that much. Even so, they’d come to accept her. To some degree, she’d probably earned their trust. Still, this order from Saiga felt quite sudden. By accepting this mission, D-Powers would essentially be admitting to having a means of acquiring orbs.

“If they ask why we want this orb, can I tell them?” Miharu asked.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way around that,” Saiga replied. “But ask them to keep quiet on the matter.”

“Understood. But please don’t get your hopes up too high.”

“Sorry, but I have the utmost faith in you.”

Miharu let out a tremendous sigh. “...Well then, what will the conditions of our offer be?”

Based on what she’d heard, nations around the world would sell their souls for Otherworldly Language Comprehension. If D-Powers auctioned off the orb,

the final bidding price would be an unimaginable sum of money.

“Conditions...?” Saiga repeated. “Will a request from a friend not suffice?”

“Of course not!”

True, that might have been the Japanese way of doing things, but such a request would never work in the business world. And this was outrageously big business.

“I expected as much...” Saiga groused. “Still, if D-Powers finds the orb and sells it, their profits could exceed the JDA’s yearly budget. Quite simply, we can’t outbid our competitors.”

“You can’t hire someone to build a house only to say, ‘Sorry, I don’t have the money’ afterwards. They wouldn’t let you off the hook.”

“Fair enough... In that case, I can only negotiate with the higher-ups, making the state provide the money. For now, let’s agree to cover their expenses and provide reasonable payment.”

“Understood,” Miharu said. “But if you can’t provide a reasonable price, the JDA’s credibility will plummet to the ground.”

“If that happens, we can always earn back the original sum by asking D-Powers to auction off the orb.”

If they went through all this trouble just to auction off the orb, Miharu would fear for her life. Nevertheless, she swallowed those words. After all, the chances of D-Powers failing to find the orb were far greater.

Standing, Saiga hooked his finger around the window blinds, looking outside. “By the way,” he said casually. “We still have no idea who the top-ranked explorer of Area 12 might be. Have you glimpsed their shadow within D-Powers?”

“Are you asking if there’s a third, unknown member?”

Dropping the blinds back to their original position with a clatter, Saiga turned in Miharu’s direction. “Come to think of it, I received a call from the US Dungeon Association.”

“I see.”

“Starting tomorrow, Team Simon will apparently be diving in Yoyogi for a while.”

“Seriously?”

“Additionally, I received word of First Lieutenant Kimitsu’s team leaving Narashino to come here as well. Still, I don’t know if the two teams are competing with each other.”

“By Kimitsu, do you mean Iori?”

As the eighteenth-ranked explorer in the world, Iori Kimitsu was Japan’s ace diver.

“That’s right,” Saiga replied. “Starting tomorrow, many of the world’s top-ranked explorers will be appearing in Yoyogi. The management section is going to be quite busy.”

“Is there anything I can do to help...?”

“Stick to D-Powers like white on rice. Something is going to happen this month—I’m sure of it. I look forward to hearing your response on the Otherworldly Language Comprehension matter.”

Afterwards, Saiga left the conference room.

Now alone, Miharu muttered a few words to herself. “Looking forward to my response, huh...? You make it sound so easy.”

November 12, 2018 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

On this day, three low-pressure systems surrounded the Japanese archipelago, causing bad weather across the entire country. Thus, on an overcast, slightly chilly morning in Tokyo, we moved into our new office.

Opening the entryway door to my apartment on the second floor, a few mumbled words slipped from my mouth. “Oh man, what the hell is this...?”

“It’s Scandinavian style,” Miyoshi replied, glancing around the room.

Yes, we’d asked the designer to organize our living space into a simple

concept. And true to those words, everything had been organized simply and beautifully.

“Still...” I trailed off.

Looking at the lights hanging above the table—which resembled bagworm moths—I couldn’t stop myself from recoiling. Would I even be able to relax in such a gaudy space?

“Well, home is where you make it,” I said. “I’ll get used to this place eventually.”

Summing up my feelings in a few words, I began organizing my meager belongings. A stately bookshelf took up one side of the living room wall. If filled with thick and heavy technical books, it would look quite cool. Unfortunately, in this day and age, I didn’t own many technical books in paper form.

With such a small amount of luggage, I finished organizing my belongings in less than thirty minutes. Leaving through the entryway, I walked downstairs to the office. However, I could also reach the first floor by taking the inside stairs, which were located in the corridor between the two apartments.

“The first floor looks like your hobby room,” I noted.

Miyoshi laughed. “Nice, isn’t it?”

Three EuroCave Revelation wine cellars had been lined up inside the dining room. Still, there were no wine bottles as of...

Wait, we already have a few bottles?

“I expected you to put these in your apartment’s dining room,” I said.

“What kind of lush would knock back that much wine in her own room?!”

“In that case, you’re going to get hammered in the *office’s* dining room?” I wanted to ask. However, refraining from such quips was the key to getting along with others. I’d learned that lesson the hard way.

Peeking into the living room area, I saw that it already resembled an office space. A large, L-shaped desk occupied the back of the room. Three thirty-inch monitors sat atop the desk, handwritten memos already scattered around them.

As my desk had also been set up, I tested out the chair. Yep, pretty comfy.

“Kei, are you finished organizing your stuff?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah, I only had books and some clothes.”

“Huh? What about your kitchenware and other small things?”

“They’re at my old place,” I explained.

“Your old place...? What happened to that apartment?”

“I didn’t feel like dealing with it, so I’m leaving it be for a while.”

“Wow, high roller over here!”

True enough. Before we sold the orbs, I would have been desperate to vacate the apartment, no matter the trouble involved. That building might have been a dump, but the rent was quite expensive. Of course, compared to other apartments in the area, it was dirt cheap.

“Come hear my wisdom, Miyoshi, for I am the living embodiment of inner peace.”

“I think you’re just being lazy.”

Can’t argue with that.

“Well, what are *you* doing right now?” I asked.

“I’ve already moved all my stuff.”

“Huh? But I could’ve sworn you haven’t lifted a finger.”

“I hired an all-inclusive moving service,” Miyoshi explained. “While you relax and do nothing, your belongings are mysteriously packaged and delivered. And in the blink of an eye, your room is restored to its original state. Coordinators, moving services... All kinds of magic pervade this world, don’t they?”

“Wow... Could something so convenient *actually* exist?”

“The world is an easy place for us rich folk. I’ve truly seen the light.”

“Damn it,” I swore. “Well, I’ll move my stuff out little by little. Once the apartment is clean, I’ll vacate the place.”

“I can see you maintaining that apartment forever, Kei.”

“Oh, be quiet.”

During this exchange, the doorbell rang. “It’s Naruse,” Miyoshi said, glancing at the computer screen. Apparently, she’d connected the house’s various monitors to the PC.

Opening the front door, I found Naruse standing there with a large, potted moth orchid in her hands. Sporting forty huge petals, it looked rather heavy. Under normal circumstances, wouldn’t a person have something like this delivered...?

“Congratulations on your move,” Naruse greeted us. “Here’s a housewarming gift.”

Uh, aren’t moth orchids a huge pain in the ass to care for?

As that rude thought crossed my mind, I accepted the plant, voicing my gratitude. “This is amazing. Thank you so much.”

“So,” Naruse began. “Now that you’re almost finished moving, I have something to ask as your full-time supervisor.”

After exchanging pleasantries, we’d eaten the customary “moving soba,” even though it had come from a convenience store. While the three of us chatted with drinks in hand, Naruse suddenly straightened, changing the subject to work.

Seeing Naruse unusually tense, Miyoshi offered a straightforward reply. “No need to act so formal. If it’s within our ability, we’ll help you.”

“Well, the truth is... I’d like you to hunt down a specific orb.”

“Hunt down an orb?” I repeated.

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances. What was going on here?

“What kind of monster drops it?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Naruse replied.

“Come again?”

“But, erm, the orb drops in Yoyogi, right?” Miyoshi cut in.

“I’m not sure of that either,” Naruse answered.

“Seriously...?”

“The orb—Otherworldly Language Comprehension—has only been dropped once in Russia’s Kiryas Kul’yegan Dungeon,” Naruse said. “On top of that, the drop monster hasn’t been made public.”

Otherworldly Language Comprehension? Yet another orb with an incredible name.

“So, why do you need this orb?” I asked.

Naruse let out a single sigh. After swearing us to secrecy on this closely guarded information, she explained the details.

“In short, someone used this skill to translate an inscription found inside a dungeon,” Miyoshi summed up. “But currently, you don’t know if the contents of this translation are true or false. Does that cover it?”

“Yes,” Naruse replied. “In order to verify the translation, countries around the world are searching for this orb.”

The Queen of the Merchants shot to her feet, her eyes turning into yen signs. “Kei, we could make a killing off this!”

“You think?” I asked. “Even if we *did* find this orb, would putting it up for auction be wise?”

“Oh, right...”

“Personally, I would be very grateful if you gave it to the JDA...” Naruse chimed in.

“In a free economy, forcing us to do that is gonna be a hard sell,” I said with a laugh. “But still, you already know the makeup of monsters inside this Kiryas-something-or-other dungeon? And the same for Yoyogi too?”

Yoyogi was enormous, and in terms of monsters and environments, it was one of the world’s most diverse dungeons. Single floors even contained multiple environmental sections. Thus, in addition to there being floor bosses, monsters that seemed to be section bosses existed as well.

Naruse nodded, handing me a list of the monsters inside Kiryas Dungeon. "Most of them have been confirmed."

Miyoshi and I looked over the list.

"We're looking for a language comprehension orb," Miyoshi said. "In that case, should we prioritize intelligent monsters who seem able to communicate?"

"Something like a vampire?" I asked.

"Yeah, exactly."

Incidentally, no vampires had been discovered within the dungeons as of yet. Still, Miyoshi was probably onto something.

I pointed to a single monster. "It's probably this one."

Blood Clan Shaman. A high-ranking type of goatman.

Sometimes, highly social monsters like goatmen formed clans in certain areas. Within those clans, shamans were able to wield magic.

Miyoshi donned a curious expression. "What makes you think that?"

"You haven't noticed anything strange about these dungeon monsters?" I asked.

"Strange? In what way?"

"Naruse, can you tell us who names these monsters?"

"For most general monsters, national institutions or the actual discoverer decide on the name," Naruse replied. "Afterwards, the WDA announces these names as official. But when a monster drops materials, those items usually have the creature's name written on them. In those cases, the name is corrected."

"And there it is," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"The majority of monsters seem to be named after our planet's myths, or video game worlds referencing those myths."

"Yes, for the most part," Naruse agreed.

“In other words, the dungeons generate official names, which are even attached to items. Similarly, the orbs discovered thus far provide skills that fit the attributes of their drop monster.”

“I...suppose so.”

“So, why do monsters drop orbs that *we* think fit their characteristics?”

Upon seeing the list of orbs that slimes could potentially drop, I’d grown curious. After all, it seemed as though we explorers had decided upon this lineup of drop items. An unknown life-form—possibly from another world—had been named “slime.” During the time of its naming, most aspects of this creature’s nature would have still been unknown. In that case, why had these properties matched its JRPG counterpart?

“Whoever designed this ‘game’ must understand our planet’s culture very well,” I said. “You could even say they’re incredibly well-informed.”

Listening to my speculations, Naruse wore an astonished expression.

I held up three fingers. “And so, I can think of three possibilities. First, this is all a coincidence.”

But that’s highly improbable.

“Second, this could be proof of Plato’s theory of Forms,” I continued. “All physical manifestations are imitations of timeless Ideas.”

That being said, the names matching perfectly still gives me pause.

The text on Dungeon Cards was displayed in one’s native language. As a result, monster names could be switched out based on individual recognition.

“Third, the ‘architect’ of these dungeons could be from Earth,” I finished.

“But that’s absurd...” Naruse protested.

“You think so?” I laughed, sipping my coffee. “That one seems the most fitting to me. Still, in many of our planet’s myths—especially Celtic ones—the very act of manipulating language and written characters is synonymous with magic.”

Miyoshi spoke next, striking at the heart of the matter. “Then among sociable monsters, those who can wield magic might possess skills concerning language

and written characters?"

"Exactly. Looking at this list, the only monsters sociable enough to form clans are those related to goatmen."

Naruse took out a list of monsters in Yoyogi. "Unfortunately, goatmen belonging to the blood clan don't exist in Yoyogi, but we do have the moon clan."

The moon clan—another class of goatmen—resided deep within Yoyogi's fourteenth level. In fact, this unpopulated section was located in the opposite direction from the fifteenth level stairs.

"But Kei," Miyoshi said. "Will there be a large number of shamans within the same clan?"

In all likelihood, the clan would only have one shaman. At most, there would be a few.

"That's a reasonable concern," I replied. "But once the shamans have all died, another goatman will probably transform into one."

"Do you have any evidence of that?" Miyoshi asked.

"Not really, but that sort of thing does happen quite often in the natural world."

Not among mammals, though.

"Also," Miyoshi added. "Going back and forth between the fourteenth floor and the entrance looks like it will take an insane amount of time."

"The most standard and direct route takes two days," Naruse confirmed.

"Should we set up a base somewhere and travel expedition style?"

The phrase "expedition style" originated from mountaineering terminology. Using this method, you would first construct a base camp in the dungeon. Afterwards, each time your party descended a few levels, you would set up another camp. Finally, multiple support members would travel between camps to deliver supplies, helping to support the exploration. In contrast, "adventure style" referred to raiding a dungeon with only a few party members.

“No, I think we’ll travel adventure style,” I said.

“What?” Naruse asked, seeming surprised. “Really?”

Turning towards her, I tried to dodge the question. “Anyway, I accept your request. We’ll do a bit of searching for the orb.”

“Umm... Please don’t overexert yourself.”

“Of course. I dream of becoming the world’s ultimate loafer, after all. But anyway, we have a few things to prepare. If you don’t mind, we’ll have to part ways here.”

“No worries. I’ll return to the JDA for now, seeing as I need to report to the section chief.”

“Oh, but please don’t share my assumptions about the shamans just yet. I’d prefer not to complicate things.”

“Understood. I’ll simply tell Chief Saiga that you’ve accepted our request.”

“Tell him not to get his hopes up, though.”

“Good work today,” Miyoshi added.

Exiting the front door, we said our farewells to Naruse as she returned to the JDA. Though she could have simply reported by phone, perhaps there were circumstances preventing her from doing so.

“Kei, are you really going to the fourteenth level?” Miyoshi asked. “We still haven’t even been down to the second floor.”

“Well, it should work out, one way or another.”

“Oh right, you’re the world’s top-ranked explorer. I’d totally forgotten. You don’t give off that vibe at all.”

“Wow, rude. Still, I don’t get that vibe from myself either.”

Looking at each other, we both burst out laughing.

“Well, if things start to look dire, I’ll turn tail and run back home. On that note...”

I asked Miyoshi to procure something for me. Despite looking surprised, she

agreed to look for it.

“Also...” I continued, withdrawing four orbs from Vault: Storage, Super Recovery, Water Magic, and Physical Resistance.

“Kei, these...”

“Either way, we need to test out Storage and Super Recovery. Acquiring a second Storage will take some time, but I should be able to procure another Super Recovery midway through November. And since I already have Vault, you should use Storage, Miyoshi.”

“Got it,” she agreed. “What else do we have left?”

“Aside from these four, we have two Super Recoveries, three Water Magics, and seven Physical Resistances.”

“If you’re not careful, those slimes are gonna pop out one Physical Resistance a day.”

“We can each use one of every orb,” I offered. “Aside from those, we can sell everything else. Presumably, their prices will come down gradually.”

“Sounds good. So, for the next auction, we’ll sell three Physical Resistances and one Super Recovery. Then we’ll see how things play out.”

“Four orbs twice a month, huh? Not bad.”

“Kei. Last year, only four publicly announced orbs came out of Yoyogi.”

Oh yeah, that walking square Saiga did mention something about that...

“A-Anyway,” I said. “If you’re coming with me to the fourteenth level, go ahead and use those. I’d appreciate a report as well.”

Wearing a stiff smile, Miyoshi touched Storage. “Sounds like we’re testing the maximum number of acquirable skills.”

“When you first use an orb, you have to cry out, ‘I’m throwing away my humanity!’ That’s the rule.”

“You need to tell me these things sooner!”

The orb dispersed, turning into light. Starting with the hand Miyoshi had used to touch it, the light coiled around her, and then it was absorbed within her

body. This was my first time seeing someone else use an orb; I hadn't known it looked like this.

"So, how was it?" I asked.

"Hmm. It's a strange feeling. Almost as if my body got reassembled."

Yeah, that's exactly how I felt.

"Are you going to use them too?" Miyoshi asked.

"Suppose so," I said, taking out Physical Resistance, Water Magic, and Super Recovery. "Hope my head doesn't explode from acquiring too many skills at once."

"Is that a *Scanners* reference?! But I'm begging you, please don't explode. You'll get the room all dirty."

"That's what you're worried about?!"

Afterwards, the two of us used the remaining orbs; fortunately, neither of our heads exploded.

Yoyogi Dungeon

After successfully acquiring a number of skills, I visited Yoyogi to test them out, as it was still quite early in the day. There, I ran into Team Simon, with the entire group walking across the street from me.

"Crap..." I muttered.

Why is he even here at this hour? Shouldn't he be diving earlier in the day...?

"So, this is Yoyogi, huh?" Simon asked, sounding impressed. "The entrance is practically sparkling."

"It's a dungeon in the center of Tokyo, after all," Natalie replied, opening a pamphlet about Yoyogi. *"Apparently, a lot of people explore the upper levels for entertainment."*

"Hey, isn't that Team Simon?" someone asked.

"Huh? The man himself? Not Falcon Industries' Model Simon?"

With the two guys standing next to me speaking pretty loudly, Simon turned in our direction. The cocktail party effect struck again.

“Oh, is that you, Yoshimura?” Simon asked.

The guy was so friendly, I never would have pegged him for a soldier. Waving his right hand, Simon began heading towards me. In response, the two guys standing next to me turned in my direction.

“Stop, I don’t want this kind of attention!”

“H-Hey, Simon,” I said. *“Nice to see you again.”*

“Yoshimura,” he replied, taking in my appearance. *“You’re diving in that getup?”*

“Huh? I usually dress like this.”

“That’s insane. Do you have a death wish or something?”

“Of course not! Since I’m not going anywhere life-threatening, I should be fine!”

“Yeah, but you never know what might happen in a dungeon.”

Though Simon sounded exasperated, I wouldn’t be going to places where anything unexpected occurred.

At that moment, the crowd near the entrance stirred. When Simon and I turned in that direction, we found a woman who personified the word “dignified” walking towards us. It was First Lieutenant Kimitsu Iori of Camp Narashino’s JDAG. In the field of dungeon exploration, she was Japan’s undisputed ace.

Seeing her approach, Simon spoke with panic in his voice. *“Oh crap, it’s Iori. By the way, I hear you’ve put more orbs up for sale. I’m pretty curious about that, but for now, I’ll have to say sayonara.”*

“Why the rush?”

When Simon tried to leave in a hurry, I shot him a look that said, “What’s this about?”

“I suck at dealing with Iori,” he replied with a wink.

Waving his hand, he left. The nerve of this guy.

After walking right up to me, First Lieutenant Lori spoke to no one in particular. “He always runs away when he sees me.”

“Is that so?” I answered noncommittally.

In response, Lori looked at me, furrowing her brow.

Oh no, did I just screw up? Yeah, I might be an acquaintance of Simon's, but I'm not an American spy or anything.

“Are you diving in that getup?” Lori asked.

...Oh, this again.

Simon, who had been watching from a short distance, let out a laugh. Likewise, he wore an expression that said, “See, what did I tell you?” Giving me a thumbs-up, he descended into the dungeon.

Wow, that was a little irritating.

“You two seem pretty close,” Lori said. “Are you a friend of Simon's?”

“Not really. We only met each other once through an orb trade. We're not that clo—”

“An orb trade?”

“An orb trade?” Lori repeated.

A man who seemed to be about her age had spoken those words.

He looked somewhat spindly, but if he'd done business with Simon, he couldn't have been your average diver. And recently, everyone had heard of a certain party auctioning off orbs.

“Are you associated with D-Powers?” Lori asked.

For a moment, the man looked surprised, but his features soon turned expressionless. “Uh, yeah. But I'm just an unimportant, G-ranked party member.”

Lori noticed something slightly off about his reply. Why emphasize being G-

Rank for no reason? Except for a certain subset of clear newcomers, most G-Ranked explorers tended to hide their low level. Iori could think of only one exception. When seeking protection, calling attention to your own weakness could prove advantageous. However, the timing here didn't seem to fit.

Could this man be trying to conceal his abilities...?

"Did you acquire your card recently?" Iori asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I got it last month..."

And you can already hold a casual conversation with Simon? Could you have undergone an experience similar to mine?

Iori recalled the summer day on which an SDF rescue party had saved her life.

Okinawa

The summer of 2015 was coming to an end. After appearing at the beginning of the season, the dungeons had taken hold of public discourse. However, the only incident affecting Iori had been the severance of the Chiyoda Line between Harajuku and Yoyogi Park. Other than that, her life hadn't changed all that much. Before her graduation thesis reached its critical juncture, she'd decided to take one final break, visiting Okinawa with a friend.

"Miho," Iori called out. "Are you sure this is the right road?"

The pair walked down an incredibly narrow path that resembled a tunnel made of trees. Even if she stood stock-still, the high temperature alone caused Iori to burst into sweat. Combined with the sticky air, it felt as though she were walking through a jungle. Finally, the cries of cicadas searching for their deathbed mates only intensified these unpleasant sensations.

"Umm, probably," Miho replied. "After all, there aren't any other roads."

In other words, Iori had ample ground to feel uneasy. Like an orienteering athlete, she booted up map and compass apps on her phone, attempting to verify their route. Yet each time she moved the compass, the needle spun in some unintelligible direction.

"What?" she mumbled. "This is strange."

“Why don’t you try calibrating it?” Miho asked.

Posing as if she held a phone, Miho waved her hand in a figure eight. Apparently, Asahi Kasei Electronics had patented this method of calibration. When Lori had first heard of it, she’d been quite impressed with their ingenuity. Yet even after imitating Miho several times, the results remained the same.

“Is there something wrong with the geomagnetic field here?” Lori asked.

“Oh!” Miho cried. “Could this be a power spot?!”

Despite being an engineering major, Miho loved anything to do with the supernatural. Of course, most supernatural occurrences had very little scientific value, primarily affecting only one’s consciousness. Fully aware of this, Miho still enjoyed the mental aspects of her spirituality. As such, being around her never felt unpleasant. In fact, Lori often found herself having a good time as well. After all, these so-called “power spots” often contained beautiful landscapes or something else deeply evocative.

“Don’t worry,” Miho said, starting to walk again. “On the other side of hardship, there’s always a wonderful reward waiting for you.”

Sweat still poured from Lori’s skin, and musty fumes rose from the grass, permeating the air. While bugs occasionally flew at her face, the cicadas continued celebrating life, singing at ear-splitting volumes. Lori’s supernatural-loving friend had brought her to a variety of places, but this ranked as one of their most difficult excursions.

As more time passed, Lori began to grow tired of this experience. Yet at the end of the road, an open space suddenly unfolded before her eyes. Sunlight filtered through the trees, painting the area in streaks of light. And though the air had previously been humid, it now felt cool and refreshing. Almost as if they had stumbled upon a single section of another world.

“Incredible...” Lori mumbled.

“This is probably the place,” Miho said.

Almost nothing occupied the D-shaped area, which had been cleared of undergrowth. Only a stone in the shape of a quadrangular prism stood in the center of the D’s straight line.

“Is that an ibi stone?” Iori asked.

Miho nodded. “Most likely.”

When descending into the mortal realm, gods used ibi stones as landmarks. In other words, they were signposts connected to the divine realm.

“This is supposed to be an utaki, but I don’t see anything resembling a torii gate,” Miho commented.

As sacred sites in the Ryukyuan faith, utaki were often located in mountains, caves, or groves. On the other hand, torii gates were Shinto shrine archways.

“During Japan’s imperialist expansion, many religious sites were transformed into Shinto shrines,” Iori said. “Those torii gates must have been erected after the Meiji Era. Lately, a lot of them have been removed.”

“Interesting.”

In short, the torii gates must have been removed from this location, or they had never been built in the first place.

It’s probably the latter, Iori thought, looking around the area.

Even so, the lack of anything here struck her as odd. During the journey, the heat had seemed to be mourning the passing of summer. Furthermore, insects had clung to their sweat, and humid air had risen from the grass. However, none of those things were present now. Instead, a strangely vacant cleanliness dominated the area. The pristine atmosphere brought a classic, satirical poem to Iori’s mind.

“Even fish struggle to live within the pristine waters of the white river—Shirakawa,” she muttered to herself.

“How I long for the murkiness of the Tanuma era,” the poem continued.

Written by Nanpo Ota, this poem had been referencing Sadanobu Matsudaira. Ruler of the Shirakawa Domain, Matsudaira had been the architect of the Kansei Era. Despite this era being an age of “tolerant governance,” many had found his reforms stifling. As such, Ota had longed for the far laxer governance of the former era, when Okitsugu Tanuma had been senior counselor to the shogun.

Additionally, a strange silence filled the area. During the journey here, the cicadas' cries had been ear-splitting. Why couldn't Lori hear them now? If this had been the only change, she might have thought, "Finally, they've stopped making that ruckus." However, the roar of the sea, which had echoed alongside the constant droning, no longer reached her ears either.

Until now, her surroundings had merely seemed beautiful and refreshing. Now, she began to view the landscape as alien, as though she'd wandered into another world.

"This is where people meet with the gods," Lori said, trying to disguise her unease with a joke. "It must have some kind of spiritual effect."

Looking in Miho's direction, Lori found her taking a picture of the clearing. By slowly backing away, she was attempting to capture a panoramic view of the ibi stone. This would require fitting the entirety of the D-shaped area's straight line into frame. To prevent Miho from tumbling backwards, Lori approached her friend.

"Hmm, maybe a little bit more to the left..." Miho said.

She'd backed up to the apex of the D's curved side. When she moved slightly to the left, her foot stepped out into midair.

"Whoa!" she cried.

"Look out!" Lori shouted.

With Miho on the brink of falling, Lori grabbed her arm, pulling her friend up with all her might. Miho did return to solid ground, but due to the opposing forces, Lori stepped into the nothingness beyond the clearing. And just like that, she slipped from the edge of a steep slope.

"Lori! Lori!"

From above, she heard a desperate voice calling out her name.

Oh, that must be Miho.

"Ouch," Lori grumbled.

Fortunately, she'd worn long sleeves to prevent sunburn, and as a result, she'd avoided any serious injuries. Moving her arms and legs gingerly, she didn't appear to have broken or sprained anything. Small abrasions seemed to be the worst of her wounds.

When Iori looked up, she only saw a thin sliver of the sky. Despite being steep, the slope hadn't covered a great distance. In the end, she'd apparently fallen down a crevice in the rocks.

"Miho!" Iori called back.

"Oh, you can hear me! Are you okay?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine! Just skinned my hands a little!"

"Thank goodness. Can you climb back up?"

For the first time, Iori looked around the area. Though light shone through the crevice, it was so dim that she could hardly see anything. Since she couldn't find her phone, it must have fallen out of her chest pocket somewhere during the fall. Thankfully, the small backpack she'd been carrying remained unscathed.

During this trip, Iori and Miho had planned to visit gama—natural caverns in Okinawa. Taking out a flashlight meant for such excursions, Iori turned on the beam, examining what lay ahead. Bathed in light, a portion of the wall and fallen stones appeared golden.

"That can't be *actual* gold," Iori murmured.

It was probably iron ore, as a golden color often formed around magnetite. Perhaps the compass had been acting strangely due to a small vein of ferromagnetic ore.

"Iori?" Miho asked.

"Oh, sorry. Um... Doesn't look like I can climb up from here! Farther inward, this place turns into a cave, and it seems to continue for quite a ways. I'm going to check it out!"

"Huh? No, stay there! Wandering around is dangerous! I'll go call for help right now! Don't move a muscle while I'm gone!"

"Okay, but I'm going to look around a little—"

Pointed at the darkness beyond, the flashlight brought something completely unreal to the surface. In response, Iori let out a shrill scream.

“Iori!” Miho shouted. “What’s wrong?! Did something happen?!”

There was no mistaking it. The flashlight’s beam had revealed human bones. Furthermore, it appeared to be an entire skeleton.

“Oh, s-sorry,” Iori stammered. “I found something a little surprising here...”

“What? Did you stumble across some lost pirate treasure?”

“Treasure? Hmm. Well, maybe from an anthropological perspective... No, these seem a little too fresh for that.”

“What are you talking about?”

As if part of some ritual, the white bones had been carefully enshrined. Traditionally, Okinawa had practiced open-air burials. Nowadays, cremation had become the norm, but the outlying islands still conducted jar burials. Until the seventies, the Miyako Islands had practiced cave burials. After being placed in a gama for a number of years, the bones would be washed, cremated, and placed in a funerary urn.

Gama served as boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead. These natural caverns were both sacred sites and places to wash away impurity. Upon closer inspection, bones apparently belonging to other people lay scattered around the white skeleton.

“Umm,” Iori said. “This place looks like a grave, I guess?”

“A grave?!”

“Yep. Someone’s skeleton is enshrined here, waiting to be wa—”

Before Iori could finish speaking, something appeared from around the corner up ahead, producing a faint glow. Upon seeing this, she wondered if the fall had actually killed her.

“Iori?” Miho asked. “Iori?! What’s wrong?! Did something happen?!”

“Please be quiet, Miho...”

Floating upright, a fish of gorgeous silver appeared, gracefully bending its

dorsal fin back and forth. Each time the creature's dorsal fin wriggled, it sparkled with a breathtakingly beautiful, rainbow-colored light. However, there was one problem. While Lori stood on the ground, the fish swam through midair. If she hadn't gone crazy and started hallucinating, there was only one possible explanation for this phenomenon.

"Miho," Lori said. "Can you call the police and tell them we've found a cave that seems to be a dungeon?"

"You're in a dungeon?!"

"Something up ahead is giving me that impression."

"That's kind of vague, but... Are you okay?"

"Not sure. Either way, I'm going to stay hidden so that it doesn't find me."

"Got it... Ugh, why does this place have to be out of range?! Hold on a minute. I'll be right back!"

Presumably, Miho had started running back towards the parking lot.

"If I can just stay hidden, that would be great, but..."

Muttering to herself, Lori withdrew a survival knife from her backpack. Apparently, a manufacturer in Okayama had created this knife, its handle sporting an engraving of Momotaro being born from a peach.

When Lori had announced her trip to Okinawa, her younger brother had given her this knife. "If you're going into the wilderness, take this for protection," he'd said. Thinking it might get in the way, Lori had considered leaving the knife behind. Nevertheless, since her brother had gifted this blade as a good luck charm, she'd placed the knife in the bottom of her bag, carrying it with her.

"I suppose he can be useful every once in a while."

Looking at the thick, jagged edge of the knife, Lori felt a little safer. From the shadow of a boulder, she peeked at the silver fish, which had increased from one monster into a small school. They continued swimming quietly, bathing in the narrow sliver of light. Assuming these were cutlassfish, they were a carnivorous species with fang-like teeth. Likewise, the blades along their backs were as sharp as razors.

Silently, Lori prayed for the creatures to stay back, not knowing if anyone was listening. Yet after remaining in the same place for a little while, the flying school of fish returned in the direction they'd come.

Sighing, a relieved Lori sat on the ground. But at that moment, something grazed the back of her neck. Fearfully, she turned around. Before her very eyes, a great white shark—about two meters long—opened its mouth, preparing to sink its teeth into her. Terrified, Lori let forth a silent scream. Mind completely blank, she swung the knife in her hand, stabbing the shark's head with all her might. Not expecting this counterattack, the shark flipped its body around, sending Lori flying backwards.

"Gah!" she cried out.

Lori's back slammed into the opposite wall, rendering her unable to stand up right away. Across from her, the shark writhed in pain, apparently still alive. Turning its black, emotionless eyes on her, the creature shot towards her for a second attack.

Lori watched the shark's approach with vacant eyes. By instinct, she shifted downwards to avoid the assault, and—mouth opened wide—the face of a smiling demon passed over her. At that moment, an intense irritation overcame Lori. What had she done to deserve this? And so, she kicked upwards, venting her frustrations into the shark's belly. Even if she used her full strength, a single kick from a powerless woman couldn't defeat a great white shark. Even so, the kick did succeed in changing two things: the monster's trajectory and her inevitable fate.

As a result of the force, the shark pointed slightly downwards from its original flight path. The knife was still stuck in its head, and the handle slammed into the wall, pushing the blade in deeper. Spasming violently, the monster transformed into black light, vanishing from sight.

As she watched in a daze, the knife—now freed from the shark—dropped from above, slicing off a portion of Lori's hair. Afterwards, the blade stuck upright into the ground. While Lori lay on her back, a silver card appeared on her chest. In her eyes, it resembled a magical item to which one could offer their prayers.

“Did I actually survive that?” Lori muttered to herself.

Perhaps as repayment for the hair she’d sacrificed, a rainbow-colored orb appeared in front of her. Except for the pain in her back, the entire world had lost all sense of reality. Thus, she touched the orb without any hesitation, unleashing its power. A feeling of weightlessness enveloped Lori, as if gravity had ceased to exist. Afterwards, she experienced the strange sensation of her body being reformed. Oddly enough, the pain in her back vanished as well.

Lori sat up delicately, confirming the lack of fractures and any other abnormalities in her limbs. Rising to her feet without a sound, she brushed the dirt from her clothes, and picked up her knife and flashlight. Still dazed, she looked over the silver card she’d just obtained. There, she discovered yet another curiosity. Her name and rank had been etched into the surface of the item.

“So, this is a D-Card, huh?”

After single-handedly defeating a monster for the first time, an explorer would receive this item. Even Lori knew this much, as the topic had been discussed to death. Furthermore, the skill she’d just acquired had also been engraved upon the card.

“Magnetic Field Manipulation...? Were those fish using magnetism to float?” Muttering to herself, Lori made the knife levitate atop her palm. “Wow, it’s actually working...”

The stainless steel used in knives was usually made of martensite. In other words, it was ferromagnetic.

What a great skill for an engineering major, she thought with a small chuckle.

If she imagined the magnetic flux, she could use this skill with relative ease. Testing its power on a pebble at her feet, she pulled it towards her hand. Though the pyrrhotite mined in Okinawa was magnetic, it varied in strength. Thinking of another idea, Lori stood upon a similar stone, attempting to levitate her whole body. Unfortunately, it didn’t work.

“Oh, that’s rich. Are you saying I’m too heavy?”

There might have been other causes, but right now, she didn’t have time to

contemplate such matters. After all, she didn't know when the next monster would attack. She needed to learn how to use this newly acquired skill as a weapon right away.

If I can manipulate magnetic fields, I could create something like a railgun, but... If there's zero electric charge, the Lorentz force will also be null, no matter how high the magnetic flux density might be.

If she were to fight using Magnetic Field Manipulation alone, she would have to use induction heating or a coil gun. When you changed the direction or intensity of a magnetic field at high speed, the metal placed within the field would generate electricity due to electromagnetic induction. This was known as Faraday's law of induction.

During such times, the magnitude of electromotive force was expressed as $d\Phi / dt$. “ Φ ” represented magnetic flux, and “ t ” represented the number of seconds. Of course, “ d ” represented Leibniz's notation, which expressed the differentials. Put simply, a change in magnetic flux of one Weber per second would produce a single volt of electromotive force.

Presumably, Magnetic Field Manipulation allowed her to control the field's density, strength, and direction. In that case, she could freely change the magnetic flux, and theoretically, she could generate an infinitely large amount of electromagnetic force.

The Joule heating generated as she did this could be calculated through this formula: $R \times I^2 \times t$. “ R ” represented the object's electrical resistance, and “ I ” represented the electrical current's charge. Once again, “ t ” represented the number of seconds for which the current flowed. According to Ohm's law, if you expressed the electromotive force as “ V ,” the generated electrical current could be calculated as $I = V / R$.

In other words, Joule heating could be calculated as $V \times I \times t$. Thus, if Lori could make the electromotive force infinitely large, she could also make the amount of generated heat infinitely large. However, she would need to have an electrical current flowing through the material.

Coil guns operated on a much simpler premise. After all, she only needed to send a magnetic body flying by having it pulled along a strong, magnetic field. In

the real world, she wouldn't be able to acquire a strong magnetic field, and electrical currents were a limited resource. As a result, she wouldn't be able to gain sufficient initial velocity. On the other hand, if she could manipulate the magnetic field itself, that would be a different matter.

"Hmm..."

Around the pyrrhotite in her palm, Lori tried forming a magnetic field stronger than one achievable through a coil. At that moment, every magnetic stone in the area began moving towards her hand. Panicked, she released the magnetic field.

"Yikes, that was a close one..."

According to the inverse square law, the strength of a magnetic field produced by a pole was inversely proportional to the distance from the source squared. In other words, as Lori's distance from the source increased, the magnetic field's strength would rapidly weaken. Even so, she'd created a magnetic field strong enough to move all magnetic bodies in the vicinity.

"This might be an extreme conclusion, but 'manipulation' implies that I can control the strength and direction of the magnetic flux at will, right?"

In a direction away from her body, Lori applied a high-density magnetic flux to the stone in her hand. At that moment, the stone vanished from her sight, striking a wall ten meters away with a terrible sound.

While this incredible power left Lori dumbfounded, a school of silver fish rounded the corner, lured in by the sound. Seeing these creatures, Lori returned to her senses. In that instant, she recalled the shark, causing the blood to drain from her face. Resolving to act before the monsters drew any closer, she picked up a few stones at her feet. Due to her previous pull, the magnetic bodies in the area had already gathered there.

"Fire!" she cried.

Using the same trick as before, she applied power to the stone, striking one of the many fish.

"Oh, it worked. Didn't hit the one I aimed for, though."

For the next shot, Lori imagined the line of the magnetic flux all the way to her target. Suppose you were using a normal, attraction-type coil gun. When the bullet passed the pole used for pulling, you would need to turn off the magnetic field at once, or else the bullet would return to its source. However, because Lori could adjust the magnetic flux at will, she didn't need to worry about that.

The second bullet flew along the magnetic field Lori had envisioned, striking its target dead center. At any rate, the bullet moved too fast for her to see, meaning she could only make assumptions. Still, based on how the projectile had struck its target, it must have flown along the line with perfect precision.

Thus, Lori eliminated the remaining school of cutlassfish swimming towards her. Afterwards, she faced the skeleton, clapping her hands together in prayer. Finally, she continued her journey deeper into the cavern.

Upon receiving a call for help, the police had immediately forwarded the request to the Dungeon Countermeasures Department. Almost at once, that information had been relayed to the JDAG, who had been deployed nearby for training.

Before, the SDF had only been able to dispatch personnel during disaster relief missions. However, in matters related to dungeons, this structure had been broadly simplified. Whenever the Dungeon Countermeasures Department received a report, the SDF could petition them directly for dispatch.

At first, there had been plenty of misguided arguments in regard to this matter. "It's a detrimental change to make SDF employment easier," some had complained. "It's going to be used for war," others had speculated. Ultimately, the threat of monsters leaking out of dungeons had eradicated these dissenting opinions. Almost at once, the proper system had been put into place.

Led by Sergeant Hagane, the JDAG's first squadron had been training in the cavern-filled islands of Okinawa. As a result, they'd received the call for help. After grabbing their equipment, the men quickly boarded their HMV.⁽²⁾ Leading Private Kaiba—the squadron's lovable goofball—hopped aboard the vehicle with gusto. Despite the interior being much cooler than the outside, he still had few words of complaint.

"Yeah, this is definitely Okinawa. I didn't even know we had HMVs with air conditioning deployed here. Either way, it's still hot as hell."

The Okinawan sun was harsh. Even when it was overcast, being outside all day without a shirt could often result in full-body burns. Still, compared to the hellish heat outside, the HMV's interior was heaven on earth.

"All right," Hagane began. "Now that we're all inside, let's get going. I'll explain the situation during the trip." Pausing, he distributed documents to everyone. "At 11:15 this morning, a lone woman slipped into the cavern-like area on this map."

"A cavern-like area?" a subordinate repeated. "But if we received orders to rescue her, that must mean..."

"Exactly. Apparently, that area is an undiscovered dungeon. With us being the closest troops in the area, the mission's in our hands."

The squad members all wondered how long a single, unarmed woman could survive in a dungeon. Even so, none of them spoke these words aloud.

"The woman's name is Lori Kimitsu," Hagane continued. "She's twenty-two years old. Our goal is to rescue her and—if possible—capture the dungeon. Obviously, her rescue takes priority."

His face pale, Leading Private Miyagusuku—an Okinawan native—looked over the documents silently. "Anu tira yamun..." (8) he muttered in an Okinawan dialect.

In response to these words, which sounded like a curse, Staff Sergeant Sawatari turned towards Miyagusuku. "What did you just say?"

Looking at Sawatari, Miyagusuku grew even paler. "That cavern is cursed ground," he explained, straining to speak the words. "Around these parts, it's simply called a 'tira.'"

"And what does that mean?" asked Hagane.

According to Miyagusuku, "tira" was a Ryukyuan word for "cave." Though "gama" referred to natural caverns, "tira" originated from the Japanese word "tera," which meant "temple." In short, tira were caverns used for open-air

burials.

“Open-air burial locations are called *tiaras*?” Kaiba asked, making a bad pun. “Those caverns must be really full of themselves.”

“Sergeant Hagane.” His face still extremely pale, Miyagusuku donned an expression of tragic heroism. “This isn’t a joke! That place is dangerous! An... An abandoned god dwells there!”

No one responded to Miyagusuku’s over-the-top proclamation. In the twenty-first century, who still spoke of gods dwellings within caverns? Though everyone wanted to laugh off his statement, the strange pressure dominating the vehicle wouldn’t allow for that.

“The dwelling place of a god?” Hagane asked. “Are you talking about an *utaki*?”

In the Ryukyuan faith, *utaki* were important places. Based on what Hagane had heard, they were something like ceremonial sites.

“Sergeant, how familiar are you with the Ryukyuan faith?” Miyagusuku asked.

“Huh? Oh, well, with there being so many taboos, I had to attend a lecture before coming here. But honestly, I’m not too familiar with the details.”

“*Utaki* and *tira* aren’t the least bit similar. After all, *utaki* are where *noro* priestesses perform ceremonies. Still, both of them do serve as boundaries with the divine realm.” After pausing for a beat, Miyagusuku continued his explanation, speaking to no one in particular. “No matter where you go, most old religious festivals are probably the same. Even here, most of them are ceremonies to welcome visiting deities. During a specific time, we hold a specific festival, communing with the visiting god. For example, Kudaka Island holds the well-known *Izaiho* ceremony to welcome gods from *Nirai Kanai*. After having the deity confirm a new goddess, it’s sent back.”

Hagane felt taken aback. A subordinate had never given him an anthropology lecture in the middle of a briefing.

“So, what does this story have to do with our current mission?” he asked.

“I’m getting there,” Miyagusuku replied. “First of all, do you think a human

ceremony could actually select which god will visit?"

If the ritual simply opened the door, could humans choose what deity appeared from the other side? Even if religious leaders strictly controlled the ceremony's time and proceedings, that was a difficult quandary.

"Do you know why Izaiho is only performed once every twelve years?" Miyagusuku asked.

"Because of the date or the position of stars?" Hagane guessed. "I don't really understand, but that sort of thing matters, right?"

Based on texts throughout all times and places, the barrier between the human and divine realms strengthened or weakened depending on the time of year.

"That's one line of thinking," Miyagusuku answered. "But in reality, it takes twelve years to accumulate the prayer power needed to select a deity.⁽⁹⁾ Kudaka Island is swarming with priestesses, and it still requires that much time. What on earth could another region with only one year of accumulated power actually select?"

In the end, humans had arbitrarily classified some gods as "good" and others as "bad." Still, if a god were selected at random, it could end up being an "evil" deity, unleashing plagues upon the mortal realm.

"So, that cave is where such gods were abandoned?" Hagane asked.

"Yes," Miyagusuku confirmed. "In the past, locals used that cave to forcefully send back unwelcome gods."

Tira served as boundaries between the divine and mortal realms. As such, if you trapped a god within a tira, it would return home of its own volition.

"If the god returned home, what's the problem?" Hagane asked. "What do you think is in that cave?"

"...Sergeant," Miyagusuku said. "The priestesses *become* the Ryukyuan gods."

In the Ryukyuan faith, the gods borrowed the bodies of priestesses to manifest. In other words, these summoning rituals caused spiritual possession. In physical terms, the manifested god and the priestess became one.

"You mean to say the priestess herself was..." Hagane trailed off.

"Munne mutarin. Ariyafu turu shimun." [\(10\)](#)

A moment earlier, the car had been sweltering. Now, Miyagusuku's Okinawan dialect spread through the vehicle like an incantation, chilling the interior. It no longer felt like summer.

When Hagane spoke, he attempted to thaw the icy atmosphere. "Absurdly enough, these dungeons have spread across the world, their depths overflowing with creatures out of fantasy. At this point, coming across a god or two wouldn't surprise me. Listen up, everyone. All talk of deities aside, our mission is to rescue a young woman trapped inside a newly discovered dungeon."

"That's our sergeant," Kaiba chimed in. "Truly, a man among men."

In response to his flippant remark, the tense atmosphere within the car relaxed. All around them, it felt as though sound had returned to the world.

Since defeating the cutlassfish, how many more monsters had Lori killed? Occasionally, the monsters dropped items, and though Lori didn't recognize these objects, she placed them in her backpack. As she continued walking through the cavern, blue light shone from up ahead, and the sound of waves reached her ears.

Can I exit from here? Lori wondered, racing in that direction. To her disappointment, she merely arrived in an open area of the cavern. Despite being a dead end, the enclosure was relatively spacious. At the other end of the area, she found a sparkling blue tide pool of around ten meters in diameter. Up above, stalactite hung from the ceiling. Each time the tide pool rippled, the blue light caused the stalactite's shadows to sway, forming dark streaks that resembled living creatures. Finally, the pungent scent of sea water hung in the air. If Lori had to guess, this tide pool led to the ocean.

While Lori gazed absentmindedly at this phantasmal scenery, a black shadow appeared on the water's surface. With a splash, several large cutlassfish leapt into the air. Almost as if the tide pool had given birth to these monsters. Once

again, lori defeated the cutlassfish, yet upon killing the last one, a light dizziness came over her.

“Huh?”

Her body felt sluggish, resembling a state of extreme exhaustion.

“Could I have overused my power?”

Apparently, this tide pool gave birth to monsters. Deciding it would be dangerous to linger here, lori turned back on unsteady feet. If she could hold her breath long enough, she might have been able to escape through the tide pool, but that seemed like a risky gamble.

At that moment, a massive black shadow appeared in the water, its dorsal fin protruding from the surface.

“A-Am I on the set of *Jaws*?”

As this pointless thought crossed her mind, lori ran as fast as she could on unsteady feet, her face twitching. If that shark started flying, the situation would transform from a Spielberg film into an insane, made-for-television movie by Asylum. [\(11\)](#) Plus, if this new shark attacked similarly to the first one, her only chance of victory would be to leap into its mouth with a chainsaw.

lori’s prayers to remain unseen fell upon deaf ears. The shark, which looked to be about five meters long, poked its head out of the water. Springing into the air, the creature began chasing after her. If she used Magnetic Field Manipulation even one more time, she would likely pass out. Regardless, she would struggle until the bitter end, for that was her creed. While running, she gripped the survival knife—her brother’s good luck charm—in one hand.

In front of her, a voice cried out to lori. “Get down!”

Reflexively, lori obeyed the voice, falling prostrate on the ground. At the same time, the intermittent sound of gunfire rang in her ears, originating from up ahead. Cradling the back of her head, she remained flat on her stomach, and eventually, the roar of artillery ceased.

“Are you all right?” someone called out to her.

Lifting her head, lori found a man kneeling before her, his gaze full of concern.

Despite looking somewhat rugged, he also seemed dependable. Trembling, Lori held onto him, breaking into sobs.

“Damn, Sergeant,” said a flippant-looking man. “This job comes with a few perks, eh?”

“I’m impressed with how well you did on your own,” the sergeant said to Lori. “You must have been terrified.”

Only then did Lori understand her own feelings. *That’s right, she thought. I must have been scared for my life.*

Lori stayed in that position for a while, but eventually, the squad members who had ventured into the tide pool area returned.

“It’s a dead end,” one of the soldiers announced. “If the dungeon is just this cavern, we should have circled the entire thing by now...”

Even so, the dungeon showed no signs of having been fully captured.

“The final boss must be around here somewhere...” the sergeant muttered.

“If it’s on the other side of that tide pool, we’ll have to give up for now.”

Yeah, they probably don’t have scuba equipment or any other underwater gear.

Looking to the side, Lori noticed a restless looking man, appearing wary of the direction in which they’d come.

“Sergeant, we should head back at once,” he said. “We’re probably too late already, but we should still leave now!”

“Calm down, Miyagusuku,” the sergeant answered. “What are you so panicked about?”

The flippant-looking soldier replied in his stead. “Ever since we saw that skeleton at the entrance, he’s been acting like this. Must’ve been scared shitless.”

“Yeah, I am!” Miyagusuku called back. “You guys just don’t know what that was! That’s why you’re keeping it together!”

“And what was it, exactly?” Hagane asked.

Despite being a capable soldier, Miyagusuku had been acting strangely for some time now.

“I explained everything during the briefing!” Miyagusuku shouted. “You know exactly what that was! Let’s hurry up and get out of here!”

Miyagusuku’s peculiar behavior gave Hagane pause. Still, they had no reason to linger here any longer, as the target had been secured.

“I suppose we have no other choice,” Hagane said. “We’ll begin our retreat now.”

“Yes, sir!” his squad replied in unison.

While walking alongside everyone, Iori spoke to Sergeant Hagane. “I didn’t realize the exit was in the opposite direction. I thought this was a dead end since the passage grows increasingly narrow.”

“There’s a section just wide enough for one person to squeeze through,” Hagane replied with a comforting smile. “If you had known that, you probably would have escaped by now.”

I’m finally saved, thought Iori, relief welling up within her.

The flippant soldier with a playboy vibe turned towards his anxious friend, teasing him. “Hey, Miyagusuku. If we turn that corner, that’s where you shit your pants, right?”

Seemingly unable to hear the teasing, Miyagusuku’s fearful eyes darted around the area.

A serious-looking man with glasses glared at the flippant soldier. “Cut that out, Kaiba. One section of the area did look like an altar. Those bones were probably the subject of a cave burial awaiting washing. Either way, they’re still human remains. We should probably contact the police, just in case.”

“...No, that was something entirely di—”

Before Miyagusuku could finish his sentence, he gasped loudly.

“Leading Private Miyagusuku?”

Concerned, a young man walking at the front turned towards Miyagusuku, following his gaze. Afterwards, he tried facing forward again. Unfortunately, that would never again be possible.

“S-Saito?”

For one moment, another young man looked utterly dumbfounded. After all, the soldier who had been walking diagonally in front of him—Saito apparently, based on the name he called out—was now a headless corpse. A moment later, the dumbfounded soldier began firing his gun like a madman.

“Hey!” Hagane cried. “What the—?”

He tried to ask, “What the hell just happened?” But then the upper body of Shimabukuro—who had been firing like a madman—burst apart. Then, fear incarnate poked its head around the corner.

“Fall back!” Hagane shouted.

His voice lit a fire under the surviving soldiers. After revealing its face, the creature moved towards them slowly. Its upper body perfectly resembled the skeleton laid to rest at the altar. Yet now, a brown film had been wrapped around its bones like dried skin. Thin white hair reminiscent of silkworm threads covered its head in a wild mop. And finally, its lower body had transformed into the tail fin of a fish.

“A mummified mermaid, eh?” Kaiba muttered.

“Sergeant, is this the dungeon’s final boss?” Sawatari asked.

“Probably,” Hagane answered. “But if this dungeon is only one floor, that thing is way overleveled. What the hell is going on here?”

Shimabukuro had even fired his Type-89 (12) on full auto. At such short range, most of his bullets should have hit, no matter how disturbed he had been. Even so, the mermaid continued moving, entirely unfazed.

Tears welling in his eyes, Miyagusuku spoke in a shrill voice. “Did none of you listen to me...? A wrathful, abandoned god dwells within this place! We’re...

We're all doomed!"

"You're telling me that's no ordinary monster?" Kaiba asked. "It's basically a collab between the dungeon and a vengeful god?"

While cradling her head, lori turned towards Miyagusuku, who had completely lost the will to fight. "How do you know so much?" she asked.

"Huh...?" he replied. "My grandma was a yuta. She pacified the god here."

Yuta were a type of shaman. Though noro priestesses presided over official rituals, yuta were spiritual mediums of the folk variety. Because they belonged to a different order, yuta had been persecuted during certain time periods. As a result, many women avoided introducing themselves as yuta.

"As a little girl, my grandma spoke with something in these woods," Miyagusuku explained. "After getting married and giving birth to my mom, she almost died of an illness. That inspired her to become a yuta and pacify the spirit from the old stories. That's what I've been told, anyway."

lori cast her gaze towards the mummified mermaid, which still approached them slowly. "So, your grandmother was friends with that thing?"

"I don't know! I don't know, but that thing obviously holds a grudge against humans!"

After all, the priestess had become the host for a god. Soon afterwards, the people had become displeased with the god, abandoning the host inside a tira.

Miyagusuku slumped his shoulders, his expression one of total resignation. "I don't know if the god or the vessel resents us, but either way, it's going to kill us."

While side-eyeing this conversation, Hagane listened to Sawatari's report. "Based on Shimabukuro's last stand, our Type-89s won't even scratch that thing."

Even during times like these, the ever-dependable Sawatari remained composed. Nevertheless, Hagane noticed his hands trembling ever so slightly.

"Other than our Type-89s, what equipment did we bring for this mission?" Hagane asked.

"You have two MK3 hand grenades, [\(13\)](#) Sergeant. Everyone else has four Type-06 rifle grenades." [\(14\)](#)

"Sergeant," Kaiba interrupted. "I'm begging you, please come up with some miracle plan to get us home alive! There are so many girls left for me to fool around with! Damn it, look at how much I'm shaking! I could pull the trigger any second now!"

Kaiba had always excelled at putting the squadron at ease with his careless attitude. Yet now, even his voice sounded hoarse.

We can't defeat that thing with our current equipment, Hagane thought.

"All right, let's fall back quietly," he said, finding his resolve. "If the monster attacks us, keep retreating while firing off a barrage of bullets. Once we're at the tide pool, move to the corner entrance. As soon as that thing enters the area, launch your grenades all at once, pushing it back. Afterwards, we'll escape down the passageway and keep running."

"What if our grenades don't push it back?" Sawatari asked.

Hagane shrugged. "In that case, all of us will have to tackle it."

"I'm not much of a sumo wrestler," Sawatari replied with a chuckle.

Turning towards Iori, Hagane gave her instructions with a serious expression. "Listen up. Once the monster falls back, keep running towards the entrance. Don't look back for even a moment."

"Understood," she replied.

Positioning themselves in the corner, Hagane and his men got into firing formation. At the entrance, they could see the first sliver of the monster.

"Prepare to fire!" Hagane shouted.

"Preparing to fire!" his squad responded in unison.

When the monster's body came into full view, Hagane's voice rang throughout the area. "Fire!"

Alongside his voice, the soldiers launched four rifle grenades. All the projectiles slammed directly into the monster's head, exploding. Even so...

“Not even a scratch...” Hagane muttered.

Hardly retreating, the monster showed no signs of damage. Now that the situation had come to this, Hagane’s squadron had no other choice. They would have to focus solely on allowing Iori to escape.

“We’ll keep aggroing the boss, leading him to the corner of the room,” Hagane said. “In the meantime, use that opportunity to escape outside through the entrance.”

“Huh?” Iori asked. “What about you?”

“Our job is to protect the lives of civilians.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry. We won’t be killed that easily.” Wearing a genial smile, Hagane patted Iori on the shoulder. “All right, time to begin the operation.”

Firing their guns in burst mode, the four soldiers led the monster deeper into the room. Just as Hagane had planned, the creature moved away from the entrance, allowing Iori to switch places with it. Despite their current situation, the sight of her escaping filled the squadron with relief. They had fulfilled this mission’s minimum requirements.

“Looks like we might complete this mission,” Kaiba noted.

“Um, you do realize we’re on the brink of total annihilation, right?” Sawatari replied. “But at the last moment, we could split up, fleeing on either side of the monster.”

Kaiba nodded to the sparkling blue surface of the water. “We could also try diving in there.”

“Not a bad idea, but do you think you can swim faster than a mermaid?”

“Ah. It’s the fate of us handsome beasts to be chased by women, alive or dead.”

“Handsome beast? Looked in the mirror lately?”

Even in the face of death, the squad mates continued joking. Either mortality seemed like a distant concept, or they’d somehow attained enlightenment.

"No matter who goes down, don't turn around," Hagane ordered.

"Concentrate on saving your own skin, and run as fast as you can."

"Yes, sir!" the squad responded in unison.

Steeling themselves, the soldiers stared down the monster. However, upon seeing Lori standing opposite them, everyone gaped in astonishment.

"What hell is that girl doing?!" Hagane shouted.

Standing at the entrance to the room, Lori gripped her brother's knife, facing down the monster. "There are probably a million things you'd like to say to us," she said to the creature.

"What are you doing?!" Hagane cried. "Get out of here right now!"

As if she hadn't heard, Lori continued speaking. "Despite being the ones to summon you, the humans who called you to the mortal realm treated you terribly. Still, everyone here has a life to return to."

Despite doing her best to control it, Lori had gathered an overpowering amount of magnetic force. All around her, the pebbles containing magnetic substances began dancing into the air.

"S-Sergeant..." Kaiba stammered. "Wh-What's going on?"

Lori's large knife now floated by her side, vibrating in short, repeated spasms. "Your precious friend left this world a long time ago," she said. "It's time for you to return home as well."

As if in response, the monster turned towards Lori, opening its fanged mouth wide. Then, it let forth an incomprehensible roar.

"Forgive me," Lori said.

When she finished speaking, something shot towards the mermaid, producing a deafening bang. In addition to creating a sonic boom, the knife ripped the monster's upper body into pieces, blowing it apart.

Aghast, the squadron watched the mermaid's bones splash into the water. Its lower body then transformed into black particles, melting into the blue light

shining from the water's surface.

Tira served as boundaries between the mortal and divine realms. Through the ocean beyond the tide pool, the god and its vessel could surely return home.

As her consciousness rapidly slipped into darkness, Lori felt a strange sense of satisfaction.

Yoyogi Dungeon

This man might have experienced something similar to me, Lori thought. If so, I wouldn't be surprised if he had some sort of powerful ability. Like creating skill orbs, for instance.

"By any chance, did you—" Lori began.

"First Lieutenant Kimitsu!" someone called out to her.

"Look," Yoshimura said, acting as though he'd been saved from the jaws of death. "Your team is calling for you."

Studying his face, Lori broke into a smile. "Well then, I'll hear your story another time."

Afterwards, she raced after her team.

"Another time?!" I repeated.

What does she mean by "my story"? Either way, I'm keeping my distance from any elite SDF members. Yep, never going anywhere near her again.

With these thoughts in mind, I reassessed my outfit. Before anyone could comment on it again, I headed back to my new home without diving.

Okinawa, 2015 (A Few Days Later)

Nishihara, Nakagami District (Uehara Street)

Hagane stepped out of his car and into the parking lot. Despite it being almost evening, the scorching heat of the sun still beat down upon him. From the high

ground of Ryukyu University Hospital, he could see the Pacific Ocean stretching out in the distance.

“Sure is hot,” Hagane muttered, heading towards the hospital ward.

As he entered the building, the cool air felt pleasant upon his flushed skin. Despite already knowing the room number, he stopped by the nurse’s station, and after going through all the formalities, he started walking again. Checking the room’s nameplate, he knocked on the door.

“Come on in,” the patient called.

Opening the door, Hagane found Iori sitting up in bed, her complexion much healthier than before.

“You look well,” he said.

“Hello there, Mr. Hagane. Well, I wasn’t sick or anything.”

“After collapsing, you slept for two whole days. Even if you weren’t sick, your condition was still cause for concern.”

“Sorry for making you worry. And thanks.”

“So long as you’re healthy, I’ve got no complaints.”

Outside the window, the distant ocean sparkled beneath the still-strong rays of the setting sun.

“Why didn’t you run away at the end?” Hagane asked abruptly.

For a moment, Iori didn’t understand the question. Yet when the meaning fell into place, she scratched the tip of her nose, feeling embarrassed. “Leaving others to die when you have the means to save them? That doesn’t sound very Japanese to me.”

“Now see here, that’s a problem,” Hagane spoke with a strained laugh. “We can’t have the people we’re supposed to rescue disobeying orders.”

“My apologies.”

“Speaking of which, if you hadn’t defeated that monster in a single blow, what had you planned on doing?”

“Hmm,” Iori mused. “I didn’t think that far ahead. Still, I only had one idea for

driving something back to Yomi. And that was to pelt it with peaches.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s from the *Kojiki*. At Yomotsu Hirasaka, the goddess Izanagi drove evil spirits back to the land of the dead by hurling peaches at them.”

She’d used myth as the basis for her actions? For one moment, Lori’s words rendered Hagane speechless. Yet when he considered the very existence of dungeons, a sigh escaped his lips. Perhaps that *had* been the right answer. Since the appearance of dungeons, myth had started blending with reality, taking on new life. Because of this, Lori’s explanation didn’t sound too unusual. Thinking back on what had occurred inside that cavern, Hagane couldn’t blame her for relying on old myths.

“So, where did you find peaches in this season?” he asked.

“On the handle of my survival knife. It was a gift from my brother.”

“Come again?”

Lori told Hagane about the knife from Okayama, which her brother had forced upon her.

“On the handle, there’s an engraving of Momotaro being born from a peach,” she explained.

“So, an old myth led you to believe that a peach-engraved knife would slay a monster? You had nothing else to support this idea?”

“I suppose not...”

Indeed, Lori had possessed no other basis for her actions. Upon recalling the engraving on the knife’s handle, the idea of using peaches to repel evil spirits had taken hold. The possibility of failure hadn’t even crossed her mind. Perhaps Miyagusuku’s grandmother had offered her this suggestion. After all, the deceased yuta wouldn’t want her old friend to kill her grandson.

“My brother forced that knife onto me as a good luck charm, and in the end, it actually protected us. Still, I lost the knife itself. I wonder if my brother will be mad at me...”

Hagane found Lori’s despondent attitude oddly amusing. Suppressing a laugh,

he offered a suggestion. “Well then, as thanks for saving our lives, my squadron will gift you a new knife.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Of course.”

“You’re a lifesaver. I have no idea how to buy another one of those knives.”

When facing the dungeon boss, Iori had seemed possessed by divinity. Yet seeing the happy expression on her face, she now looked like an ordinary college girl. That being said, her power hadn’t been an illusion. After all, the words “Magnetic Field Manipulation” had been engraved upon her D-Card.

Remembering why he’d come here, Hagane changed the topic. “What are your plans after graduation?”

“Let’s see. I’m not working on any research important enough to stay in the lab. I’ll probably receive a job offer and start working for some company. After that—”

“Would you like to come back with me?”

“...Huh? What?!”

In response to Hagane’s statement, which invited misunderstanding, Iori turned bright red.

Surely, he couldn’t have meant that.

Realizing what he’d said, a flustered Hagane added further context. “D-Don’t get the wrong idea! That’s not what I meant! By ‘come back with me,’ I meant to the JDAG!”

“The JDAG...?” Iori repeated, her mouth agape. After regaining her composure, she continued speaking, seeming a touch sulky. “Well, I thought you meant something like that. This is what you want, right?”

Pulling out a chain around her neck, Iori revealed her D-Card.

“Certainly, we could use your power,” Hagane confirmed. “However, I’m inviting you to join us because of what you said earlier.”

“What was that?”

“Not leaving others to die when you have the means to save them.”

“Oh, I see.”

“How about it?” Hagane asked.

“I’m not strong enough to join the SDF. Plus, the officer candidacy tests for next year have already ended, haven’t they?”

Hearing this, Hagane felt hopeful. “How do you know that?”

The SDF only held its officer candidacy test once a year in May, and those who passed wouldn’t be enlisted until next April. Except for those who had always intended to join the SDF, most college students weren’t aware of this schedule. Normally, a person wouldn’t imagine the exam being held so early. Thus, when students decided to take the test, many of them ended up falling a year behind. Even so, that might have been the perfect amount of time to beat oneself back into shape.

“Oh, well...” Iori began. “Considering what happened, I couldn’t help but feel curious. Plus, I have this power now.”

The reddening sky dyed Iori’s cheeks crimson, her embarrassed features reflected in the window.

“If I’m able to have you approved as an exception, would you take the test?” Hagane asked.

After all, the cavern had been Japan’s first fully captured dungeon, and Iori had played a central role in this feat. If Hagane twisted his superiors’ arms ever so gently, perhaps he could speed things along.

Why is he going to such lengths for me? Iori wondered.

“There’s no guarantee that I’ll pass,” she answered simply.

“Oh, I’m not worried about that.”

Iori had been gifted something of the divine, overcoming the panic-driven madness of a dungeon. In the end, she’d chosen to fight of her own volition. Looking at her profile, Hagane recalled the story of Miyagusuku’s grandmother. This young woman named Iori reminded him of a Ryukyuan shaman. Considering how the situation had turned out, perhaps this series of events had

been fate.

After all, this was Okinawa. On these islands, many women became priestesses in service to the gods.

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Message Board [Where On Earth] D-Powers 57 [Are These Orbs Coming From?]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-0914

From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appears and begins auctioning off orbs.

Are they swindlers? Or saviors of the world?

Next thread at 930.

2: Anonymous Explorer

First. But man, D-Powers' auctions are getting out of hand. At this point, we *auc* to *shun* them.

3: Anonymous Explorer

Second. Yeah, not even two weeks have passed since the last auction, and they're already holding another one.

Where the hell are they getting these orbs from?

>2 Also, did you change *ought* to *auc*? That's a stretch.

4: Anonymous Explorer

Plus, they're selling one called Super Recovery. It's not even listed on the JDA database.

5: Anonymous Explorer

Seriously? Another undiscovered orb?

6: Anonymous Explorer

>3 I will defend this pun to the grave. Shun the nonbeliever!

7: Anonymous Explorer

Yoyo D only produces four orbs a year, right? No matter how you look at it, four every two weeks is just bizarre.

Sure, we don't know when they collected the first four, but another four in two weeks goes against all common sense.

8: Anonymous Explorer

As soon as they started holding auctions, common sense flew out the window. Are they using the black market or something?

>6 lmao, I can sense your desperashun!

9: Anonymous Explorer

Is there even a black market for orbs?

10: Anonymous Explorer

Maybe there's a shadowy organization belonging to the JDA.

Like 7D▽.

11: Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, Seventy Turn A. That sounds cool.

12: Anonymous Explorer

Even parties on Team Simon's level couldn't find four orbs in a month. One in two months would be difficult.

Seventy Turn A. Badass.

13: Anonymous Explorer

Maybe they have a copy-and-paste skill.

14: Anonymous Explorer

You've been reading too many light novels.

15: Anonymous Explorer

Who knows, maybe they're using alchemy.

16: Anonymous Explorer

If you worked ten parties on Team Simon's level to the bone, maybe you could come up with that many orbs.

17: Anonymous Explorer

>16 Ten parties on Team Simon's level don't exist. You've pretty much proved it's impossible.

18: Anonymous Explorer

Here's the weird thing about D-Powers. Without the slightest hesitation, they're auctioning off these extremely rare orbs, right? But at the same time, they're not selling potions or any other dungeon-produced items. Those are rare too, but there are plenty more of them in circulation.

19: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, but other parties can sell potions, and compared to selling orbs, D-Powers wouldn't make nearly as much money.

20: Anonymous Explorer

They're the one and only sales channel.

Even if someone else found an orb, they wouldn't be able to imitate D-Powers.

21: Anonymous Explorer

No other organization in the world can auction off orbs.

22: Anonymous Explorer

Do you think intelligence agencies in the US, China, Russia, and Israel will start looking into their secrets soon?

23: Anonymous Explorer

And this guy's seen too many movies.

24: Anonymous Explorer

You think? After the last incident, it seems like they've already started moving.

25: Anonymous Explorer

Fact is stranger than fiction, after all.

26: Anonymous Explorer

And since the auction, Yoyogi has been swarming with superstars.

27: Anonymous Explorer

Are you talking about Simon?

28: Anonymous Explorer

Oh, I saw him too! His aura is totally different in person.

29: Anonymous Explorer

It's not just Team Simon. Looking at the Yoyo D thread, Narashino's first squadron is there as well.

30: Anonymous Explorer

Iori was there? My one true love!

31: Anonymous Explorer

Hey, you guys are getting too off topic.

32: Anonymous Explorer

Well, let's hope no one involved in this situation dies.

33: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, no joke...

November 15, 2018 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

“Huh?” Miyoshi said. “You’re up early, Kei.”

Opening the door to the first-floor office, I found Miyoshi already eating breakfast. It felt as though we were barely using our own dining rooms upstairs.

“My new bed felt so wonderful that I fell asleep right away,” I explained.

“And then you woke up early?”

“Pretty much.”

“Would you like breakfast? I can whip up an omelet.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

While toasting bread, Miyoshi fried up some bacon, beginning to make the omelet. Sitting at the dining table, I watched her absentmindedly.

This sorta feels like being newlyweds, doesn’t it?

Nope, no such thought ever crossed my mind. I swear on my mother’s grave.

While eating breakfast, I brought up a new topic. “Say, Miyoshi.”

“Yes?”

“Have you tried using Storage?”

“Yep, sure have. It reminds me of a magic trick.” Without further ado, Miyoshi made the coffee cup on the table disappear, returning it there a moment later. “Unlike Vault, Storage doesn’t stop time completely, but it does have an interesting effect.”

She then brought out two stopwatches from her desk, starting them at the same time. Apparently, she’d bought these from a one-hundred-yen shop to use in an experiment.

“I’ll store this one,” Miyoshi said, making one stopwatch disappear. “Then we wait one minute.”

“You could earn a living from sleight of hand.”

“By making small objects disappear and reappear? At most, I could perform at a magic bar on the outskirts of town.”

When Miyoshi withdrew the stopwatch a minute later, it was thirty seconds behind the other device.

“It slows down time by half?” I asked.

“On the surface, it sounds amazing, right? But from a practical standpoint, it’s probably not very useful.”

“What are you talking about? This could double the shelf life of food, for crying out loud!”

“Compared to Vault’s full time-stopping abilities, that’s nothing. It would just make managing things more complicated.”

“That’s because we’ve already had experience with Vault,” I pointed out. “Taken on its own merits, Storage is amazing. You could even preserve orbs for two days.”

“Oh, you’re right. We live in the age of private jets. With two days, you could deliver an orb anywhere on Earth.”

“Exactly. But I’m more interested in Storage’s actual storage capacity.”

Did size or weight determine the limit? Was there anything that *couldn’t* be stored?

“The other day, I tested out what I could and couldn’t place inside Vault,” I admitted.

“Interesting.”

“Much like the conventional item boxes from fantasy novels, I didn’t expect it to hold living creatures, but...”

“What? Something with a heartbeat went inside?”

“Yeah, but it didn’t work on humans. Incidentally, I tried it on you.”

“What?!” Miyoshi cried. “Kei, you’re the worst!”

“Honestly, I was praying for nothing to happen. If humans could go inside Vault, a new question would arise. What if I put *myself* inside?”

If Miyoshi had gone inside, experimenting with placing myself inside Vault would have driven me mad. After all, time stopped within its confines. In all likelihood, I would have been trapped in there for all eternity. But of course, the possibility of seeing thousands of years into the future would also have arisen.

“In conclusion, I couldn’t store dogs or cats,” I said. “But a cricket did go inside.”

Miyoshi tilted her head. “So, can you not store anything above a certain level of intelligence?”

“I can’t be sure, but maybe it doesn’t work on mammals. Oh, and I was also able to store a fish.”

“If intelligence is the key, maybe you could put me inside while I’m sleeping.”

“I’m afraid to test that out. We don’t know what would happen if you woke up in there. Regardless, it probably wouldn’t work.”

“Seeing as Vault stops time, I probably wouldn’t even wake up to begin with...” Miyoshi said. “Do you think storing something has to do with nervous system complexity?”

“I think it’s related to something more metaphysical, like consciousness. But since slimes wouldn’t go in either, there must be restrictions on the metaphysical as well.”

“Seems like an interesting area to explore.”

“Yeah, it’s interesting, but it doesn’t sound very useful. Anyway, I was able to store some pretty lengthy objects. Basically, since nothing was too long to fit in Vault, the restriction must be on mass.”

“Mass *is* energy,” Miyoshi agreed.

“So, here’s what I ultimately discovered. Vault can store more than ten tons but less than twenty.”

“And how did you research *that*?”

“By going to a parking lot for transit buses in the middle of the night.”

“You what now?” Miyoshi asked.

“Most large-scale transit buses in Japan are Mitsubishi Fuso Aero Stars. Those vehicles weigh around ten tons.”

“Let me get this straight. In the middle of the night, you tested out Vault by using a long-ass line of transit buses like counterweights?”

“That about sums it up. The first bus went inside, but the second one didn’t.”

“Jeez.” Exasperated, Miyoshi tossed the last piece of bread into her mouth. “What would you have done if someone found you?”

The marmalade she’d used on the toast was quite delicious. Despite being homemade, it had come from a local bakery. Yes, Miyoshi liked to eat, but she could also be surprisingly lazy. Though she didn’t slack off when looking for a good meal, she put absolutely no effort into making food herself. To this, Miyoshi had offered the excuse, “Well, you can’t beat the culinary skills of a pro chef!”

“No one’s expecting a bus to disappear,” I pointed out. “But here’s what I’m guessing. Vault stops time and has a small storage capacity, relatively speaking. On the other hand, Storage has a large capacity and slows down time by half.”

“Well then, I’ll test Storage out in the near future. Should I go to the same parking lot?”

“There are around twenty buses there, so it’s a good spot for experimenting. I’ll give you the address later.”

“Got it.”

“Anyhow,” I said. “If the materials for our dungeon base camp exceed ten tons, I might not be able to carry it all.”

“What kind of materials are you talking about?”

“I want to build a livable space within a container in advance. That way, we can take it out of Storage and use it in the dungeon.”

“That’s a brilliant idea. Mind bogglingly lazy, but still brilliant.”

“Oh, pipe down,” I grumbled. “Still, figuring out how to circulate water inside a closed container seems pretty difficult.”

"Kei, one or two experiences with the great outdoors wouldn't hurt you. But anyway, does this have to do with the order you asked me to place the other day?"

Right. I asked Miyoshi to buy us an RV.

"Were you able to get it?" I asked.

"I asked a well-known Japanese manufacturer for any RV they might have on hand. But no matter how much they hurry, it won't be ready until November 21st."

"Well, beggars can't be choosers. In that case, we'll start looking for the language orb once the RV comes in. Until then, I'll keep up my steady work as a slime executioner."

"Think you'll earn the 'Mortal Enemy to Slimes' title anytime soon?"

I scoffed. "Doing just fine without that, thanks. Speaking of which, do dungeons even award titles?"

"I've heard of people having nicknames, but never titles... And even if they were displayed on D-Cards, how could you tell the difference between titles and skills?"

Yeah. As far as I know, D-Cards only list your skills.

"Still, won't slimes just eat the RV while we're asleep?" Miyoshi asked.

"Like we talked about before, cables are a bust in Yoyo D," I answered. "No matter where you lay them, they always wind up severed in the first floor's slime areas. But apparently, there aren't many slimes on the deeper levels, and RVs are sturdier than defenseless cables. We should be okay for one night."

"We also need to be careful of monster attacks. The vehicle's gonna be as flimsy as paper to them."

"You're right about that. All things considered, I'd like to place the RV in a titanium box."

"For now, I asked the manufacturer to reinforce the body of the RV with metal sheets."

“We’re going full *Mad Max*?!” I cried.

“According to the manufacturer, the RV won’t pass inspection, but it doesn’t need to run properly, does it?”

“Nope. And after that, we just need a water source... How did your experiments with Water Magic go?”

“I could produce an infinite amount of water. It poured out like a river.”

“Was it good to drink?” I asked.

“Hmm,” Miyoshi mused. “In short, the skill produces pure water. It’s okay to drink, but it doesn’t taste very good. Also, I don’t know when the skill might become unusable.”

“Yeah, there are no guarantees with magic... For now, why don’t we buy some boxes of mineral water as well?”

“I’ll order a hundred cases from Amazon.”

“That’ll be around twelve hundred kilograms plus whatever else we place in Vault, right? Sounds good, but we also need to think about food.”

“Can’t we just pack a thousand bento boxes into Vault?” Miyoshi suggested.

“How many days do you plan on us diving, exactly?”

“Until we find the orb, right?”

“Definitely not. For now, let’s plan on this expedition lasting seven to ten days.”

Miyoshi frowned. “You won’t be able to defeat one hundred shamans in that amount of time.”

“About that. I’m going to defeat any goatman belonging to the moon clan. So long as the hundredth one is a shaman, I should get the orb.”

“And if that doesn’t work out?”

“I’ll head home with tears streaming down my face.”

Laughing, Miyoshi began cleaning up after herself. “Now that’s my Kei.”

As for the bento... I’ll go to the department store basement and buy up as

many side dishes as possible. Here's hoping for some freshly made ones.

November 16, 2018 (Friday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

As of today, the second auction had come to an end. The deadline had been midnight in Japan. Curious about the results, I descended the stairs to the office early in the morning. Apparently working on something, Miyoshi was already there with the lights on.

“Oh, good morning,” she greeted me.

“Morning. You’re up early. Did you pull an all-nighter?”

“Pretty much. I got caught up working on the code for status measurements.”

“Wow. Did you learn nothing from our former workplace?”

“Yeah, but this is all for *our* benefit,” Miyoshi noted. “That changes everything.”

“I suppose so.”

Miyoshi stopped working to make coffee. “Speaking of which, are you going to raise your stats before we dive?”

Oh, right. Following the exam at Midori’s lab, I hadn’t touched my stats at all. Since bounce-swoosh-thudding didn’t require high stats, the thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“Probably should,” I said. “Just to be on the safe side.”

“In that case, why don’t we measure each status up to one hundred in increments of ten?”

As the numbers increased, how would the measurement values change? That definitely piqued my curiosity.

“Sounds interesting,” I agreed. “I’ll round out each status to thirty, bringing each one up to a hundred in increments of ten. That will equal...forty-seven measurements. Well, if I use all my SP, we won’t be able to do these measurements ever again. Let’s give it a shot.”

“The more foundational data we have, the better. I’m counting on you!”

“Still, forty-three measurements will cost ninety million yen. Wow. Our perception of money is growing more warped by the day.”

“Yeah, but there’s no need to worry about our funds.”

“True enough,” I said. “Anyway, I’m off to play with my slime buddies for a while. If you don’t mind, test out your new skills while I’m gone.”

“Got it,” Miyoshi replied, sending a quick email to Midori. “By the way, there’s something I wanted to discuss.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d like to invest in Midori’s company.”

“Oh?”

Apparently, Miyoshi had extracted the necessary measurement values from the data we’d recently obtained. Using this information, she wanted to create a prototype status-measuring device.

“Just a device?” I asked.

“Yep. Afterwards, I’ll use the device on you, allowing me to fine-tune it into a model capable of quantifying statuses.”

Though AI seemed better suited to this task, only I knew the precise values of my stats. Consequently, we couldn’t just measure a large number of people, feeding the patterns to an AI. For now, we would have to rely upon heuristic adjustments to the code. Regardless, Miyoshi had a good sense for these things.

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “But once you develop this device, it’ll be copied in no time, right?”

“To prevent that, I’ll configure the device’s terminal to only contain the sensor, the display panel, and the means for electronic communication.”

“Are you going to use the same voice-recognition technologies as Google and Amazon?”

“That’s the plan. The measured data will be sent to a data center, and the user will only receive their results on the display.”

In that case, no one would be able to analyze the foundational parts of the software. Someone *could* provide the device with an array of values, using the results to inductively reason out the formulas. Even so, if we cut off unauthorized access, copying our device would prove difficult.

“Should we rent a cloud from some other company?” I asked.

“No, that could lead to our data being leaked. For the initial transmissions, receptions, and precalculations, we’ll use something like Amazon Web Services. That being said, we’ll host the final results of each calculation on our office’s computers.”

“Do we have the cables for that?”

“Since not many people will be accessing our computers at first, we won’t need bandwidth,” Miyoshi assured me. “So, if we install ten consumer-use cables of ten gigabytes each, that should be more than enough, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, this is something of a test run, after all.”

“Later, if everything stays on track, and we start turning a profit, we can sign a contract for a leased line.”

“Makes sense.”

“And with this system, we can camouflage our own stats,” Miyoshi added.

“What do you mean?”

“Kei, do you not understand the implications here? If we sell these devices to the general public, people will measure *your* statuses.”

Oh, right! And since I’m the basis for the device, my stats will show up with the highest precision!

“Yikes,” I said. “Didn’t consider that at all... Still, would anyone be able to identify an individual with this data?”

“Well, you *are* the basis for it. Everyone else aside, someone could definitely identify *you* with the right information.”

“By all means, let’s use this system then. Oh, and I’d like the device to be a

pair of glasses. What do you think?”

“Glasses?” Miyoshi repeated. “Are you thinking of scouter from *DBZ*?”

“What else? Pretty cool concept, eh?”

“I guess so, but with glasses, the wearer could secretly scan as many people as they wanted.”

“We could reduce the device’s accuracy, only displaying an overall value. That way, it could be treated like a toy.”

“Seriously, a toy?” Miyoshi asked. “This device could assign a value to each individual human... Sure, it might be convenient, but I hope it doesn’t lead to discrimination.”

“Yeah, I can imagine some jerk yelling, ‘Your power level is closer to nine than nine thousand!’ That would be the worst.”

“I can see that going viral.”

Yeah, she’s right. In fact, I’d probably wind up as the jerk shouting DBZ memes at people.

“Yeah, maybe we should just forget the whole scouter toy idea,” I said.

“Good thinking. Let’s make two types of devices. One will look like a speed gun with a simple display. The other will be a fixed installation that provides accurate results. Data can be transferred via Wi-Fi or a SIM used for communications.”

“Now there’s a harmonious solution. Sounds like it’ll be cheap to make too.”

Still, Miyoshi wants to invest in Midori’s company?

“By investment, you don’t mean a loan, right?” I asked. “Since we don’t know what the company’s stocks look like, having them issue us new shares could be difficult. But seeing as Midori mentioned something about venture capital, maybe they would be willing to do so.”

“Supposedly, they have no intention of issuing new shares. At face value, you can buy one thousand of their stocks for ten thousand yen.”

“If Midori was the only shareholder, purchasing stock might be easy. But if the

university and laboratory also have stakes in the company, it could cause a dispute over the ratio of shares. And anyway, our measurement device isn't directly related to the company's current work. Creating a separate, joint venture company might be a better idea."

"I'll consult with Midori about everything we just discussed," Miyoshi said. "How much money are you okay with me spending?"

"No matter how much we end up investing in the end, one billion yen should suffice for the time being. But I do have one condition. The company needs to prioritize creating a prototype of our device. And it can only include the sensors related to status quantification."

"Got it. I'll bring this to Midori later."

"Thanks," I said. "Well then, I'll keep dungeon diving to earn funds for all our ventures... Speaking of which, how did the auction go?"

Originally, I'd woken up early to check on that thing. Woops.

"Physical Resistance is surprisingly popular," Miyoshi informed me. "And it seems so basic to me."

2,422,000,000 JPY

2,658,000,000 JPY

2,855,000,000 JPY

Final prices aside, the winning bidders of these three Physical Resistances formed an incredible lineup. Simon from the United States, Huang from China, and William from England. These explorers were ranked number three, four, and six in the entire world.

Other members of Team Simon occupied the fifth, seventh, and eighth ranks. If Simon's whole party came to receive their orb, the top eight explorers would be assembled in Yoyogi. Well, except for Dimitri, the world's second-ranked explorer. Sure, these bidders might have been using their countries' military budgets, but this auction had been a contest between the single digit explorers.

“They’re all top-ranked explorers,” I said. “Past experience must have taught them the necessity of Physical Resistance. By the way, what do you think happens if a person uses the same skill orb twice?”

“Wanna try it out?”

Hmm. It would probably turn out fine, but what if I landed myself in a load of trouble for no reason whatsoever?

“If the need arises, I’ll test it out sooner or later,” I replied.

If using the same orb twice *did* cause problems, I would need to test this on a skill unlikely to give me too much grief. Maybe something detection-related.

At that moment, Miyoshi’s phone buzzed.

“Looks like Midori’s awake...” Reading the email, Miyoshi gave me an update. “They don’t have enough reagents for forty-three tests. If she orders more now, they should be ready by the nineteenth. How does that sound?”

“The nineteenth is Monday, right? Give her the OK.”

“Roger that. Oh, and about Super Recovery...”

“What’s up?”

Miyoshi brought up the winning bid page for Super Recovery. “Who do you think bought *this* orb?”

5,543,000,000 JPY

“Five and a half billion?!” I cried. “What’s their ID?”

“A normal search doesn’t turn up any hits. Even though the other competitors used non-personal IDs, the winning bidder’s ID *did* fall into the personal category. Do you think they used a proxy?”

“In other words, this person isn’t a famous soldier, a dungeon capturing agency, or a corporate entity?”

“Precisely. Still, if this ID belongs to a proxy, we’d have no way of knowing.”

“We’ve already privatized the IDs on the website,” I said. “What’s the point of

setting up a proxy?"

"Honestly, I have a bad feeling about this."

"What do you mean?"

"This orb is called Super Recovery. More importantly, it's an unknown skill with unidentified powers."

"Your point being?" I pressed.

"If I had to guess... A wealthy person with a family member suffering from an incurable disease probably bought this orb."

"And if the orb doesn't work..."

"The buyer will turn their misplaced resentment on us," Miyoshi finished.

"Plus, this person could have an obscene amount of power."

Yeah, she might be onto something.

"Speaking of which, what kind of functions does Super Recovery have?" I asked.

"I can only speak to its surface-level functions, but right now, I feel great. Even though I pulled an all-nighter, I barely felt tired. So long as I stayed alert."

"Sounds like one hell of a dangerous drug."

"Also..."

Trailing off, Miyoshi withdrew a box cutter from her desk drawer, slicing the tip of her finger.

"Hey!" I shouted.

"Settle down, Kei. Take a look at this."

Watching me panic from the corner of her eye, Miyoshi wiped the tip of her finger with a tissue. When she finished, I could only see a faint trace of where the cut had been.

"What the?!" I cried out.

"While avoiding cars yesterday, I caught my arm on a nail sticking out from a sign on the shoulder of the road. If the wound had been serious, I don't know

what might have happened, but... It feels like I'm gradually transforming into something greater than human."

The description often used for skill orbs came unbidden to my lips. "...An item taking humanity to the next stage of evolution."

"Also," Miyoshi said, changing the subject. "The winning bidder seems to be in a huge rush. They want to receive the orb today."

"Today?! As in right now?"

If this person didn't live in Tokyo, they must have made the trip before winning the auction. What an astounding level of enthusiasm.

I sure hope they're not on death's door...

"Yep," Miyoshi replied. "Our appointment is at ten o'clock."

"You've gotta be kidding me! If the auction had dragged on due to an extension, what had they planned on doing? And we only have three hours to get ready!"

In a great hurry, we prepared to go to Ichigaya.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"This is Mr. Ahmed," announced a man who looked like a butler. He was slender, middle-aged, and appeared to be of Anglo-Saxon descent. "He is the winner of the auction."

The man named Ahmed appeared to be in his forties. Wearing an expensive suit, he sported a fine, nearly full-faced mustache. Turning towards Miyoshi and me, he bowed his head quietly. A young woman in a wheelchair sat next to him. Looking downwards, she wore a mask reminiscent of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Once again, Miyoshi's intuition proves correct.

As this thought crossed my mind, something else still puzzled me. If the girl simply had external wounds, wouldn't a potion suffice? He didn't need to gamble on an orb.

With Naruse acting as the JDA's guarantor, the actual sale went off without a hitch. However, no sooner did Naruse declare the trade finished than the butler spoke to us.

"Mr. Ahmed has one more favor to ask of you."

Feeling suspicious, I looked to Naruse. "A favor?"

Naruse shook her head, indicating that she didn't know anything. Afterwards, she took charge of the conversation. "I'm sorry, but the orb sale has concluded. Is there some sort of problem?"

The butler began discussing something with Ahmed rapidly.

"Miyoshi, what language is that?" I asked.

"I would assume it's Hindi, but...it sounds somewhat different."

The girl in the wheelchair, who had been silent until now, answered our question. "It's Marathi."

"Oh, do you understand Japanese?" I asked.

"Just a little." Afterwards, she added in English, "*But I'm more fluent in this language.*"

Miyoshi quickly Googled some information on Marathi. "As one of India's official languages, it's spoken by ninety million people," she said, also teaching me a few of their most common words.

Of course she's better at English than Japanese. English is a semi-official language in India, after all.

"Well, I'm better at Japanese," I gave my belated reply in English.

"Never would've guessed," the girl answered in Japanese.

"So, what are they squabbling about?"

"Dungeon. Want you to take me."

"Huh?"

Thinking I hadn't understood, the girl spoke again in English. "*My father would like you to take me to a dungeon.*"

Say what?

“Miyoshi,” I said. “Did she just say what I think she said?”

“Unfortunately, I heard the same thing.”

Taking a disabled person to a dungeon? Wouldn’t asking the military be the much better, safer option?

“*Why does your father want that?*” I asked.

“*It’s simple,*” the girl replied. “*I don’t have a dungeon card.*”

Those words rendered us speechless. Almost certainly, Ahmed wanted his daughter to use the Super Recovery orb. Unfortunately, the person in question had never acquired a D-Card.

“*Hold on a second,*” I said.

I brought Miyoshi to the corner of the room. The butler, Ahmed, and Naruse were still discussing various things.

“Miyoshi, what do you think?” I asked.



“About her father asking us to help her acquire a D-Card within twenty-four hours? Obviously, it’s impossible.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“But since he brought up the topic after the trade, he must have some kind of agenda.”

“Speaking of which,” I said. “What do you think of the butler-looking guy? Seems kind of arrogant, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. This is just a guess, but...” Miyoshi trailed off.

“What is it?”

“Doesn’t he seem like a government agent from England or the US?”

“Based on his pronunciation and ability to speak Marathi, he’s probably from England, don’t you think?”

“It’s possible,” Miyoshi agreed. “We still haven’t told anyone the truth about our orb preservation technology, right?”

“Nope. I keep insisting that we’re finding them by coincidence.”

“You say that like it’s not our necks on the line. But anyway, they’ve already verified the orb count. If we accept this request and hand over the orb in another twenty-four hours, we might as well be confirming our ability to preserve them.”

Yeah, that made sense. I didn’t know whether to call this ploy clever or cunning, but either way, I applauded their efforts to confirm our orb preservation abilities. Of course, if we didn’t accept the request, nothing more would come of their probing.

“Do you think Mr. Ahmed is involved in this plan?” I asked.

“Even if he’s in on the plan, he’s also desperate to heal his daughter. I’m sure of that.”

I looked from Ahmed—who was still arguing with Naruse—to the girl sitting quietly in her wheelchair. Seeing both of them, I agreed with Miyoshi.

“Better yet,” I suggested. “We could let the orb disappear in their possession,

selling them another one later..."

"Huh?" Miyoshi asked. "Didn't we use the last Super Recovery the other day?"

"The cooldown time is only twelve days. I should be able to pick up another one soon."

Miyoshi looked at the girl in the wheelchair. "That's one solution—but either way, you still need to help her acquire a D-Card. Can you do that?"

Explorers acquired a D-Card after defeating their first monster. Despite this being the only rule, one strict condition did exist. You had to defeat the monster single-handedly. During the acquisition tours, which had been popular for a time, this condition had been thoroughly verified.

On the majority of these tours, the businessperson would provide their clients with guns, allowing them to shoot monsters from a relative distance. However, if the gun were affixed to something or supported by someone else, the explorer would fail to receive a D-Card. More surprisingly, having someone else load the bullets would lead to the same result. Even letting another person aggro the target monster would lead to a failed acquisition. In short, a higher-level explorer couldn't carry you to victory.

Likewise, a single person had to lay and activate any traps from start to finish. Furthermore, these traps would only count as a kill for a set period of time. But thankfully enough, a trap user didn't have to go so far as to create their own tools.

At a glance, these restrictions seemed harsh, but for an able-bodied person, these weren't high barriers to climb. After all, dungeons contained plenty of weak monsters.

But in this girl's case...

Returning to her side, I asked the girl a direct question. "*What's wrong with your body?*" Her father clearly wanted the Super Recovery orb to heal his daughter and take her out of the wheelchair.

In response, she looked taken aback for a moment. Nevertheless, she soon answered. "*It's mostly the right side of my body. I'm missing my right leg and*

most of my right arm. My left leg is okay, and I still have my left forearm. Fortunately, I still have the left side of my face as well.”

“Were you involved in an accident?”

“Pretty much.”

“If your father can afford this orb, why doesn’t he just buy a potion?”

“Apparently, potions won’t mend an already stabilized body,” the girl explained.

“So, the accident happened a long time ago? This might sound cruel, but perhaps you could amputate what’s left of your limbs and then use a potion.”

“Potions can reattach severed limbs, but they can’t make arms and legs grow from nothing. Even if such a potion did exist, it’s not available to civilians.”

Money could buy most things in this world. Still, no matter how much wealth a person accumulated, they could never purchase what didn’t exist. Even the first high-level potion, which had caused a sensation, had only mended the soldier’s body. Though a monster had bitten off his legs, most of his body had still existed. As such, the potion had only healed and reconnected his limbs, not regrown his entire lower body.

“By the way, what’s your name?” I asked. “Mine’s Keigo Yoshimura.”

“My name is Asha. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“How so?”

“It means ‘hope.’”

Hearing the way she spoke, I made up my mind. “Hey, Miyoshi.”

“What is it?”

“I’d like to take her to Yoyogi Dungeon.”

“Yeah, I thought you might. You’ve always had a soft spot for beautiful women.”

Beautiful? Upon closer inspection, the left half of her face did look refined. Her features reminded me of a young Katrina Kaif. Perhaps she was only half Indian.

Hearing our conversation, Asha looked up in surprise.

"So, how do you plan on having her kill a monster?" Miyoshi asked.

"We can have her use a long, thick straw," I replied. "And she can wear a boot with a thick, metal plate attached to the sole."

Miyoshi sighed. "Well, if you insist, I'll make the preparations right away."

With that, she sneaked out of the room to make a call.

"Are you really accepting our request?" Asha asked. *"Even though the British and Indian militaries turned us down?"*

The British military, eh? Looks like we were onto something.

But yeah, of course they'd turn down the request. If things went poorly, Asha could die, and everyone else could be exposed to danger. No one else could subdue the target monster, and using anesthesia on them would be out of the question as well.

"Leave everything to us," I reassured her. *"We're not just grasping at straws here."*

"I see."

Had a smile appeared on her lips?

All righty then, it's a race against the clock.

"Still, we don't have much time," I continued. *"From here on out, I need you to follow my instructions, no matter what I say."*

"Even if you tell me to strip naked and spread my legs?" Asha asked, blunt and deadpan.

"...Yeah, even that. But even if I made a request that...interesting, the people chatting over there would probably kill me, so I'll keep my mouth shut. Disappointing, huh?"

"All right. I'm trusting you, Kaygo."

"Thanks."

Afterwards, I walked over to Naruse. "What's going on here?" I asked.

“Oh, there you are, Yoshimura. Apparently, these men would like you to take the girl to Yoyogi Dungeon. Since this has nothing to do with the orb sale, I’ve explained that they can’t force you to do so, but they’re resolute about this request.”

“Understood.” Thinking back to the vocabulary list Miyoshi had shown me, I recalled the translation for ‘mister.’ Though I didn’t know the pronunciation, I could probably fudge it. “Shri Ahmed.”

Ahmed raised his eyebrows ever so slightly.

“Mr. Yoshimura,” the slender man with a butler’s air cut in. “I can speak on his be—”

“With the sale finished, *your* job is over,” I cut him off. “I’ll speak to Mr. Ahmed directly now, thank you very much.”

“What? No, I can’t allow that.”

“Naruse, can we use the small conference room next door?”

“Huh?” she asked. “Oh, yes, right away.”

Based on a previous conversation with Naruse, all of the JDA’s small conference rooms blocked radio waves to prevent eavesdropping. I gave up on preventing audio recording, as even cell phones were capable of that. Regardless, we were using this room out of the blue. Planting something there in advance would have been difficult.

“*Well then, shall we go, Mr. Ahmed?*” I asked.

Pushing Asha’s wheelchair, I forced us to relocate into the neighboring room. At the entrance, Naruse blocked the interpreter from entering, closing the door behind her. Only Ahmed, his daughter, and I were left in the room.

“*So, you want us to take your daughter to a dungeon so that she can acquire a D-Card,*” I summarized.

For the first time, Ahmed spoke to me directly. “*That’s correct.*”

“*You understand how difficult that is, don’t you?*”

“*This has nothing to do with the original sale. As part of a new request, I’m*

asking you to—”

“I don’t know where that interpreter came from, but you know this being a ‘new request’ isn’t the actual issue, right?”

At that moment, Ahmed’s face transformed from that of a businessman to a father. “...Yes, I do.”

“To get straight to the point, we’ve decided to help your daughter acquire a D-Card,” I said.

“Truly?!”

“Even so, I can’t guarantee that we’ll complete this task in twenty-four—no, more like twenty—hours.”

“I feared as much.”

“Should that happen, this orb—which you paid a fortune for—will go to waste.”

“Why?” Ahmed asked. “Didn’t you two develop orb preservation technology?”

“Did you hear that from your interpreter?”

“I did.”

“If I had to guess, such a convenient piece of technology doesn’t exist in all the world.”

“But just like you promised, the orb count of Super Recovery was below sixty minutes.”

Raising my index finger, I tapped my lips softly. “That was merely a coincidence.”

“A coincidence?”

“Indeed. Every so often, God does his job.”

At this, the corner of Asha’s mouth quirked up ever so slightly.

“I’ll do my best to finish the job in time,” I promised. “But if I’m too late, I’ll work on obtaining another Super Recovery right away.”

“Come again?” Ahmed asked.

“Of course, I won’t be able to hand it over for free.”

“I suppose not. So, how much should I pay you for helping my daughter acquire her D-Card?”

“Let’s see,” I said. “Various militaries across the world have turned down this Mission Impossible... In that case, it’s going to be quite expensive.”

“Name your price.”

“Well then, if your daughter safely acquires her D-Card, may I have the privilege of taking her out to dinner? I’ll have you foot the bill, of course.”

Ahmed furrowed his brow, as if he’d misheard me. *“...Pardon me, but I’m not familiar with Japanese humor.”*

“No jokes here, sir. By the way, aren’t Hindus vegetarian?”

“It varies. We don’t mind fish in our household. As for meat, we’ll eat animals harmful to people or crops. But only sometimes.”

Well, that’s Hinduism for you. They’re so broad-minded, you can’t summarize their precepts in a few words.

I held out my right hand. *“Then do we have a deal?”*

After hesitating for a moment, Ahmed took my hand, squeezing it firmly. With that, the deal had been struck. Exiting the small conference room, I couldn’t see the interpreter anywhere. Instead, Miyoshi jogged over to me, giving a report of the situation.

“Kei, I rented a conference space in Yoyogi. I’m having equipment and a change of clothes delivered there. Everything should be ready in three hours.”

“If you could, please have a cradleboard delivered there as well,” I said. “One with a rack and straps for carrying people. Those are sometimes used in rescue missions, right?”

“Got it. You’re going to carry Asha on your back?

“That’s the plan. Who knows what might get caught on a wheelchair? Plus, navigating a dungeon in one of those would be difficult.”

“This feels like something out of a spy movie. Exciting, isn’t it?”

“Honestly, I’d prefer not to stand out so much...” I grumbled.

“Autumn nears its end...how I long for our lost days...of idleness.”

“Um, did you just compose a haiku?”

“Yep. Pretty good, right?”

“Well, your last line was only four syllables. Maybe ‘of summer idle’ would have been better.”

With her puffed out cheeks telling me to “read the room,” Miyoshi kicked me in the leg. “I’ve said this a dozen times—but *this* is why you’re single, Kei.”

Three hours later, we’d gathered in a rental conference room of Yoyogi Dungeon. Though Ahmed had wanted to come with us, I’d made him wait in a separate room for VIPs. Until the very end, he’d wanted to have a bodyguard accompany us. I’d refused this offer, since—to put it bluntly—someone joining us would only be a hindrance.

“Asha,” I said. “*If you would, please remove your prosthetic limbs and anything else you’re wearing. Then change into the clothes we’ve provided for you.*”

“*Everything?*” she asked. “*Even my underwear?*”

“*Yep, everything.*”

Her cheeks flushing, Asha looked down. “*This is no different from being ordered to spread my legs.*”

“Miyoshi, I’ll leave the rest to you,” I said.

“That’s fine with me,” she replied. “But what’s this about spreading her legs?”

“Yeah, I’m not too sure about that. If you’re curious, ask Asha herself.”

At this, Miyoshi raised an eyebrow.

After leaving the room and shutting the door, I found Naruse waiting for me. I decided to request something difficult from her.

“Naruse. Once we’ve entered the dungeon, could you close the entrance for

at least five minutes so that no one else comes in?"

"What?" she asked. "You're asking me to seal the dungeon?

"Just say the receptionist is feeling under the weather or something. Please."

"This feels like a massive abuse of my authority..."

"Since you're acting to prevent danger, it should be aboveboard," I said. "If any foreigners end up following us, it could lead to a lot of problems."

Naruse sighed. "I suppose so..."

"Thank you so much."

"I also did a quick inspection, and in the last three hours, no foreign explorers have signed into Yoyogi Dungeon. But a few groups did enter before then."

"Got it."

I could always count on Naruse to make things convenient. Miyoshi and I had made the sudden decision to go dungeon diving three hours ago. Even if British intelligence agencies were determined to spy on us and even if they were that exceptional, organizing any Japanese allies to follow us in that brief amount of time would be difficult.

Later, the conference room door rattled open, and Miyoshi poked out her face. "We're finished getting ready."

"All right then, let's go!" I replied.

Placing Asha onto the rescue-style cradleboard, I hefted it onto my back. With Miyoshi at my side, the three of us descended into Yoyogi Dungeon.

"Wow," Asha said. "*So this is what the inside of a dungeon looks like.*"

"Pretty much," I replied. "*Like I said before, don't tell anyone about what you see here.*"

"*Of course.*"

For a few minutes, we followed a straight road, the path long and narrow. Upon reaching the end, we made a slight turn.

Oh, there's one now.

Doing her best not to draw the jiggling slime's ire, Miyoshi spread out a thick cushion sheet on the ground.

"Once I place you on the sheet, use the straw to suck up that liquid," I instructed. "Then blow it onto the slime as hard as you can."

"What?" Asha asked. *"That's it?"*

"Yeah, that's it. A little bit won't hurt, but try not to swallow the liquid or get it in your eyes."

Though I considered letting her spray the slime, preparing the bottle might have been equated with loading bullets into a gun. Therefore, we'd chosen the most primitive, reliable method for obtaining a D-Card. Even if a small amount of the solution got into her mouth, I couldn't foresee it causing any problems.

"Miyoshi, do you mind keeping an eye on the route from that corner?" I asked.

"No problem."

Wearing goggles, Asha lay back on the sheet and bent her neck forward to see the slime. She used one foot to scoot herself closer to the monster. I stayed by her side, ready to help in case anything happened.

"This spot will do," Asha said, gasping for air. *"Can you help me with the straw?"*

Silently, I placed the long straw in her mouth. From here on out, she would have to do everything by herself. Sucking up the liquid, she took a deep breath through her nose, blowing out through the straw. Magnificently, the stream of Alien Drool hit the slime dead center. At that moment, the creature burst apart and disappeared, its core rolling on the ground. Still lying face up with her neck bent forward, Asha watched this scene unfold with a dumbfounded expression.

"What is this stuff?" she asked.

"Incredible, right?" I replied. *"We call it 'Alien Drool.'"*

Asha burst out laughing. *"What a terrible name."*

“Next, you just need to strike the core—that glass bead lying on the ground—with the sole of your boot. Hit it as hard as you can.”

“Understood.”

Using her leg to twist her body, Asha shifted into a sitting position. Taking aim with her left foot, she kicked down with all her might. Though the steel plate on the sole of her boot struck the core, she failed to destroy it completely.

“Kei,” Miyoshi called out to me. “Someone came around the corner on the opposite side.”

“One more time!” I shouted.

“Okay!” Asha cried.

With renewed vigor, she swung her foot down. This time, the steel plate struck the core with perfect precision, causing it to shatter. Like always, the core transformed into black particles, leaving behind a dull, silver card in its wake.

Picking up the card, I showed it to Asha. *“Congratulations.”*

“Th-Thank you,” she replied. “I can use the orb now?”

“You certainly can.”

Wrapping her arm around my neck, Asha thanked me repeatedly.

From behind me, I heard someone speaking in native-sounding English. *“Hey, are you three okay?”*

“Do you have some kind of business here?” Miyoshi responded.

“No. I thought I saw someone, so we came over to check. Do you need us to escort you?” While speaking, a flippant-looking man looked over at me and Asha. *“Oh, looks like you’re in the middle of something.”*

“Thanks for the offer, but we’re about to leave,” I said. “Please, keep focusing on your own adventure.”

Holding Asha, I seated her on the carrier, heaving it up over my back. At the same time, Miyoshi quickly put away the sheet and straw.

“Is she hurt or something?” asked the flippant-looking man.

“No,” I replied. “Please don’t worry about us. Have a nice day.”

With that, Miyoshi and I jogged away from the two foreigners.

“It seems like they’re following us,” she said.

“Yeah, probably,” I agreed. “Change of topic, but do you still have the thing?”

In response, Miyoshi withdrew the Super Recovery orb from her pouch, which Asha’s father had entrusted us with.

“There’s an urban legend that orbs are more effective when used in a dungeon,” I said. *“Wanna try it out?”*

After considering this for a moment, Asha gave a small nod. When Miyoshi held out the orb, Asha touched the object with her handless left arm. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. At that moment, the orb transformed into light, wrapping around her body.

“Ngh...” she groaned. “Ah!”

For anyone unable to see our current situation, Asha’s moans would have caused a misunderstanding. Panicked, I dashed into a side road, setting her down. Then Miyoshi and I watched the scene unfold.

“Ah... Aah, aah!”

Watching her writhe upon the ground, my face grew hot. Seeming disgusted with me, Miyoshi dug her elbow into the right side of my stomach. Yet as my eyes filled with tears, something happened. The missing parts of Asha’s body began to swell, taking on the shape of hands and feet. Likewise, the sections of her right side not covered by clothes began to shine faintly.

“Aaah...”

Beads of sweat forming on her brow, Asha let forth her loudest moan yet, slumping against my chest.

“K-Kei, she’s...” Miyoshi trailed off.

As Asha’s mask fell off, plopping onto the ground, a cascade of luscious, black hair spilled down her mended face. Her breathing harsh, a beautiful woman now sat upon the ground. And just like I had guessed, she resembled a young

Katrina Kaif.

“Wow,” Miyoshi said. “Orbs are something else, aren’t they?”

“No arguments there,” I replied.

As we watched this in amazement, footsteps reached our ears. It must have been the two men from earlier. Signaling to Miyoshi with my eyes, I picked up Asha, starting to move.

“Oh, I left behind the carrier,” I said.

“It’s okay,” Miyoshi reassured me. “There’s nothing left on it. Plus, if those two stop to investigate, it’ll buy us some time.”

Despite holding Asha in my arms, my muscles barely felt tired. During the medical examination the other day, I’d added ten points to my STR. That had to be the reason. In that case, if I distributed the rest of my points, would I truly be rejecting my humanity? That thought worried me somewhat.

When the door to Yoyogi Dungeon’s VIP room opened, a young woman reminiscent of a flawless gem entered. Seeing this, Ahmed couldn’t stand, staring at his daughter in stunned disbelief. She must have looked very similar to his wife when they first met.

Though Miyoshi and I couldn’t understand what Asha said, it sounded something like “Pita.” Presumably, this carried the same meaning as “Papa.” Because he couldn’t stand from the sofa, Asha raced over to Ahmed. Embracing him, father and daughter cried together. After exchanging glances, Miyoshi and I made a quiet departure from the room.

“Good work in there,” Naruse said. “Two men of British nationality entered the dungeon five minutes after you. Did everything work out okay?”

“Oh yeah, we met them,” Miyoshi replied. “They both seemed kind of flippant.”

“They followed us like a pair of stalkers, but neither of them caused any real harm,” I added.

“But Kei, Yoyogi is massive. Those two finding us when we had a five-minute head start is pretty impressive.”

"Usually, there are no people in that area either. I have to wonder, do the British have a secret weapon to track people in dungeons?"

"Oh, do they have Q working for them?" Miyoshi asked.

"No idea. By the way, Q doesn't appear in the original Bond novels. The Q Branch is mentioned, though."

Puffing out her cheeks, Miyoshi fired back a snide, completely outrageous remark. "How many times do I have to tell you, Kei? That's exactly why you don't have a girlfriend."

"Well, one girl seemed pretty into me back in the dungeon."

"Oh, did something happen?" Naruse chimed in.

"You wouldn't believe it!" Miyoshi cried. "Kei carried Asha in his arms like she was a princess!"

"Oh my goodness!" Naruse yelped.

C'mon, it's not that big of a deal...

Naruse suddenly reentered work mode. "Speaking of which, Yoshimura."

"Yes?"

"Is Ms. Asha's healing the result of Super Recovery?"

"I can't be certain, but when she used the orb, her body did mend itself."

"Can you tell me more about the situation?" Naruse pressed.

"Oh, do you need a description of the orb's effects for the WDA database?"

"That's right."

I looked towards the VIP room door. Asha and her father still hadn't come out. "...Perhaps the details are better left unpublicized," I said. "In my opinion, simply disclosing what we saw would inflame humanity's greed to a dangerous extent."

When potions first became public knowledge, the world had fallen into panic. Undoubtedly, the appearance of Super Recovery would cause an even greater impact.

“Is she immortal?” Naruse muttered.

In response to these disquieting words, a flustered Miyoshi tried to gloss over the issue. “No, it’s nothing so grand! Super Recovery just perks you up a bit. And if you’re resilient, a single all-nighter won’t hurt you.”

“Huh?”

“Also, minor injuries heal up right away. If you’re going to issue a report on the skill’s functions, that should be more than enough to—”

“Hold on a second,” Naruse interrupted.

“Yes?”

“Miyoshi... Did you use a Super Recovery orb too?!”

“Err...”

Placing a hand to my forehead, I looked up at the ceiling.

Miyoshi, you left yourself wide open there.

“Well, yes,” she finally replied. “Before selling an orb, we have to perform experiments, right?”

Miyoshi, you idiot...

“Then you’ve also acquired other unknown skills?!” Naruse cried.

Miyoshi refused to meet Naruse’s eye. “N-Not...all of them, okay?”

Need any help digging that grave deeper?

“All that aside, we still don’t know exactly what Super Recovery is capable of,” I cut in. “We probably shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves.”

Despite glaring at me suspiciously, Naruse nodded.

“In the first place, we don’t even know how long the skill’s effects will last,” I continued. “In all likelihood, its functions could be lost after one huge recovery.”

For the recovery to take place, energy needed to be obtained from somewhere. From a commonsense perspective, the infinite acquisition of energy would be impossible. Still, I didn’t know if common sense could be

applied to the dungeons.

“Once cut off, even a lizard won’t be able to use its tail for a long time,” I pointed out. “I doubt any life form could obtain immortality or agelessness so easily, but...hold on a second.”

“What is it?” Naruse asked.

I turned towards Miyoshi. “What’s displayed on Asha’s D-Card right now?”

“Oh right, I still have it! But do you think we should look at it without her permission?”

“Since we already know all the information, it shouldn’t be a problem. This being an emergency, we can turn a blind eye to the ethics of the situation.”

“If you say so. Here it is.”

Name: Asha Ahmed Jain

Area: 12

Rank: 99,728,765

Skill: [Super Recovery]

Miyoshi looked at the card curiously. “Why is the skill name displayed in Japanese?”

“Skills are displayed in the native language of whoever is looking at the D-Card,” Naruse explained.

“Huh? Why?”

“We don’t know.”

“In other words, we don’t perceive the text on D-Cards through light alone...” I mused. “But that aside, I’m noticing another difference.”

“There are brackets around the skill name, and the text looks faded,” Miyoshi replied.

“Hmm,” Naruse mused. “If I had to guess, she won’t be able to use the skill

for the time being.”

“You’re probably right,” I agreed. “But will it become usable again over time, or is it gone for good? We don’t know yet.”

“We should probably explain this to Ahmed and Asha later,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “After all, some idiotic country might try to confirm the skill’s effects.”

“Kei, you don’t mean...”

“Don’t worry. It’s just a possibility.”

I didn’t want to think about Asha getting kidnapped and chopped up like a guinea pig. If news about Miyoshi spread, she could face the same danger as well. I needed to do something about this in the near future.

My peaceful life is growing more distant by the second, I thought with a sigh.

November 17, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

When I woke up, the sun had risen a long time ago. As I took a shower, my stomach started complaining of hunger. After washing up, I headed downstairs into the first-floor office.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Late morning,” Miyoshi corrected. “It’s already past eleven.”

“Yeah, yesterday was pretty rough...”

“Can’t argue there...”

After we left the VIP room, Ahmed thanked Miyoshi and I repeatedly, dragging us to Ginza. At a restaurant near the sixth district, he’d opened up numerous bottles of champagne to celebrate his daughter’s miraculous recovery. In the end, we’d even gone barhopping, of all things.

Seeming to remember the lineup from last night, Miyoshi looked ecstatic. “Do you recall drinking from crystal glasses in that old salon? And what could the

pièce de résistance have been but the Clos d'Ambonnay? Ah, it was like a dream. To think we even drank a bottle of Guillaume's Au Dessus du Gros Mont! Ginza really has everything, doesn't it?" At this, Miyoshi cocked her head. "Still, was that really the sort of bottle to open during a celebration?"

Don't ask me, you lush.

I remembered asking Ahmed, "*Are Hindus allowed to drink?*"

"Some towns do prohibit alcohol, but on the whole, most of us drink a fair amount," he had replied.

What a lenient religion.

"So, what are we doing today?" I asked.

"We're delivering orbs to three different people," Miyoshi replied. "If you would, please take a break from dungeon diving."

"If the meetings end early, I might go for a short dive. After all, I'm right on the verge of getting another Super Recovery. How are things going on your end?"

"The code for the measurement device is starting to take shape, more or less."

"Great. But either way, that stuff's all Greek to me. I'll leave it in your capable hands."

"What are you talking about?" Miyoshi asked. "Didn't you do a similar job where we worked before?"

"I've forgotten everything about that hellhole."

"I'm sure you have."

Cutting across the dining room, I entered the kitchen. From the refrigerator, I grabbed a bottle of Evian Natural Spring— *Wait, this is a glass bottle, and it's called Chateldon...?*

"Miyoshi," I called. "Is this Chateldon stuff water?"

"Yep. You like beverages with light carbonation, don't you?"

Twisting off the screw cap, I poured the Chateldon into a glass, taking a gulp.

Delicious and refreshing.

“I might whip up an omelet,” I said. “Feeling hungry?”

“It’s almost lunchtime. Why don’t we grab a bite to eat in Ichigaya?”

“Oh yeah, that’s another option. But where?”

“If Naruse visited, I was planning on kidnapping her and eating at the JDA. She hasn’t shown up, though.”

“A lot did happen yesterday,” I noted. “Think all the report writing has done her in?”

“Maybe. Before the dust had even settled, we got confronted with the question of immortality.”

I didn’t expect Super Recovery to grant immortality, but at this rate, an “Immortality” skill orb might very well appear. Apparently, those things could do anything.

“Do you mind giving Naruse a call?” I asked. “If it’s no trouble, ask her to meet us at the JDA cafeteria.”

“Will do.”

“Well then, I’ll get ready to go out.”

“Sounds good.”

I finished off my glass of water, stuffing it in the dishwasher. Returning the glass bottle to the fridge, I headed back upstairs to change clothes.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

This afternoon, we would be delivering orbs to Huang, Simon, and William—in that order.

Huang—the world’s fourth-ranked explorer—turned out to be a rather impatient, taciturn man. As soon as the transaction ended, he used the orb. Seeming to check his bodily condition, he repeatedly opened and closed his right hand. “Shāo hòu jiàn,” he then said all of a sudden, leaving the room.

“Doesn’t that mean ‘see you later?’” Miyoshi asked.

“You expect *me* to understand Chinese?”

Our next client was Simon. A business truly relied upon repeat customers.

Since our meeting the other day, he’d apparently spent all his time warming up in Yoyogi.

“*How far down have you gone?*” I asked.

“*In a little over twenty-four hours, we descended seventeen levels,*” Simon replied. “*And then we came back up in a day.*”

No one could compare to the adventure style of the world’s top party. Still, could this be called a *warm-up*?

“*Heard you had a rough time yesterday,*” Simon commented.

“*News travels fast,*” I responded.

“*What are you playing dumb for? Right now, Yoyogi is the front line of an information war. In case you haven’t noticed, even Great Britain and China are here.*”

“*Sorry, but we have nothing to do with that.*”

A look of exasperation came over Simon. “*Yeah... I don’t think that’s possible. But anyway, Yoyogi has a fascinating ecology. If you want to find a specific resource, this might be one of the most convenient dungeons in the world. Plus, it’s completely open to the public. You won’t find anything like this outside Japan.*”

“*In other words, you think Japan should learn to keep its guard up?*”

Chuckling, Simon rose to his feet. “*Still, if you’re thinking about humanity as a whole, your country has made the right decision.*”

With that, he left the conference room.

“Should’ve guessed he’s thinking about humanity’s future,” Miyoshi commented.

“Usually, people seek to benefit their own country,” I replied. “But if the whole world is destroyed, what does your country matter? Plus, if the Dungeon Passage Theory proves correct, the future of all humankind will seem even more important.”

Would descending to the lowest possible level of a dungeon lead to another world? Before, I’d considered this idea as outrageous as the Hollow Earth Theory. But now...

“You’re right about that,” Miyoshi agreed.

“Regardless, let’s just do whatever we’re capable of.”

“It’s the Queen of the Merchants and her supplier against the world!”

“Exactly. So, who’s our last client?”

“Great Britain,” Miyoshi informed me. “Our fated rivals.”

“Think that butler will show up again?”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

Contrary to our expectations, the butler opened the door, making for a shocking entrance.

“If the client speaks English, we don’t need an interpreter,” I said.

Donning a humorless smile, the butler responded with an idiom from my native language. *“Yes, but Japanese foxes excel at hiding their tails.”*

“We’re merely careful not to board ships of mud,” I replied with an idiom of my own.

Wait, doesn’t the first idiom reference tanuki, not foxes?

While I considered this, a militaristic man appeared from behind. However, I couldn’t sense any of Simon’s good humor in him. England had created the Dungeon Capture Unit as a subordinate organization of the Special Air Service. As such, the DCU’s members were all elite soldiers. And apparently, this man was William.

The transaction proceeded smoothly. Upon seeing an orb count of less than

sixty minutes, the butler frowned slightly. Yet once the deal had ended, the butler shook my hand, and he and William departed without incident. Somehow, that creeped me out even more.

Miyoshi sighed. "Wow, that was nerve-racking."

"No kidding. I never expected the butler to show his face so brazenly."

"What could he have been thinking?"

"Who knows? Perhaps it was a declaration of war."

"Don't say that!" Miyoshi cried.

Listening in on our conversation, Naruse grimaced as well. "She's right, Yoshimura. Sometimes, I can't tell if you're a pacifist or a warmonger."

"A warmonger?" I repeated. "I'm the laziest pacifist you'll ever meet."

"I can't argue with the lazy part," Naruse said. "But considering what happened yesterday, you *have* been working hard lately."

"Think I should take a break?"

"And here I thought you were improving."

At that moment, someone knocked on the conference room door.

"Come in," Naruse called, seeming puzzled.

From beyond the opened door, Asha appeared. "Kaygo!"

When she threw her arms around me, I grew incredibly flustered. Sure, a hug from a beautiful woman might have filled me with joy, but I wasn't used to this sort of thing.

"Asha, what's going on?" I asked.

"I'm here to fulfill our promise."

I exchanged glances with Miyoshi. "Promise?"

"You forgot?" Asha asked, continuing to speak in Japanese. "How terrible of you."

Thus, Asha reminded me of the reward I'd proposed for helping her acquire a D-Card.

Hearing this for the first time, Miyoshi looked exasperated. “You’re such a show-off, Kei. Also, if you think that line was cool, you’re up to your neck in otaku culture.”

Huh, did I not mention any of this to her?

“Erm, I was just goofing around back then...” I said.

“That was a joke?!” Asha cried.

“No, um, not at all.”

Taking my hand, Asha gave me some sort of letter. “*Here’s your invitation. We’ve reserved multiple seats, so you can invite up to six people.*”

“Understood. I look forward to it.”

“Great! I’ll see you tomorrow then!”

Saying her farewell, Asha left the conference room.

“What a busy bee,” I commented.

“Apparently, she has an interview with the JDA later,” Naruse replied.

“An interview?”

It must have been related to Super Recovery. That worried me a bit, but her Papa Bear wouldn’t allow the JDA to do anything unreasonable.

“Kei, can I have a look at that invitation?” Miyoshi asked.

“Huh? Oh yeah, here you go.”

“May I open it?”

“No problem.”

Taking the card from the envelope, Miyoshi looked down, her eyes opening wide. “K-Kei, this... This is an invitation to dine at Naito!”

“Naito?” I asked.

“It’s a sushi restaurant in Ark Hills South Tower.”

“Oh, because they’re Hindu. According to Ahmed, their family eats fish.”

“That’s not even close to the point. I’ll phrase this in a way that even you can

understand. It's one of the only three sushi restaurants in Tokyo with three stars from a certain tire company."

I frowned. "...I don't really catch your drift, but can you even rent out a restaurant like that spur of the moment?"

"That's what I'm saying. What will happen to everyone with a reservation? Don't tell me they've all been canceled... Wait, the eighteenth?!"

"Why are you freaking out?"

"The eighteenth is tomorrow!"

"Yes, and?" I asked.

"Naito is closed on Sundays!"

"Oh, so that's how Ahmed managed to rent the place out."

"Hold on a second here," Miyoshi said. "Without any sort of appointment, Ahmed convinced an entire restaurant to work on their day off? Kei, who is this man, exactly?"

"Good question."

"Naruse, do you know?"

In response to this question, Naruse's expression remained unflappable. "I have a duty to respect the privacy of our clients."

"Confidentiality aside, we're going to eat a mountain of delicious sushi with someone else footing the bill," I said. "Of all people, that should make you happy, Miyoshi."

"Of course I'm happy! Speaking of which, would you like to come with us, Naruse?"

"Huh, me? Is that okay?"

"I don't see why not," I interjected. "By abusing your authority, you managed to slow down those British spies, remember?"

"I-I didn't abuse my... Oh, never mind. It is a Sunday, after all. I'd be more than happy to go with you."

“So now we’re a group of three,” I said. “Hmm, I suppose that’s fine. Anyone else you’d like to invite, Miyoshi?”

“This is all happening so fast. Right now, I can only think of Midori... Speaking of which, Naruse, aren’t you Midori’s older sister?”

“The Midori who started a medical device company?” Naruse asked.

“That’s the one!” Miyoshi confirmed.

“Yes, we’re sisters. How do you two know each other?”

“The two of us are developing something together right now! It’s going to blow your mind.”

“Slow your roll, Miyoshi,” I interrupted. “We still haven’t had a proper conversation with Midori. Don’t go leaking our future plans.”

“Future plans?” Naruse repeated. “I’d *love* to hear those! It’s my duty as a full-time spy!”

“Again with the spy stuff...” I grumbled. “Well, you’ll hear about it sooner or later.”

“You’re cutting me out of the loop?”

“Miyoshi, tell Midori to keep everything under wraps. Looks like her sister’s gonna come snooping.”

“You got it, Kei.”

“Now I’m a snoop?!” Naruse huffed.

In the end, the girls spent the rest of the day chatting with each other.

The next day turned out completely normal, if slightly overcast. Since we would be going to dinner in the evening, I stopped by Yoyogi Dungeon, hoping to obtain the Super Recovery I’d missed out on yesterday. While in the entrance hall, someone called out to me.

“Yoshimura!”

Turning around, I found a slender woman wearing a ski mask and face guard

running towards me. To my great surprise, she threw her arms around me, causing a small stir in the vicinity.

Huh? What's going on here? Don't tell me...

"M-Mitsurugi...?" I asked.

"Yes, it's me! I passed!"

Was she talking about the job interview that Saito had mentioned some time ago? Either way, we weren't filming a TV drama. If the two of us kept embracing in a place like this, we'd stick out like a pair of sore thumbs. Leaving the entrance hall, I led Mitsurugi to the YD Café, where Naruse always took me for business meetings. Once inside, I chose an inconspicuous table.

"Have a drink of this," I said, offering Mitsurugi a cup of café au lait. "It'll help you relax."

"Thank you."

Taking off her ski mask, Mitsurugi's short hair fell smoothly down her face. Overall, she appeared more refined than ever before. With an agile movement of her right hand, she fixed her glimmering, sideswept bangs. To say the least, she'd captured my full attention.

"Ski masks are convenient, but they make you sweat," she said with a sigh. "That's why I can't wear makeup."

"I wasn't aware when we first met, but you're famous, right? Is it okay to show your face around here?"

"You're exaggerating. No one will notice a complete novice like me. Especially without makeup."

Even the way in which she laughed heartily seemed elegant.

Yeah, I'm a little scared to find out how much her stats increased...

"So, you passed the model audition we talked about before?" I asked.

"I did, and it's all thanks to you!"

"No, you're the one who put in all the effort. Since our first meeting in the dungeon, it seems like you've kept diving a fair amount."

“About that...” Mitsurugi trailed off, taking out her D-Card.

Though explorers often showed each other their license cards, people only revealed their D-Cards to those they trusted. Unless a person had just acquired their D-Card, a man and woman sharing theirs could easily be mistaken for a couple. At that moment, I might have heard a stir rippling across the café. Yet upon seeing Mitsurugi’s D-Card, I no longer cared about my surroundings.

Rank: 986

Leaning her face closer to mine, Mitsurugi whispered into my ear. “It’s only been six weeks, and I haven’t dived any lower than the first level. Yoshimura, you figured something out, didn’t you?”

Afterwards, she handed me a piece of paper with the number of slimes she’d defeated, which I’d requested during our previous meeting. Apparently, she’d killed an average of 118 per day. Incredible. Compared to my half-assed dives, she’d defeated far more slimes. All while going back and forth to the entrance.

If she defeated one slime every five minutes, that’s twelve kills per hour. In other words, she must have been dungeon diving ten hours a day for forty-two days. And she’s hardly taken any breaks these past six weeks...

“Were you able to keep working while diving so much?” I asked.

“Since I wanted to train until the audition, I asked my agency to not accept any work for me outside of something unavoidable.”

“Wow.”

On average, Mitsurugi had earned 2.36 SP per day over forty-two days. In total, she would have acquired 99.12 SP.



So one hundred points can bring you up to the triple digits, huh?

After defeating nearly two thousand slimes myself, I had earned a measly five points. Well, having killed them all in succession, I couldn't expect anything more.

Still, if most of Mitsurugi's points had been distributed to AGI and DEX, she would have already reached the realm of superhumans. In all likelihood, she could control her movements by less than a millimeter. Now, she only needed to imagine the most beautiful way to conduct herself.

"Well, I might have shown you the ropes," I said, "but without all your hard work, you wouldn't have achieved these results so quickly."

"And like we promised, I haven't discussed this with anyone but Ryoko. That's Saito, if you don't remember her first name."

"I thought as much. Congratulations."

Overcome with emotion, Mitsurugi squeezed my hand on top of the table, her eyes brimming with tears.

Feeling flustered by this sudden development, I changed the conversation.
"So, what happened with Saito?"

"From what I've heard, her acting has improved like crazy. She's landed so many roles that she barely has any time to hang out with me anymore."

"Then you've been diving alone? Don't you think that's dangerous?"

"Well then, will you keep me company?"

"Huh, me?" I asked. "Umm. If I can make the time, sure."

"Is that a promise?"

"Y-Yeah."

According to Mitsurugi, Saito had defeated the same number of slimes for thirty days, which would add up to around seventy-one SP. If most of those points had been distributed to DEX, she would no longer be a normal person either.

"This goes for Saito as well," I said, "but I would advise against showing your

D-Card to anyone.”

“Understood,” Mitsurugi said with a laugh. “Only people who are extremely close—like couples—show their D-Cards to each other.”

“If possible, you shouldn’t even show your card to someone *that* close.”

“What? Um, okay.” In response to my serious attitude, Mitsurugi straightened her posture. “Also, this might be totally out of left field, but...”

“Yes?”

“...Well, everyone’s talking about how the world’s top-ranked explorer is a civilian who suddenly appeared in Area 12.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard.”

“After everything you taught me, I can’t help but wonder if...” Mitsurugi trailed off.

As we looked at each other in silence, the clamor of the café faded into the sound of waves crashing in the distance.

At last, Mitsurugi broke the silence. “Even after my job starts, I’m going to visit Yoyogi as often as possible.”

“Sounds great.”

“Um, should we exchange contact information?”

“Fine by me, but didn’t I give you my business card a while back?”

A bemused smile tugged on Mitsurugi’s lips. “If Ryoko were here, she would puff out her cheeks and say, ‘By exchanging contact info, I’m asking you to get in touch with me.’ Understand what I’m saying, Mr. Researcher?”

Feeling embarrassed, I exchanged my personal contact info with her.

“I’ll shoot you an email soon,” she said. “See you later.”

As she stood to leave, I unthinkingly grabbed her hand. “Oh, one more thing. Later today, my office is attending a small party related to our work. Would you like to come with me?”

“What?”

“According to Miyoshi, it’s a sushi restaurant in Ark Hills called Naito. Does that sound okay to you?”

“Sushi sounds wonderful. It’s healthy, after all. But if this is a company party, is it okay for me to tag along?”

“With everything that’s happened, I can count you as one of us. If you’d like, go ahead and invite Saito as well.”

“In that case, I accept the invitation, but Ryoko is filming a drama until late this evening.” Mitsurugi donned a mischievous smile. “When she hears about this later, she’s going to be *quite* bitter.”

“The party starts at five o’clock. Where should I pick you up?”

“Somewhere near my place should work... Are you familiar with the Toguri Museum of Art?”

“Huh, the one in Shibuya?”

Mitsurugi nodded. “Indeed.”

“You live in the Shoto district? Talk about classy!”

“Oh, um, not at all. My apartment’s rent is really cheap.”

“The museum is on the same street as that one restaurant... Chez Matsuo, right?”

“Yes. You know your way around the city.”

“With Miyoshi being such a glutton, I’ve learned a lot about restaurants and nothing else,” I said with a laugh. “So, should I meet you in front of the museum at four o’clock in the evening?”

“Sorry, but you can’t park your car in front of the building...”

“Well then, I’ll call you when I leave my place. Since I’m only a kilometer away, it should take about five minutes by car.”

“Only five minutes? Come to think of it, we live pretty close to each other.”

“Yeah, guess we do,” I said.

“All right then, I’ll be waiting for you outside the museum. Take care.”

Watching Mitsurugi leave, I considered something she'd mentioned.

She'll shoot me an email, huh? Pretty rare to hear that from a modern girl.

Afterwards, I swiftly vanquished twelve slimes, obtained another Super Recovery orb, and returned to my office.

With time being tight, I rented a chauffeur-driven vehicle for the evening. After typing a few words into a search engine, I'd discovered that same-day rentals didn't pose a problem. All hail the internet. Though I offered to give Miyoshi a lift as well, she promised to meet me at the restaurant since she would be arriving with Midori.

"You invited a girl, *and* you're having a chauffeur pick her up?" Miyoshi asked. "Color me impressed."

"Nah, it was just luck," I replied.

"Still, those two are making a crazy amount of progress."

"I know, right? Both of them took slime hunting pretty seriously—but even so, the results of the dungeon boot camp are kind of incredible."

"That's for sure. I'm having difficulty deciding where and how we should publicize the 'in-and-out' rule for acquiring SP."

"No kidding," I agreed. "It's one complication after another."

"By the way, what are you wearing tonight?"

"The tried-and-true smart casual. From the most to least expensive restaurants in Japan, you can't go wrong with that style."

"Sure is nice being a man, huh? For most formal occasions, all you need to wear are slacks, a collared shirt, and a jacket. On the other hand, women can look out of place in a smart elegant outfit. Plus, it's a struggle to determine what constitutes the 'bare minimum' for semiformal wear."

"We're having sushi, the venue is small, and it's going to be a friendly atmosphere," I pointed out. "Casual attire shouldn't cause any issues, right?"

"We're talking about someone who rented out Naito on the restaurant's day off at the drop of a hat. His views on social etiquette could be completely

different from ours. I need to come prepared, just in case..."

"Life's hard for us common folk."

"You're right about that." Miyoshi sighed. "I'm also worried about Midori showing up in a lab coat."

"...I can totally see that happening. At the same time, I can also see Ahmed being quite pleased with that."

Taking out some sort of case, Miyoshi began wrapping it.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A gift to celebrate Asha's recovery."

"Oh, right. Should we buy gifts for Mitsurugi and Saito as well?"

"I'll leave that decision up to you."

At this, I cocked my head.

"Kei," Miyoshi said. "Ahmed spent five and a half billion yen on the Super Recovery orb, remember?"

"...Yeah, I guess so. But what's in the case?"

"What's in the case, you ask? None other than Sunflower earrings by Harry Winston. Worth two million yen, all young women of class dream of wearing these earrings with ruby center stones."

"Wow, no one will ever accuse you of skimping on gifts..."

I am worried about one thing, though.

"Quick question," I said. "Will Asha be able to pierce her ears with Super Recovery?"

"I had the same thought, but right now, her skill doesn't seem to be active. If we strike while the iron's hot, maybe she'll be able to wear these."

"If her skill reactivates in the future, she won't be able to pierce her ears anymore, so you're encouraging her to do so now? That makes sense, but once her skill *does* reactivate, won't the piercings just close again?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Miyoshi reassured me.

“Why not?”

“Because my piercings haven’t closed.”

Seriously? I expected Super Recovery to recreate one’s body from its genetic information, but is that not the case?

“Hmm,” I said. “That’s certainly puzzling.”

“Kei, you said something about this yourself.”

“I did?”

“You hypothesized that something metaphysical—like consciousness—might be connected to skills.”

“Oh, right. Our discussion about Vault.”

Miyoshi nodded. “Exactly. You might have been more on the mark than I originally thought.”

“So, you think that will apply to piercings too?”

“I do indeed.”

At that moment, a very inappropriate idea occurred to me. Yet as someone who had dedicated his life to research, I had an unwavering responsibility to bring all truths to light. Yes, it was dangerous business going out your front door, but I would assume the risks.

“Say, Miyoshi.”

“Yes?”

“I must admit, there’s something I’m very curious about.”

“Wow, I have a terrible feeling about this, but let’s hear it.”

“What happened to your hy—UGH!”

Before I could finish my question, Miyoshi threw her tablet, hitting me squarely in the forehead.

“Learn to have a little delicacy, Kei.”

Yeah. Shorry for ashking...

“Anyway,” Miyoshi continued. “Asha had her accident during adolescence, and she’s been living as the Phantom of the Opera ever since.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“In other words, she’s never had the luxury of being fashionable.”

“That makes sense.”

“By giving Asha these earrings, we’re basically telling her to enjoy this new luxury,” Miyoshi explained. “And with the price being reasonable, she won’t have to worry about inconveniencing us. But most importantly, these will be a gift from her ‘boyfriend.’”

Two-million-yen earrings are reasonable?! You top one-percenters have no idea what the world is actually like! I’ll teach you money grubbers the true value of the yen! Or not... The father did pay us five and a half billion, after all.

“But we’re not piercing her ears ourselves, right?” I asked.

“Her Papa Bear will probably have her ears pierced at a proper medical facility. Still, not being able to wear your present right away is downright sad!” At this, Miyoshi let out a self-assured chuckle. “And that’s why I *always* have a backup plan. Like this mini pendant with the same design!”

“A pendant?”

“Take my word for it. Tonight, she’ll be wearing something with a low neckline, but she won’t have any accessories.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Because up until now, she’s had to hide her body. But considering how beautiful Asha is, she’ll definitely wear something glamorous for the party.”

In summary, Asha doesn’t own any accessories because she’s never needed them. Well, I did swear to never doubt Miyoshi’s intuition again.

“Oh, and you should be the one to place this pendant around her neck,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Why me?!”

“She’s a little too old for her father to do it... And everyone else at the party

will be a woman."

Oh, that's right. Wait, when did I become a harem protagonist?

"If we keep ingratiating ourselves to Mr. Ahmed..." Miyoshi trailed off, her mouth seeming to water.

"Do you need a napkin, Miss Queen of the Merchants?"

"No, the thought of him renting out L'Osier for the next occasion hasn't even crossed my mind, I swear!"

A certain cosmetics manufacturer had opened a restaurant called L'Osier in Ginza. Following renovations, the restaurant had reopened with a circular floor design, the waitstaff busily moving around its perimeter. Nevertheless, L'Osier was one of the representative French restaurants in Japan. The very idea of renting out such a place seemed impossible to me.

"By the way," Miyoshi said. "This is a complete change of subject, but..."

"But?"

"I was able to place multiple buses from that parking lot into Storage... All twenty to be exact."

Seriously? All twenty?

"Th-That's incredible," I replied. "In other words, over two hundred tons can fit inside Storage. I'm having trouble imagining its limits."

"When you take an object out of Storage, you can place it wherever you imagined, more or less. It even works if you're a short distance away. That was pretty amusing."

"...Did you turn a whole parking lot of buses into building blocks?"

"B-Building blocks?" Miyoshi repeated. Afterwards, her voice took on a robotic tone. "Sorry, your question does not compute."

Miyoshi refused to meet my eye, but if I pressed the matter, I would only increase the number of criminals here from one to two. Nope, nothing good would come of that.

I didn't see anything here, Officer.

“Will we have to test out Storage on a train or tanker next...?” I mused. “If either of those fit, it’ll cause a much greater uproar than the mere possibility of smuggling. For now, let’s stick to *gathering* Storage orbs, not selling them.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

After discussing everything on the agenda, I found myself with a lot of spare time. The hired driver wouldn’t arrive for another four hours.

“All righty then,” I said.

“What’s up?”

“Since it’s still noon, I’m going out.”

“Looking for a way to win Mitsurugi’s heart?” Miyoshi teased me.

“How did you figure that out? Are you a telepath?”

“No, I could tell from the flow of the conversation. You’re pretty easy to read, Kei.”

“Damn, you got me there... Eh, oh well. What do you think I should get her?”

Though I wasn’t proud of it, my complete lack of refinement didn’t surprise me. I had no idea what kind of present to give a model.

“Now you need me to think up gift ideas for you?” Miyoshi asked. “Well, if you’re going to celebrate her becoming an exclusively contracted model, jewelry is probably your best option. As a classic beauty with short hair, she’ll mostly be modeling clothes. If you buy her earrings, I recommend a simple pair with one pearl each. Small ones are nice enough, but large pearls are quite noble, and they have a strong presence.”

“I see. And where do you buy pearls?”

“You’re hopeless, Kei... But if this is your first time buying them, Mikimoto is a safe bet. Their main store is located in Ginza’s fourth district.”

“All right. Large pearls from Mikimoto, but keep it simple, right? I never doubted you, my brilliant agent.”

Miyoshi sighed. “Just do your best not to screw everything up.”

And thus, I ventured out into an unfamiliar world. Not to save the Earth from

destruction, of course.

Roppongi

I entered the first floor of Ark Hills South Tower. At the corner of Chun Shui Tang, I'd regrouped with Miyoshi, who had just come up from the escalators.

“What?!” I cried. “Midori’s not wearing a lab coat?!”

Clenching her fist, Miyoshi voiced her agreement. “I couldn’t believe it either.”

“Huh?” Midori asked. “Do you have a fetish for bespectacled STEM girls in white lab coats?”

“Not at all,” I replied.

“Then why the dramatics?!”

While Midori and I shared this idiotic exchange, Miyoshi spoke to Mitsurugi, who stood by my side. “Hi there! Congratulations on passing the audition!”

“Thank you. I shamelessly decided to tag along today.”

“Kei invited you, right? It’s so out of character for him to put the moves on a girl.”

“Slander!” I cried. “I invited her as a fellow member of the Slime Hunters!”

“C’mon, let’s head to the party,” Miyoshi said.

Damn, she just ignored me.

At what appeared to be a dead end, there was actually a passageway leading to the left. Walking through the automatic door, we arrived at the venue.

If you’re not a customer or employee, I doubt anyone would let you through here. [\(15\)](#)

“Yoshimura, Miyoshi!” Ahmed exclaimed. “Thank you for coming. My family owes you two a great debt.”

As we reached the corner, Ahmed—who stood in front of the restaurant—threw his arms around both of us.

Wow, this old man is surprisingly strong. He's squeezing the air out of me.

"We didn't save your daughter by ourselves," Miyoshi said. "Naruse of the JDA provided plenty of support from behind the scenes and out in the open."

"Of course," Ahmed replied. "I'm grateful for her meticulous backup as well. But who are these lovely young women?"

"This is Midori—Naruse's younger sister. Her company develops medical equipment, and we work together from time to time."

"Oh, is she a start-up founder?"

"She sure is."

Midori nodded to Ahmed. "Nice to meet you, sir. I'm Midori Naruse. Thank you for letting me join this party even without a direct invitation."

"Of course. Your sister has been a great help to me. Please enjoy yourself."

"Thank you very much."

Seeing her like this, Midori gave off the impression of a very competent woman. Plus, her suit was rather stylish.

"Midori," Miyoshi said. "If you always acted like this, you would be so cool."

"Jeez, no need to be so blunt," I interjected. "Still, I had the same thought."

"And this is Haruka Mitsurugi," Miyoshi continued. "She's an up-and-coming model. Starting next year, she'll be exclusively contracted with the Fiversity brand."

"Nice to meet you," Mitsurugi said. "I can't speak English very well. Sorry."

"Congratulations," Ahmed replied. "Your English is fine. I can understand you very well. Are you Yoshimura's girlfriend?"

"Wouldn't that be nice?" I said with a chuckle. "But unfortunately, she's just a work acquaintance of mine."

At that moment, Mitsurugi appeared to blush a little.

"Oh, you're a fellow explorer?" Ahmed asked.

"A new one," Mitsurugi answered.

“Is that helpful in your line of work?”

“Very much.”

Laughing, Ahmed entered the restaurant. *“I see. Then I guess you two are work acquaintances.”*

The restaurant was quite small, consisting only of an L-shaped counter. Apparently, there were other rooms, but we wouldn’t use any of them today.

“Kaygo!” Asha cried.

“Hey there,” I replied. *“Thanks for the invitation.”*

Miyoshi handed me a jewelry box. *“Here, take this.”*

“Oh, right. Got it.”

I then gave the jewelry box to Asha, who wore exactly what Miyoshi had anticipated. Yep, it was certainly wise to not underestimate intuition.

“This is to celebrate your full recovery,” I said. *“It’s from both of us.”*

“Really?” Asha asked. *“Thanks! May I open it?”*

“But of course.”

“Oh my gosh, what lovely earrings! If only I could wear them right now. What a bummer.”

“Don’t worry. You can have your ears pierced at a reputable location soon enough. For today, you’ll have to make do with this pendant.”

Asha looked at the second piece of jewelry eagerly. *“Oh, will you help me put it on?”*

“Your wish is my command.”

“Kei,” Miyoshi whispered to me in Japanese. *“Where did you learn to speak English like that?”*

“I looked it up on the web yesterday,” I answered in a low voice. *“Did I get something wrong?”*

“You should be fine. It’s a standard phrase.”

Turning away from me, Asha lifted up her hair. Wrapping the pendant around

her neck, I hooked the chain with uncertain fingers. Once I'd finished, she let her hair down, turning around again. Bordered with diamonds, a small, crimson ruby now shone beautifully at her chest.

"Yeah, it looks great on you," I said.

"Thank you," Asha replied. *"I'll wear it all the time!"*

After taking our seats, we began enjoying our meal. In particular, Midori's behavior left a strong impression on me. "Monkfish liver is friggin' delicious!" she cried, gulping down sake and ordering seconds. I never would have pegged her for such a big drinker.

"Monkfish liver begins to fatten in December, but lately, we've been able to harvest them earlier in the season," the host explained. "These are the most delicious of the early harvest."

Pretending not to see this, the older Naruse—who had arrived later—spoke with Miyoshi and Ahmed.

Sandwiched between Asha and Mitsurugi, the night couldn't have been going any better for me. While Asha—the foreigner—spoke Japanese, Mitsurugi—the native—spoke English. Odd though it might have been, this sort of situation probably occurred quite often.



“Kaygo, this is delicious,” Asha said. “Have a bite.”

“Asha,” Mitsurugi interjected. “Hold up chopsticks and say ‘open wide.’ It means ‘close.’”

“Did you say close or clothes?”

“I’ll show you. As an example.” Mitsurugi then switched to Japanese. “Open wide, Yoshimura!”

“Hey,” I said. “C-Cut it—”

“W-Women actually like Kei?!” Miyoshi exclaimed.

“Looks like they’re turning him into a plaything,” Naruse observed, throwing back a large cup of sake. “Plus, they’re drunk.”

So, the older sister can hold her liquor too?

“Even so,” Miyoshi said. “One of them is beautiful enough to be a Bollywood actress, and the other is an up-and-coming model with an exclusive brand deal!”

“Put like that, it does sound unbelievable,” Naruse agreed.

“The paparazzi is going to be all over him!”

Now that’s unsettling.

That was the frightening thing about Miyoshi. You could never quite tell if she was joking around or being serious.

“Thanks for the meal,” I said.

“Kaygo,” Asha called out to me.

“Take care of yourself, okay?”

As I said this, Asha threw her arms around me.

Are Indian people big on physical contact or something?!

While I panicked, Asha pulled away. “See you later,” she said.

“Yeah, see you later.”

We spoke to each other like friends who would be able to reconnect soon.

“The world is much smaller nowadays,” Ahmed said with a laugh. *“If you’d like to see each other again, it’s always possible.”*

I’m going to see that smile in my nightmares. Doting parents are a scary bunch.

“If you find yourself in any trouble, feel free to contact me,” Ahmed continued. *“I’ll do everything I can to help you.”*

“Thank you,” I replied.

Ahmed gave me an extravagant business card and shook my hand with unnecessary force. Ouch. Afterwards, we waved goodbye to him and Asha, going our separate ways.

Since Midori would be staying with Miyoshi overnight, we all boarded the hired car together. While dropping off Mitsurugi on our way home, I gave her the present I’d bought earlier. When I’d asked for large pearl earrings, the store employee had chosen ones in the shape of an ‘M’ with a slightly modern design. As she was getting out of the car, an overly emotional and a little tipsy Mitsurugi kissed me. On the cheek, of course.

Once Mitsurugi had left, Miyoshi teased me inside the vehicle. “Are you trying to catch the paparazzi’s attention before she even debuts?”

“They’re not bored enough to stake out some random guy,” I replied.

Though I tried to play it cool, I did feel somewhat elated.

November 18, 2018 (Monday)

Edogawa City

The next day, we visited Midori’s secret laboratory for the second time.

“Secret lab?” Midori asked. “You make us sound like mad scientists.”

“Oh, there’s another one right now,” Miyoshi said.

As she spoke, another man appeared, carrying a stack of printer paper.

His name is Nakajima, right?

“Today, we uncover the secrets of the aura!” Miyoshi cried. “I’m so excited that I could hardly sleep last night!”

“This ‘aura’ of yours probably doesn’t exist,” Midori replied, pressing a thumb and forefinger to her brow. “So, are we measuring the same categories as last time?”

“Yes,” I replied. “If you would, please measure all of them.”

“Speaking of which, your last report was well-written. Thanks for that. Still, you’re doing forty-three measurements this time? You two certainly are eccentric.”

Nakajima shook his head, seeming deeply impressed. “The exam fees will come out to one hundred million yen, after all. If only we had such an enormous budget.”

“Come on, let’s get started.” Not meeting anyone’s eye, Midori cut off Nakajima, shoving me into the same measuring machine as before. “We’re burning daylight here!”

Without delay, I opened up Making.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1118.856

HP: 61.00

MP: 52.00

STR: 24 [+]

VIT: 25 [+]

INT: 28 [+]

AGI: 20 [+]

DEX: 26 [+]

LUC: 24 [+]

For now, I would round out my statuses. Over this past month, I'd defeated over two thousand slimes in Yoyogi Dungeon, but since I'd slain them in succession, I'd barely gained five points. At this rate, I'd earn sixty SP in a year and 180 in three years.

If distributed evenly, the statuses of elite explorers were probably around thirty points each. Even accounting for variations, their statuses were probably sixty points at most. That being said, I didn't have any solid evidence to back this up. As you traveled deeper into the dungeons, monsters provided more experience points. Thus, even if I doubled my calculations, elite explorers would average sixty points per status. And by that logic, the absolute cream of the crop would average around 120.

Earlier, Miyoshi and I had discussed how to proceed. Rather than increasing one particular status in a single burst, I'd raise them all uniformly, having Midori measure the results. In all likelihood, there weren't many people with one status remarkably higher than their other ones. Since I planned on raising each of my statuses to one hundred, I would increase them evenly until then.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 1085.856

HP: 75.00

MP: 57.00

STR: 30 [+]

VIT: 30 [+]

INT: 30 [+]

AGI: 30 [+]

DEX: 30 [+]

LUC: 30 [+]

“Go ahead with the first measurement,” I said.

“Starting now,” Midori replied.

I felt a stinging pain in my left arm, and just like before, the rumbling of a CT scanner echoed in my ears. A few minutes later, Midori announced the end of the first measurement. If each one took five minutes, the whole session would last four hours.

Well, this is a marathon, not a sprint, I thought, mechanically continuing my work.

And when my STR reached one hundred points, something unexpected happened.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 715.856

HP: 235.00

MP: 171.00

STR: [-] 100 [+]

VIT: 90 [+]

INT: 90 [+]

AGI: 90 [+]

DEX: 90 [+]

LUC: 90 [+]

“What’s this?” I asked.

My STR status now contained a “[-]” mark.

“Is something wrong?” Midori asked, responding to my unconscious remark.

"No, it's nothing," I replied. "But if you don't mind, please wait a moment."

Does this mean I can return points back to the SP reserves? If so, I could play around with distributing a huge number of points to one status, but...most games have a penalty for this sort of action. For instance, to return one point, you have to spend two points.

Timidly, I pressed the "[-]" button.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 715.856

HP: 235.00

MP: 171.00

STR: [-] 99 [+][1]

VIT: 90 [+]

INT: 90 [+]

AGI: 90 [+]

DEX: 90 [+]

LUC: 90 [+]

In conclusion, the point didn't return to my SP reserves. Basically, I could decide how many points to use within a given status. Currently, I didn't really understand how to use this function. Perhaps if my statuses grew to inhuman proportions, I could use it to hold back my strength.

Similarly, it might work to camouflage my statuses. But if no one could see my stats to begin with, what use would this function serve? Could a separate skill allow the user to view other people's statuses?

And if the camouflage decreases my stats temporarily, that would be incredibly useful for Miyoshi's tests... Still, I shouldn't do anything unnecessary for the time being.

“Next measurement please,” I said, returning my STR point.

After five hours, my statuses now looked like this:

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 665.856

HP: 250.00

MP: 190.00

STR: [-] 100 [+]

VIT: [-] 100 [+]

INT: [-] 100 [+]

AGI: [-] 100 [+]

DEX: [-] 100 [+]

LUC: [-] 100 [+]

“Good work in there, Kei,” Miyoshi said.

Stepping out of the machine, I stretched my arms and legs. “Man, doing that forty-three times is rough.”

“Nice job,” Midori said, handing me a large mug filled with coffee. “It’s going to take a little while to compile the results, so drink this while you wait.”

“Thank you very much.” I took the mug, but when I gripped the handle, my fingers crushed it into dust. “Uh, what?”

The handle hadn’t just broken. Like I said, it had been crushed into dust, as if something had pulverized it. Of course, the mug fell to the ground, spilling coffee everywhere.

“Oh, crap!” I exclaimed. “S-Sorry about that!”

“You okay?” Midori asked. “No burns, right? If any spilled on you, the restroom’s right over there.”

“Th-Thanks,” I replied.

Leaving the cleanup to Miyoshi, I ran into the restroom. Of course, I gripped the doorknob with the utmost caution. While running water in the sink, I withdrew a ten-yen coin from my pocket, pressing it between my thumb and forefinger. As I slowly applied pressure to the coin, it snapped in half without the slightest resistance, as if it were made of rubber.

“You’re kidding me...” I mumbled aloud. “I have no idea how to control my strength.”

If my increased STR had this much of an effect, a light jog might look like teleportation to an observer. And if I gently petted a dog, its head could very well explode. Elite explorers had gradually increased their physical abilities over a long period of time. Thus, their bodies had become accustomed to these changes, allowing them to control their strength.

“Yeah, I understand the reason behind the minus sign now.”

Muttering to myself, I lowered my statuses to a slight increase in strength.

Name: Keigo Yoshimura

Rank: 1

SP: 665.856

HP: 250.00

MP: 190.00

STR: [-] 30 [+][70]

VIT: [-] 30 [+][70]

INT: [-] 30 [+][70]

AGI: [-] 30 [+][70]

DEX: [-] 30 [+][70]

LUC: [-] 100 [+]

Though LUC and INT probably wouldn't have much of an effect on my daily life, I did lower INT, as it might turn Water Magic into something deadly. On the other hand, having high LUC couldn't hurt anyone, right? As I considered this, my phone vibrated. Grabbing it from my pocket, the caller turned out to be a most pleasant surprise.

"Mitsurugi?"

Pressing a button, I accepted the call. "Yoshimura speaking."

"Hello there. This is Mitsurugi."

"Thanks for coming out with me last night. Did you need something?"

"Well, um, about that..."

Apparently, she'd wanted to thank me for last night, but due to kissing me on the cheek, she'd felt embarrassed, making it difficult to call.

"But for some reason I don't quite understand, I felt the irresistible urge to call you just now," she admitted.

Is this because of my high LUC?

"Anyway, my dungeon training seems to be having a real effect," Mitsurugi continued. "According to my technique instructor, I'm like a top model who's lost her memories."

Even though she hasn't learned the techniques, her body can move exactly as instructed. She would give off that impression.

"And so, my lessons are progressing much faster than anticipated," she said. "I was supposed to attend five classes a week for the rest of the year, but now it's been cut down to three."

"Does that mean you'll be able to start working?"

"No, not yet. Since my actual job won't begin until next year, I have quite a bit of unexpected free time. So, I thought we might go dungeon diving together, like we promised the other day..."

Huh, is she inviting me on a date?

That being said, dungeons were probably the least romantic places on Earth.

“That sounds great,” I said. “Starting on the twenty-seventh of this month, I’ll be away for a few days. But apart from that, I haven’t made any plans for December yet. If you tell me what days you’re free, I can adjust my schedule to accommodate yours.”

“Thanks! Well then, I’ll email you my free days soon. Sorry for calling you at such a busy time.”

“No problem. Talk to you soon.”

Hanging up the phone, I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. The man staring back at me looked like a child who had just received a surprise present. Of course, when I told Miyoshi about this later, she had plenty of quips.

Speaking of Miyoshi, she had already discussed the development of the measurement device with Midori. The good and bad of quantifying abilities were inseparable. As such, we had no way of knowing how society would react to this revolution. Nevertheless, we researchers merely did what we were capable of. The people who used this technology in the future could decide the rest for themselves.

Epilogue

A Few Days Later A Certain High Society Party

“Who’s that beautiful woman?” one man asked. “I’ve never seen her before.”

Walking through the venue, the woman in question wore a pale, lime green dress. Though her beauty wavered dangerously between girlish femininity and maturity, it held fast. The graceful, curving silhouette of her dress captured the transformative moment between girl and woman in all its beauty. Likewise, her ruby earrings and pendant enhanced her gorgeous smile.

“Oh, that must be Ahmed’s daughter,” another man replied.

“Ahmed from Mumbai? Isn’t it...taboo to speak of his daughter? I didn’t know she had any siblings.”

“No, from what I’ve heard, that *is* his one and only daughter.”

“What?”

“A few days ago, father and daughter visited Japan, and when they returned, she looked like that. Rumors of her miraculous recovery have been making the rounds within our high society circles.”

“I hadn’t heard. Did they make an appointment with a skilled plastic surgeon?”

“If there’s a physician who can regrow missing limbs, they must have made a deal with the devil.”

“Then...she must have received transplants, right?”

“Finding such beautiful limbs that matched would be difficult, not to mention her face. If such procedures were possible, Ahmed would have paid for them a long time ago. And even if she *did* receive transplants, her recovery happened in the blink of an eye. She would have needed at least a year of rehabilitation,

don't you think?"

"Do you mean to say this is the work of a potion?"

"Apparently they tried using a potion before, and it proved ineffective."

"Then what on earth happened?"

Just then, a man with a splendid mustache joined the two men's conversation. "I met a sorcerer in Japan."

It was Ahmed Rahul Jain. One of the wealthiest men in India.

"Ahmed?!" one of the men cried out. "I beg your pardon."

"Don't worry," Ahmed replied, wearing an amused smile. He didn't seem to mind the gossip. "No matter where I go these days, I overhear people talking about my daughter's recovery."

"Then if you don't mind my asking, is 'sorcerer' a metaphor for something?"

"No, I simply have no other word to describe him. It was an unbelievable day."

"What? Your daughter recovered in a single day?"

Ahmed nodded. "Her body did at least."

"I can hardly believe it."

"Yes, I felt the same way. And her heart recovered a mere two days later... All thanks to those ruby earrings and pendant."

Asha's accessories, which occasionally sparkled in the light, were fine pieces indeed. However, the earrings and pendant were both normal collection designs, not high jewelry.

"Harry Winston, if I'm not mistaken," one of the men said. "Yes, they're certainly nice. But a man of your means could have afforded a unique piece of high jewelry, no?"

"Of course," Ahmed answered with a laugh. "Still, accessories imbued with magic have a different sort of value."

Waving, he then walked towards the next guest.

“What do you make of all that?” one of the men asked.

“If you happen across a sorcerer in Japan, you can regain your lost limbs, as well as your beautiful features. Oh, and magically imbued jewelry can fully heal a broken heart.”

“Isn’t that exactly what Ahmed just told us?”

“What can I say? If there’s no other way to describe something, it must be magic.”

“If such a thing is possible, former elites who have lost their beauty or physicality are liable to flood Japan in droves. Athletes, models, actresses, and even soldiers will want to meet this sorcerer.”

A diminutive man, who’d been listening to their conversation from the side, finally spoke up. “Truth be told, I’ve heard an interesting rumor.”

“What’s that?”

“Before Ahmed visited Japan, a strange auction took place within the country.”

“An auction? Held by Christie’s?”

“No,” replied the diminutive man. “Because this auction wasn’t conducted by any major house, hardly anyone outside of specialized business circles heard of it.”

“Cut to the chase. No need to act so self-important.”

“Only two auctions have been held so far, and each time, only four items were sold. However...”

“Yes?”

“The auctioneers made roughly two hundred million dollars.”

“Hold on a second. Items costing twenty-five million dollars apiece were sold outside of any major auction house? I’m surprised anyone placed a bid.”

“Auction houses across the world would give their right arms to sell these products. Nevertheless, none of them have the means to do so.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because once these items come into existence, they disappear within a mere twenty-three hours, fifty-six minutes, and four seconds...”

“You can’t mean...”

“Yes. The auction house—or rather, a personal sales website—sold skill orbs. What’s more, the bidding lasted three days.”

“That’s ridiculous...”

“Of course, everyone suspected fraud, but someone with a WDA license operated the site, and it still hasn’t been shut down.”

“In other words, these sellers conducted normal business?”

“If we’re to believe the WDA.”

“You said these auctions weren’t well known, but if this turns out to be true, everyone wealthy enough to purchase an orb will flock to this website.”

“I expect so. Thus far, most buyers have been related to militaries across the world. Everyone else is waiting to see what happens.”

“This is hard to believe all at once,” one of the men said.

“Indeed it is,” his friend agreed.

“But this is where the story gets truly interesting,” the diminutive man continued.

“What now? I can’t handle much more of this.”

“Believe me—you’ll want to hear this. During the second auction, which was held not too long ago, an unknown skill orb was available for purchase.”

“What of it?”

“The orb’s name was ‘Super Recovery,’ and the winning bid was placed two days after Ahmed arrived in Japan. What do you make of that?”

The two men who had been originally conversing exchanged glances. Afterwards, the tallest of the three men turned towards the diminutive interloper. “It makes for an interesting story, but Ahmed’s daughter suffered her injuries before the appearance of dungeons, correct?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Then how could she acquire a D-Card? You think she single-handedly defeated a monster in that condition?”

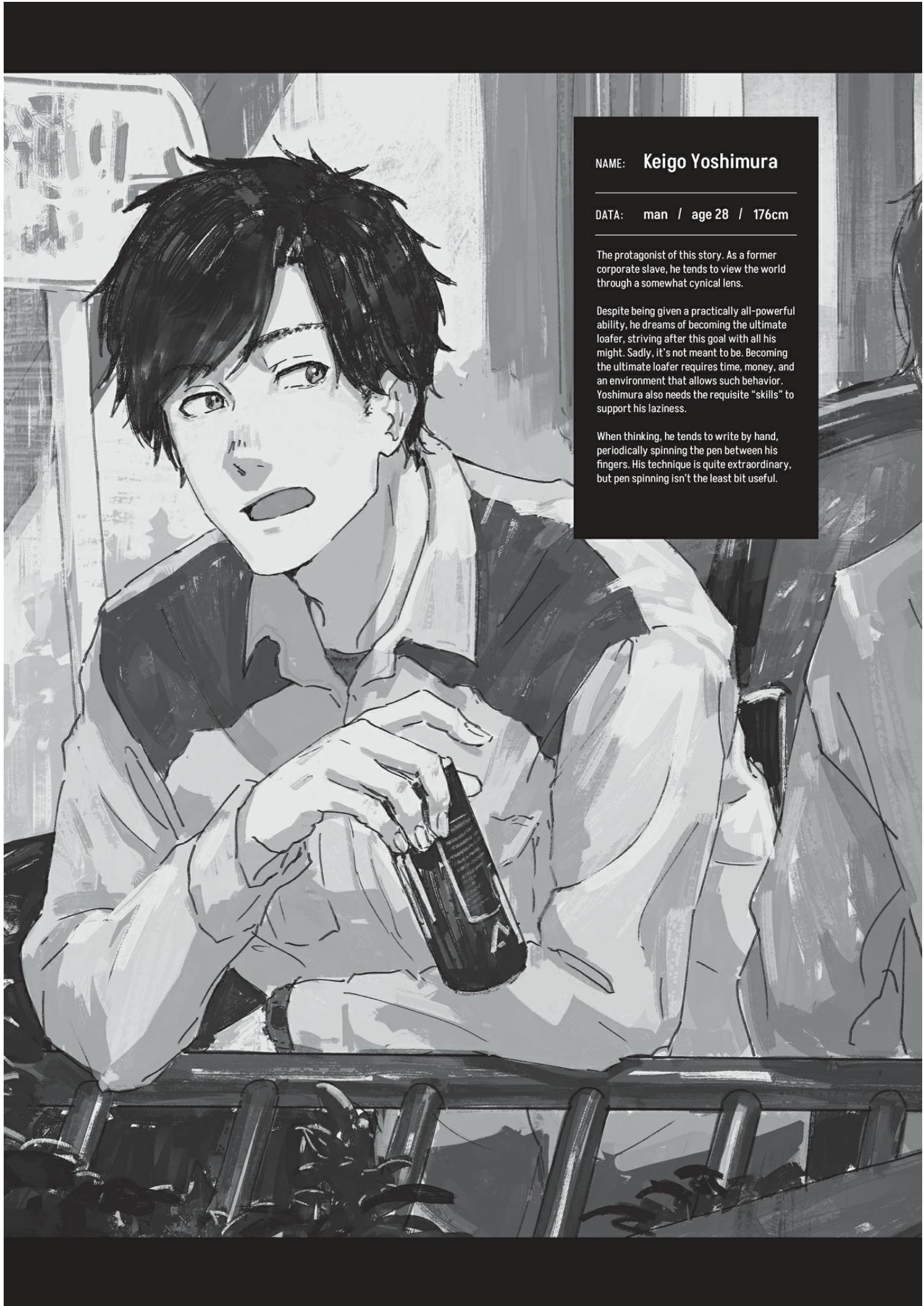
The diminutive man looked frustrated. “Yes, that *is* the single flaw in this story.”

After spending years in a wheelchair, could a person missing both arms and one leg ever hope to defeat a monster on their own? Asking her to swim across the Strait of Dover sounded more realistic. After all, the human body would float in seawater.

“This Japanese sorcerer must have figured out a way to help her,” the diminutive man concluded.

“It’s quite a fantastic story. Speaking of which—”

The conversation changed to the complications surrounding Brexit.



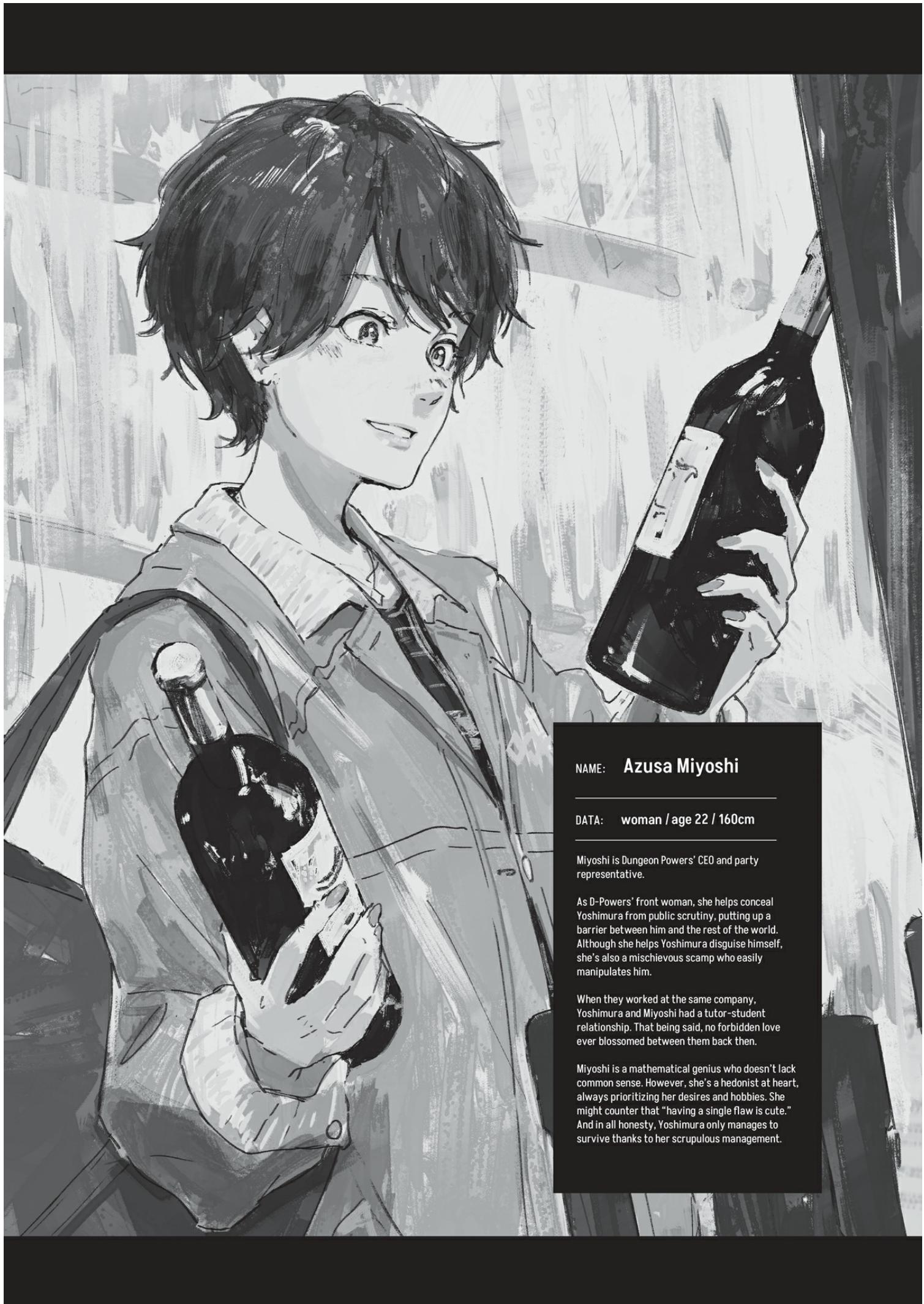
NAME: Keigo Yoshimura

DATA: man / age 28 / 176cm

The protagonist of this story. As a former corporate slave, he tends to view the world through a somewhat cynical lens.

Despite being given a practically all-powerful ability, he dreams of becoming the ultimate loafer, striving after this goal with all his might. Sadly, it's not meant to be. Becoming the ultimate loafer requires time, money, and an environment that allows such behavior. Yoshimura also needs the requisite "skills" to support his laziness.

When thinking, he tends to write by hand, periodically spinning the pen between his fingers. His technique is quite extraordinary, but pen spinning isn't the least bit useful.



NAME: Azusa Miyoshi

DATA: woman / age 22 / 160cm

Miyoshi is Dungeon Powers' CEO and party representative.

As D-Powers' front woman, she helps conceal Yoshimura from public scrutiny, putting up a barrier between him and the rest of the world. Although she helps Yoshimura disguise himself, she's also a mischievous scamp who easily manipulates him.

When they worked at the same company, Yoshimura and Miyoshi had a tutor-student relationship. That being said, no forbidden love ever blossomed between them back then.

Miyoshi is a mathematical genius who doesn't lack common sense. However, she's a hedonist at heart, always prioritizing her desires and hobbies. She might counter that "having a single flaw is cute." And in all honesty, Yoshimura only manages to survive thanks to her scrupulous management.



NAME: Miharu Naruse

DATA: woman / age 25 / 168cm

Hardworking people drawing the short straw is a constant in life. As the former Miss Keio, many people thought Naruse would become a TV announcer, but she joined the JDA of all things. The Dungeon Management Section—where she works at the front lines—has an abysmal retention rate for women. Throughout her three-year tenure, Naruse's strong sense of responsibility has led to misfortune on more than one occasion. After being assigned as D-Powers' full-time supervisor, she's become the victim of one outlandish event after another. Because of this, her facade has begun to crumble, with her true nature shining through more and more. This has led to rumors about her friendly attitude and her relationship with the section chief. At the age of twenty-five, she's beginning to worry that she actually *enjoys* drawing the short straw.



NAME: **Haruka Mitsurugi**

DATA: **woman / age 20 / 171cm**

After Mitsurugi nearly collapses under the weight of all her hard work, Yoshimura comes to her unexpected rescue. As a result, she develops a fondness for him.

Because this led to a favorable turn in her life, a spontaneous crush might be inevitable, but is this *love*? Honestly, even the author doesn't know for sure.

In 2019, she'll become an exclusively contracted model for the Fiversity brand. Even so, the life of a model is in constant flux. Before her new job begins, she'll be dragged away to fashion week.

Afterword

If you're a newcomer to *D-Genesis*, it's nice to meet you. If you've read the web novel, hello again. When I began writing this story, I chose a pseudonym similar to the name of Ki no Tsurayuki, who pretended to be a woman while penning the *Tosa Nikki*. Thus, I became known as Kono Tsuranori. You can call me Kono.

Yoshimura—the protagonist of this story—is a normal guy. Being a corporate slave for a number of years has turned him into somewhat of a cynic, but this has only strengthened his empathy for people in similar positions. At his core, he doesn't have a warped view of the world. Despite being skeptical of Making, he also fears the magnitude of its power. But fortunately, he has the mental maturity to accept and process these things.

In typical light novel fashion, the story begins with our protagonist gaining incredible power through unexpected good fortune. Still, modern adults—especially those without a strong desire for recognition—probably wouldn't use this kind of power in a grandiose manner. Doubly so if they didn't fully understand it. Like Yoshimura, most people would try to remain inconspicuous and prevent causing a stir. In short, they would continue living as normally and peacefully as possible.

Suddenly gaining an incredible power would be similar to winning a huge sum of money in the lottery. Even after claiming their prize money, many Japanese people continue living the same lives. We don't even quit our jobs, much less do anything more drastic. Honestly, I'd probably keep working too. But first, I just need to win the lottery, goddamn it!

Ahem... Excuse me.

After metaphorically “winning the lottery,” Yoshimura’s thought patterns must have been similar to a normal person’s:

-I don’t want others to know about this.

-I don't want to hang out with people who will try to take advantage of my good fortune.

-Still, I *do* want to show off a little.

Thus, Yoshimura acts accordingly, and by pairing up with Miyoshi, he wins the metaphorical “second lottery.”

Miyoshi is more or less (sorry, I know that's harsh) the heroine of this story. But unlike the exceedingly normal Yoshimura, she's a genius in one particular field. Despite being extremely logical and diligent, she possesses one fatal flaw. Her various hobbies—food obsession included—threaten to transform her into a deadbeat. When Yoshimura first tutored her at their old workplace, he didn't criticize this aspect of her personality, allowing her to sponge off him. As a result, she came to trust him.

Miyoshi would have been the most disappointed employee if Yoshimura had just quit. Upon seeing his D-Card and learning of his circumstances at an Italian restaurant, Miyoshi worried about what might become of Yoshimura without an agent. Thus, she offered herself as a potential candidate. After spending so much time with otaku upperclassmen at university, she tends to think of all men as being sloppy and irresponsible.

When you put these two characters together, their chemistry is palpable.

At first, Miyoshi successfully monetizes Yoshimura's blunders, dreaming of the easy life. Sadly, reality turns out quite the opposite. Though she quit her old job due to its exploitative nature, this new venture proves no less busy. If you obey your workplace's demands without complaint, people will all refer to you as a “company man or woman” in a derogatory fashion. On the other hand, if you choose to do something of your own volition, people will accuse you of being self-absorbed.

Strange, isn't it? (I know this from experience.)

Despite how many blunders Yoshimura and Miyoshi have committed, those in power haven't driven them into a corner yet. Perhaps you find that surprising. In part, this is due to their abilities. However, Japan honors the rights of its individuals on more than a surface level, which also plays a major role in the characters' continued freedom. If the same story took place in a different

country, the plot might have gone in a completely different direction.

But this *is* a work of fiction, right?

The various locations in this story, which are scattered across the world, mostly conform to reality. Additionally, certain events occurring within the narrative *did* happen at that time and place. And if you trace back the actions of important people to their exact dates, perhaps these individuals behaved identically in the real world. Even so, these are all coincidences. Reality is simply inseparable from the infinite number of persons, places, and things in the world.

Although this is fiction, I was careful not to insult any trademarks. An IT company could have a fictitious name due to a character potentially saying “their communication speed is slow” or “their processing is heavy.” I imagine this caused the editorial and legal departments a lot of grief. As such, I would like to thank them again here and now.

Of course, the restaurants appearing in this work are all fictional. Nonetheless, restaurants closely resembling those in the narrative might exist, and on that particular date, they might have served very similar dishes. Again, this is all coincidental.

And thanks to the Miyoshi filter, only high-quality restaurants appear in this work. Similar restaurants in the real world are likely to be just as good. Few cities are blessed with as much great cuisine as Tokyo. If you ever have the chance, please visit.

If this book hadn’t been commercially published, I planned on writing a food report from Miyoshi’s completely honest point of view. Sadly, there are some things I can’t do anymore. But if the chance ever arises, I would still like to write something similar.

And finally, this web novel received an official publication because of my loyal readers. Similarly, the second volume will only be possible because you are holding this book in your hands right now. I can’t thank you enough, dear readers. I hope to see you in the next few volumes as well.

Annotations

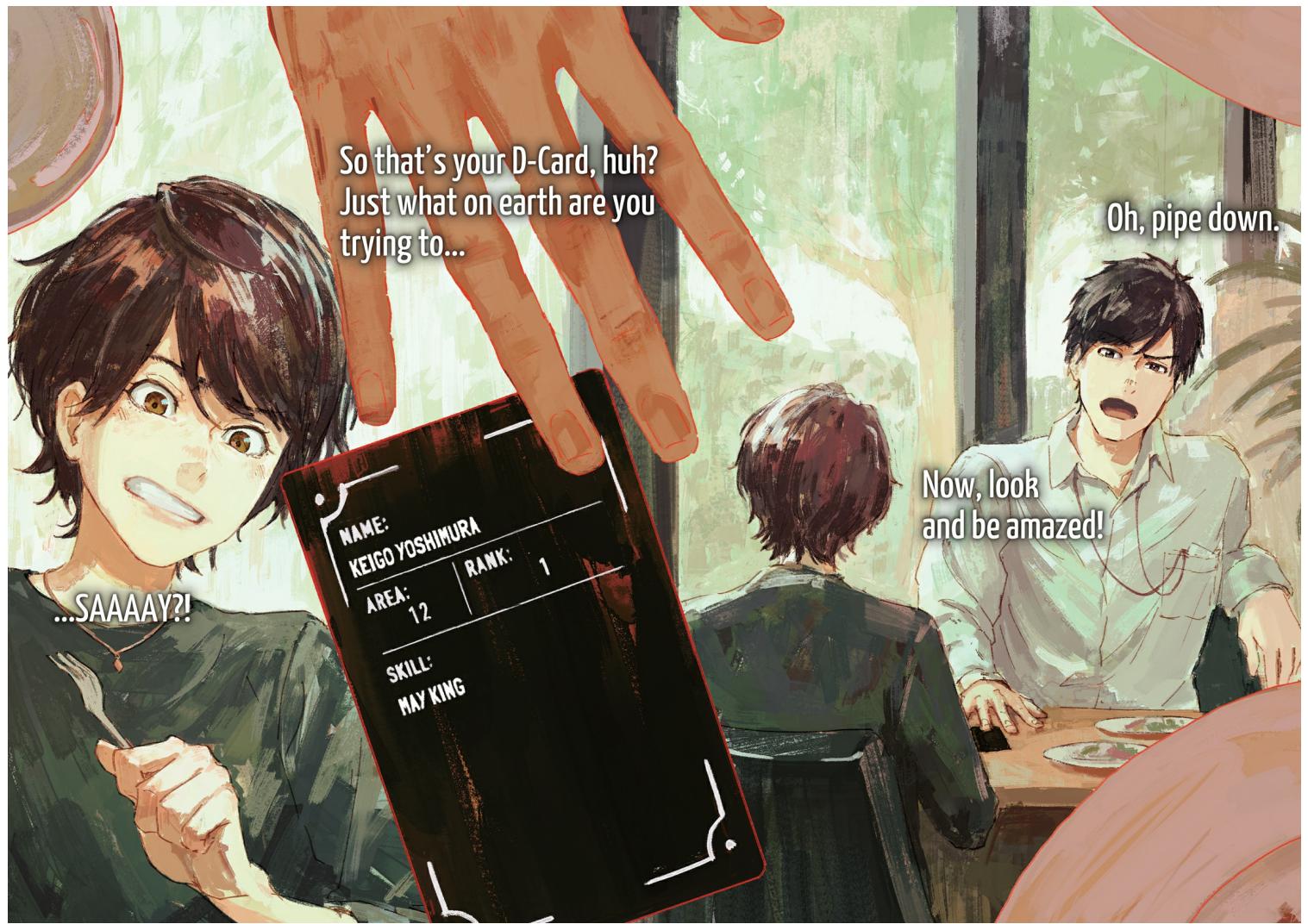
Prologue

1. [GAU-5A ASDW](#): US Air Force survival rifle (Aircrew Self-Defense Weapon).
2. [Were those scientists experimenting on a teleportation device between Phobos and Deimos?](#): The setting of *DOOM*. After its release in 1993, this game took the world by storm.

Chapter 02

1. Something-Or-Other Farms, Slipped-My-Mind Farms: Don Pachi Farms, Esmeralda Farms.
2. Due to their difficult-to-control roasting time, this variety of coffee bean needed to be handled by a skilled artisan while still green: Roasting Geisha beans requires precision down to the second. Likewise, the washing process is particularly demanding.
3. Who else would reenact a scene from a Raymond Chandler novel with me?: From *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler. On the eighteenth floor of the Los Angeles Police Department, the protagonist finds a bug in his office and gently releases it into the flower bed outside. No matter how many times I read it, this incomprehensible scene always leaves an impression on me.
4. Patriot Express: A charter flight operated by the US Air Mobility Command. Usually, the Patriot Express arrives at Yokota Air Base on Friday morning.
5. HESPER: An AI appearing in *The Two Faces of Tomorrow* by James P. Hogan. On the lunar surface, HESPER receives high priority orders to level out a crater. With no restrictions imposed on the AI, HESPER uses its mass driver to blast off the ridge of a mountain, causing an accident.
6. Is this guy a lieutenant with the LAPD's homicide division?: This is a reference to Columbo—a fictional detective portrayed by Peter Falk in his most well-known role. In Japan, the character is famous for the peculiar way he refers to his wife during interrogations. And just when the suspect is about to leave, Lieutenant Columbo often stops them by saying, “Just one more thing.”
7. HMV: High Mobility Vehicle. Personnel transportation vehicles used by the JGSDF.
8. “Anu tira yamun”: “Something wicked is possessing that cavern.”

9. *“...it takes twelve years to accumulate the prayer power needed to select a deity”*: In reality, the Izaiho festival was only held once every twelve years for other reasons. This is a fictional explanation created to suit the narrative.
10. *“Munne mutarin. Airyafu turu shimun”*: “Something wicked possessed the priestess, spiriting her away. A terrifying thing to behold.”
11. *An insane, made-for-television movie by Asylum*: This refers to *Sharknado*, a 2013 TV movie about a tornado that picks up a large number of sharks, making them fly through the air and attack people.
12. *Type-89*: Howa Type-89 Assault Rifle. The main rifle of the JGSDF.
13. *MK3 Hand Grenades*: The MK3 is a small hand grenade with a harm radius of two meters. The shock wave of its blast is used to kill or injure enemies.
14. *Type-06 Rifle Grenades*: Type-06 rifle grenades can be used with the Type-89 assault rifle. Of all places, Daikin Industries—an air conditioning manufacturer—produces these grenades.
15. *If you’re not a customer or employee, I doubt anyone would let you through here*: In reality, this isn’t the case, as there’s a restroom there.





So, where can I find tempura, geisha, and Mt. Fuji?

Dude, it's 2018. Right now, Kobe beef is all the rage. Are we anywhere near Kobe?

Simon, isn't the inside of this base still considered America?

You guys. Mt. Fuji is farther west. Kobe beef and Kyoto's geisha are in the Kansai region as well. In other words, everything you're talking about is far, far west of here. We're in Yokota right now.

Wow, so this is Japan, huh?



D GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared

WRITTEN BY

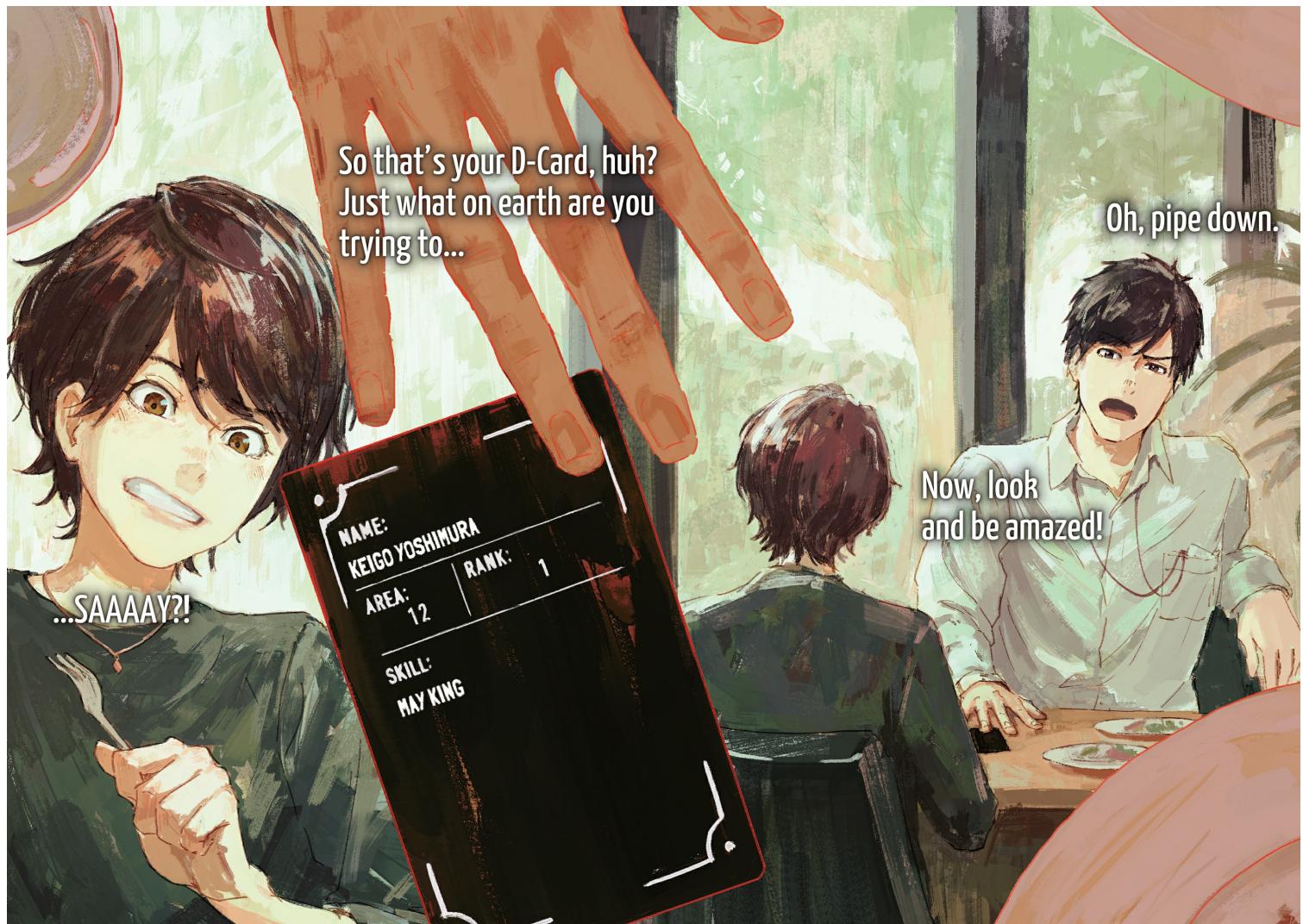
KONO Tsuranori

ILLUSTRATED BY

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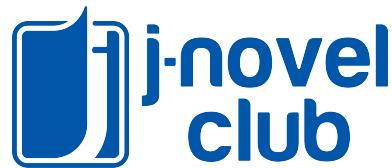
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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 1

by KONO Tsuranori

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Edited by Alyssa Wejebe

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D GENESIS DUNGEON GA DEKITE 3 NEN Vol.1

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