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ID GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared



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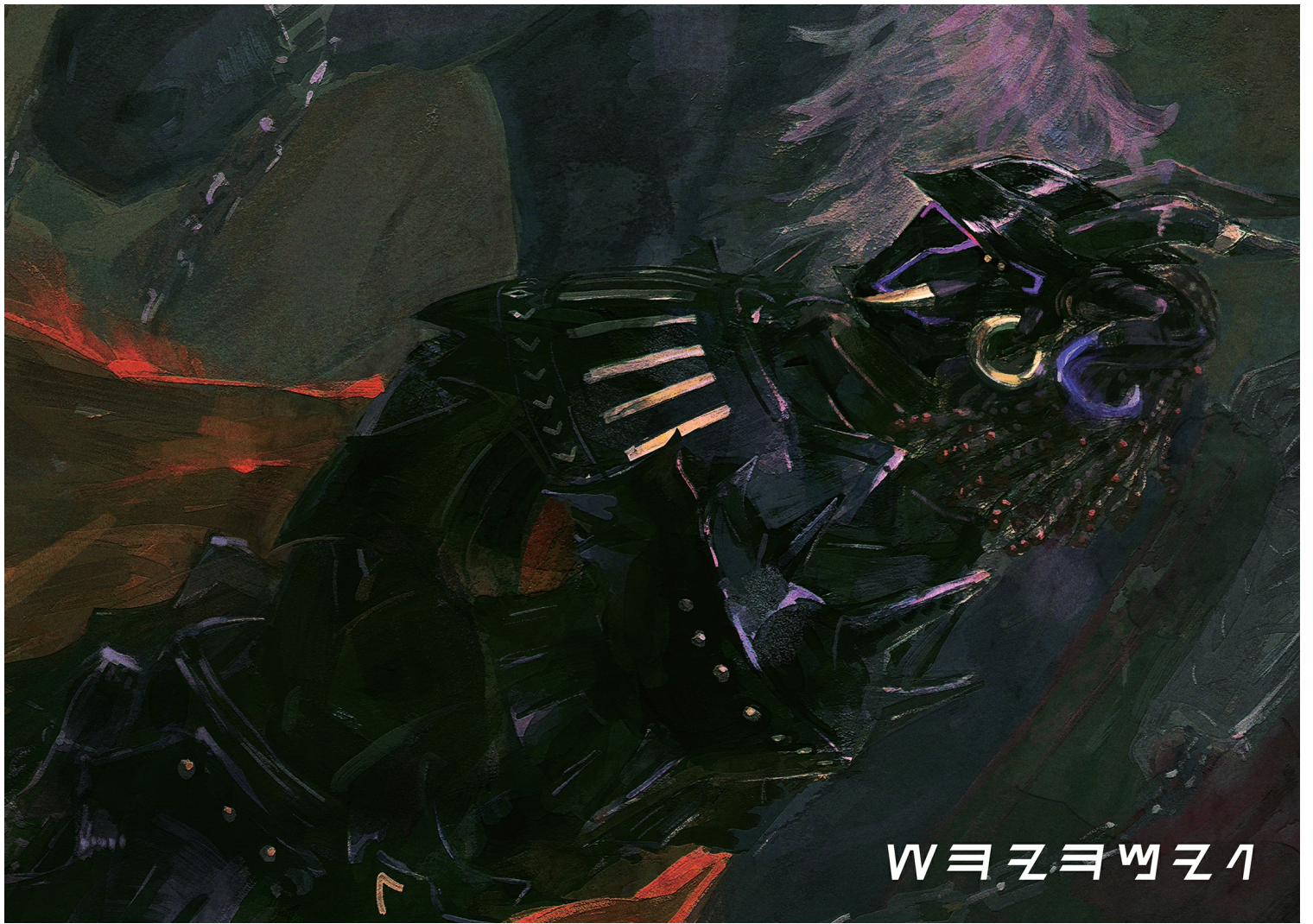
GETZYS





“The night is long.”

“Let’s enjoy!”



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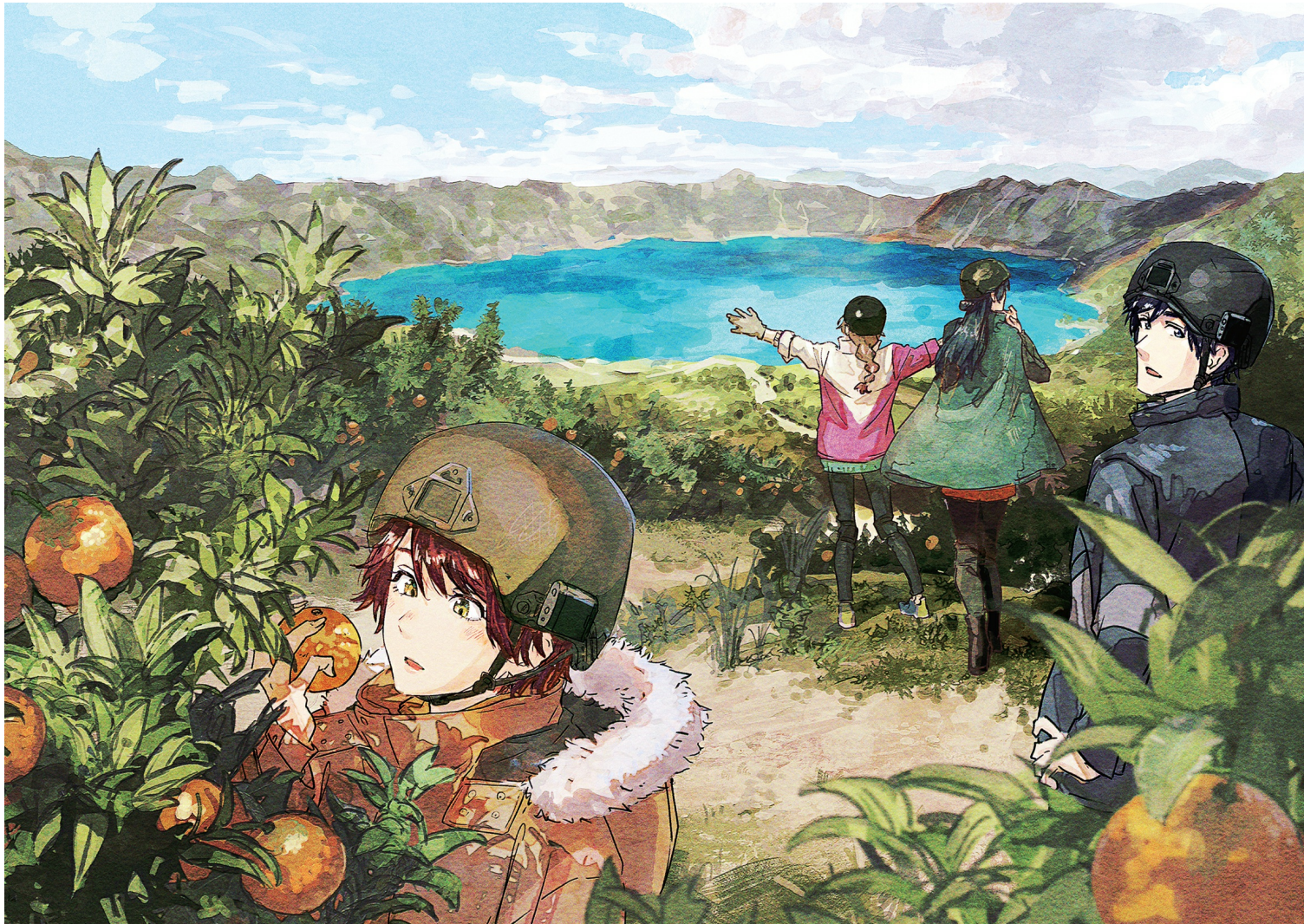


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Am Grunde des begründeten Glaubens liegt der unbegründete Glaube.

——— *Über Gewißheit / Ludwig Wittgenstein*

At the core of all well-founded belief lies belief that is unfounded.

——— *On certainty / Ludwig Wittgenstein*

Prologue

Washington, D.C., United States of America

“Seismic monitoring stations: no data. Hydroacoustic stations: no data. Infrasound stations: no data. And I don’t suppose this bears saying, but radionuclide stations...”

John R. Dalton looked up from the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty International Monitoring Systems report. “No data” was once again written in bold letters.

Dalton eyed the man across from him, upon whose uniform sat a badge displaying a single red stripe against a silver-gray background.

“The weapon *did* detonate, correct?” Dalton confirmed.

J. D. Mashford, who had been at the scene himself to set up the bomb, elegantly crossed his legs. He was a bright star even among chief warrant officers of the USMC. He’d been transferred to the US Dungeon Department specifically to lead this mission. Among his fellow marines, it was rumored that “J. D.” stood for “John Doe.”

“Assuming it wasn’t broken,” he answered unhesitatingly.

The bomb had been wrapped in a porous, anti-slime shielding. If the shielding had performed as it had in testing, it should have been able to withstand slimes for up to ten minutes.

“And yet according to this, there’s not a shred of evidence.” Dalton rapped his hands against the report, then tossed it across the desk. “No primary radiation detected from outside, no fallout, no residual radioactivity. So tell me: did it really go off?”

“The dungeon was empty, after all.”

According to the report, a trip into the dungeon afterward had revealed no bomb, no monsters, and no leftover equipment—not to mention no sign of

several explorers who were supposed to have been inside.

But it was precisely those absences which spoke to something having happened.

Either way, if this report were true, and the outcome replicable, it would mean nuclear tests in dungeons could be conducted undetectably. Thankfully, the results were known only to those involved, and no other countries currently seemed brazen enough to conduct a similar experiment without fear of being found out.

For now.

It wasn't difficult to build a nuclear weapon. If this report leaked, there were any number of nations and organizations which might jump at the chance to conduct clandestine weapon tests. Plutonium-239 was relatively easy to obtain compared to uranium-235.

Dalton shook his head.

"You were on the scene," Dalton observed. "What did you see?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. There were no vibrations. Even if there were some sort of sign the bomb detonated, we might not have noticed it inside the safety container. But I can tell you one thing: stepping into the dungeon afterward, I felt a certain feeling for the first time in my life."

"Which was?"

"The feeling that I'd seen the work of God."

Dalton furrowed his brow at Mashford's answer. Still, if the report was accurate, the United States had gotten what it wanted.

"I don't know about God, but if this all pans out," Dalton declared, "the DOE and EPA will be crying tears of joy."

That list of the joyfully damp-eyed would also include the Washington State Department of Ecology and one President Handler, who had slashed the cleanup budget for a certain site—a site just a few miles from the banks of the Columbia River, where the remnants of Cold-War-era nuclear weaponry still slumbered under thirty-five hundred cubic kilometers of parched land.

The Hanford Site.

Currently, 177 tanks of nuclear waste were corroding underground, leaking pollution into the Columbia River. Diluted by the river water, the contaminants already fell below the lowest thresholds of detectability, and the public health risk was negligible. Nevertheless, responsibility for the site and its cleanup had been the subject of several lawsuits over the years. Whatever verdict came down, however, there was no cleaning up spilled milk—or rather, radiation. It wasn't as though Handler wanted to be sitting on his hands, but at this point there was nothing to do but wait, observe, and keep broadcasting the site's safety.

However, if they could move the waste somewhere that offered safe and instant disposal? That would be another story.

Most of America's dungeons fell under the authority of the nongovernmental US Dungeon Association, the country's branch of the World Dungeon Association. However, the United States possessed one dungeon under direct jurisdiction of the national government: the Ring.

Dalton wasn't sure if Mashford had heard him whisper the dungeon name. His conversation partner displayed no reaction, merely sitting dispassionately, as if waiting for their conversation to end.

Investigations of the Ring had been tabled and access to the area prohibited. But they should be able to work out something if they were only using it as a garbage dump. There would be no need to brave the inside where strong monsters lurked—just pouring waste in through an opening would suffice. For transport, taking Interstate 82 from the Hanford Site in Washington to Interstate 84 near Hermiston, Oregon, then US Route 93 from Twin Falls, Idaho to reach Area 51 in Nevada would allow them to make the trip in fifteen or so hours. Airlifting the nuclear waste might be on the table as well. Area 51 was an airbase after all.

However, there was one concern.

"I hear the missing DSF members turned up safe in Yoyogi."

Dalton could have sworn he saw Mashford's eyes twitch. However, any look of discomfort on his countenance faded in but a moment. It was like looking at

the surface of a tranquil pond, Dalton thought.

“It was an unfortunate accident. But I’m glad to hear they’re all right,” Mashford responded, voice lacking any hint of goodwill.

Team Simon and the JSDF had been caught up in the blast despite being informed of the detonation time. The bomb must not have gone off as scheduled; there was no other way they would still have been in the dungeon otherwise. Dalton had felt that old-fashioned heroes like Team Simon needed to be taken off the board, but not if it required taking an entire JSDF unit with them.

“Did Hathaway put you up to this?” Dalton uttered the name of the secretary of the US Dungeon Department.

Mashford shrugged his shoulders—neither a confirmation nor a denial. Dalton shuddered to think that this could have been the result of the USDD and USDSF’s squabble, but he knew what kind of dark political machinations could occur behind closed doors. Either way, conspiracy or no conspiracy, they were faced with an unavoidable truth and problem: some rather inconvenient old heroes remained.

“Glad though I am to learn of their safety,” Mashford continued, “you’ll have to forgive me if I forgo their company for a while.”

It had been a truly miraculous outcome, but having “items” discarded at Yokohama turn up in Yoyogi had troubling implications. If that relocation phenomenon held true for everything left behind in a dungeon... Forget potential nuclear cleanups or experiments—if any evidence of their nuclear contribution to the Yokohama situation had made it over to Yoyogi, the United States would be implicated in an international incident.

Did the dungeons truly dissolve waste or merely transport it? Turning over those two possibilities, Dalton concluded that in the meantime there would be nothing to do but to wait, run tests, and broadcast that everything would be all right.

Chapter 9: Miner

January 20, 2019 (Sunday)

Sakuragicho, Yokohama

“Looking at the aftermath, even I’d believe nothing happened.” Miyoshi pushed open the door to Shinshinan, our first-floor laboratory, while holding an ion chamber survey meter.

The room was exactly as we’d left it—slightly untidy from the commotion with our cleaner and slime experiments.

Exactly as we’d left it...save for the absence of one of those cleaners in the acrylic tank. Apparently it had already been gone by the time Naruse came around to check last night, peeking in from the front door.

“It really did fly the coop,” Miyoshi confirmed.

“Doesn’t seem like it’s been hiding out multiplying. What’s the reading on the meter?”

“Nada.”

Miyoshi’s survey meter was sensitive enough to pick up radiation levels as low as one microsievert per hour. As long as we weren’t on an international flight basking in cosmic radiation, it would sit at zero at basically all times. We only had to watch out if the meter started fluctuating.

“You’d never guess a nuclear explosion just happened two floors below,” she added.

“Yeah,” I replied. “But still, better play it safe until we know what’s going on.”

We were outside the dungeon, and even within one, each floor was thought to be its own separate subspace. Radio waves and electronic signals couldn’t cross them, so radiation probably couldn’t either. That said, even though we’d

heard that the immediate postincident investigation hadn't shown anything abnormal, we'd still wanted to check it out ourselves.

"Naruse *did* say it was all okay..." Miyoshi commented.

"Yeah, but I don't want to die on someone else's safety report. Trust, but verify."

"You sure do like making work for yourself," Miyoshi responded with a grin, sitting down at the PC she'd set up to record the cleaner. "Looks like this baby's been running the whole time. We can play it back and try to figure out what happened to Wiggly."

"Running the whole time?" I responded. "It's been more than a full day. Can it store all that footage?"

"Modern HDDs can hold more than ten terabytes."

If the speed ran at four Mbps, that would be one megabyte every two seconds. Which would be 1.8 gigabytes per hour, and only 90 gigabytes after fifty whole hours. You could run eight separate feeds and still not reach one terabyte in two days.

"Okay," I responded. "The blast would have been a little before 6:15. Anything?"

"Let's see..." Miyoshi called up the 6:15 time stamp, then began scrubbing backward. Suddenly, she stopped. "Kei..."

On exactly the sixteenth frame after 6:13:57, rather than dispersing into a cloud of black light like we'd expected, the cleaner simply vanished. There one moment, gone the next.

"It looks like a jump cut," Miyoshi observed. She moved back and forth between the fifteenth and sixteenth frames. The cleaner disappeared and returned over and over again—gone without a trace. "I wonder if this is what happened to all the cleaners on the second floor."

"Seems likely," I responded.

"The world is full of mysteries!" she said, beaming.

"As if the dungeons alone weren't mystery enough."

The more mysteries we—no, humanity—encountered, the more our sense of the mysterious itself dulled.

“Speaking of mysteries,” I commented, “the bomb was supposed to go off at a quarter past. It detonated more than a full minute early. Strangely haphazard for a sensitive military operation.”

“You’re not suggesting someone was trying to eliminate the JSDF’s Dungeon Attack Group and make it look like an accident, are you?”

“N-No. I’m not saying that...”

The person who had set up the bomb had claimed to be a Falcon employee. But even if he were some sort of American government operative, there would be no reason to want to take out Team I.

“Well either way.” Miyoshi leaned back. “At least we can tick off one box. We know what happened to the cleaner.”

That truly was a relief. At least now we didn’t have to worry about a rogue cleaner escaping from our laboratory and causing Yokohama Part 2.

“Now, speaking of mysteries...” Miyoshi cast her eyes toward the staircase to the second floor.

“You’re not seriously thinking about...”

Going all the way down the staircase would take you directly to Yokohama Dungeon’s eighth floor—equivalent to the 160th in an ordinary dungeon.

If you could directly access the eighth floor from the stairs, and clear both it and the ninth floor beyond it, you might be able to get to whatever lay on the other side. It might be the shortest route to the end of a dungeon in the world.

“The monsters on the first and second floor are said to be about eight times as strong as the equivalents in Yoyogi. If it’s a linear relationship, the eighth floor and ninth floors would be comparable to Yoyogi’s sixty-fourth and seventy-second,” Miyoshi observed.

“But they’re bosses. Don’t expect linearity. Plus we don’t really know if that scale holds up even on the early floors.”

“C’mon, Kei. Aren’t you curious?”

“You know all the doors in the stairwell open to the outside, right?”

If something burst out, that would be one crucial second less to react than if the doors opened inward. Of course it also meant we could block them with simple doorstops, but who knew if those would hold?

“Don’t you think it’s weird?” Miyoshi asked.

“Think what’s weird?”

“As easy as it is to wander straight down to the eighth floor of Yokohama, they haven’t designated it an off-limits area like on the eighteenth floor of Yoyogi.”

“Personal responsibility? No, in that case, they wouldn’t mark the Batian Peak off-limits either...” I racked my brain. Yokohama was already off-limits to all those but B-Rank explorers and above, but that was just due to the skill thought necessary to tackle the second-floor boss monsters. It wasn’t a way of deterring people from heading down to the lower floors.

“All you have to do is walk down the stairs,” Miyoshi emphasized. “You really think no one’s tried it?”

The JSDF had famously brought in equipment including armored vehicles and been turned back at the third floor. It seemed hard to believe they wouldn’t have tried the inner staircase at that time. The same went for other curious explorers. All you had to do to get a peek at the lower floors was walk down the stairs. There was no way someone hadn’t tried.

Tenko, for example, seemed like he would have rushed straight down.

“So does that mean people have gone down the staircase before, but no one’s come back up?” I asked fearfully.

No, wait. You had to enter the dungeon through a JDA checkpoint. It was basically impossible to go in and out undetected. We were the only ones who could do that now, since we’d purchased the floor and the JDA reception had moved. If someone had entered and never returned, the JDA would know.

Which meant...

“Hold on. It’s *safe* to go up and down the stairs? Then why don’t we have info

on the lower floors?”

Maybe there was just nothing to see. But even *that* much wasn't recorded anywhere!

“I'm going to go find out,” Miyoshi proclaimed. “Come on, it'll be an adventure!”

“I prefer adventuring where I'm safe.”

A true explorer knew his limits.

“Don't be like that,” Miyoshi pleaded. “What if we're standing on the brink of some massive dungeon secret with no effort at all? Why, we could be the ones to lead the world into a bold, new era—”

“Hoooold on. Don't get ahead of yourself. Save the big moves for the heroes. This is the territory of frontline explorers—people like Simon.”

“Not to wish ill on him, but who's the world going to turn to if Simon bites it?”

“Why would they turn to me?!”

“Obviously because you'll run away before there's ever a risk of biting it! Hope springs eternal so long as the hero lives.”

No one was better at running away than her former office mentor, she added with a smug look. Speaking strictly in terms of AGI, I couldn't argue, but still...

“Maybe,” I admitted, “but I'll say it again—I'm no hero.”

Even if we were just centimeters from our goal, if the going got rough, I'd get going. Nothing said “goner” like “just a little farther...” I had a healthy fear of falling prey to ironic foreshadowing tropes.

“Come on,” Miyoshi pleaded. “Just a peek.”

“You're talking about finding something important, but the most important thing to me is my life, and it's right here. That said...” If Miyoshi's curiosity got the better of her and she went down alone, I'd never forgive myself if anything happened. Maybe it actually would be better to tag along. “Okay. But it's just a walk down the stairs. We're not trying to get in any fights. Okay? Promise?”

“You don't need to hide your true yearning for thrills.”

“I am not!”

“Jeez, it’s almost pitch-black.” We’d headed down the stairs in simple gear, me carrying a polycarbonate shield. We soon reached the landing between the second and third floor where we’d burned the cleaner, then headed deeper.

“Looks like the stairway lights don’t go past the second floor,” Miyoshi commented, shining a flashlight around the ground.

“Careful,” I whispered. “Don’t point that light at the door.”

Miyoshi nodded, then responded quietly. “There are no floor signs either.”

She was right. Usually you’d expect some kind of illuminated wall sign reading “B3.”

“They probably hadn’t installed them yet. The parking garage was dungeonized mid-construction,” I pointed out. The floor underfoot was rough, unfinished concrete. It somehow made our surroundings feel colder. “Hey, how about we turn back?”

“Right. Why with all this darkness, it seems like just the time for something to burst out! Grawhh!”

“You...”

“Come on, Kei. You have double Life Detection. You’re the last person who needs to worry about sneak attacks. Besides...” She pointed ahead, where two golden eyes gleamed in the dark. “Glas says he’ll protect us!”

Right... Cavall and the others were too big to fit in the stairwell, but the little ones would be useful as scouts. Still...

“Glas, eh? Thanks...”

Tamping down my feeling of unease, I continued to the third floor. I hung back as far from the door as I could. Without Night Vision, I’d hardly have been able to see anything. Even with it, the only thing significant I saw was the reflection, illuminated by Miyoshi’s faint flashlight, of the two biggest idiots I knew.

We pressed on. As soon as I stepped onto a stair past the third floor, Miyoshi, who was a little ahead, turned around and grinned. “Welcome to where no man has gone before.”

“We don’t know if someone has gone here before or not,” I countered. “Anyway, just get going. The sooner we can head back up, the better.”

“You sure know how to kill the mood.”

“Who has time to be worrying about moods right now?”

“There’s always time to worry about moods.”

“Words for a restaurant review, not when a crazy strong dungeon monster might jump out.”

Bickering like two children, we moved deeper and deeper down the stairwell. We passed the fourth floor, and the fifth. There was still no reading on Life Detection. And as far as I could see with Night Vision, nothing of interest behind any door. Glas, prancing along in front of us, showed not the slightest hesitation.

We passed floor seven, arriving at the fateful floor eight.

“Hey, Miyoshi...” I stopped in my tracks, probably looking like I’d just seen a ghost. “Why do the stairs keep going down here?”

“Hm, that’s weird. According to the layout, the eighth floor should be the lowest. There’s a boiler room farther down, but it isn’t supposed to be accessible from these stairs.”

And yet there it was in front of us, right before our own eyes—a set of stairs continuing down.

“Shall we?” Miyoshi asked.

“W-Wait!”

The next floor could be the last in the dungeon. After that, it would be—what? Whatever lay on the other side?

“Kei, look!” Having begrudgingly crept down to floor nine, what we saw in front of us was yet another set of stairs. It was still the dead of winter, but my

forehead was drenched with sweat.

“Y-You mean if we just walk down that, we can reach the other side?” I asked.

“If that’s true,” Miyoshi began, “what do we do?”

“‘What do we do?’ Don’t look at me!”

The stairwell was as silent as ever, and Life Detection still registered nothing. Maybe there were monsters around like the chamimiclon, which wouldn’t register even to a double skill-user unless they moved. But then we also had the Arthurs’ heightened sensitivities and Miyoshi’s Danger Sense. I didn’t think anything would get through all three.

“We’re going down there, right?” Miyoshi prodded.

This girl’s nuts! She almost seems excited. Ah well...

I resigned myself to follow.

In for a penny, in for a one-way trip through a dimensional barrier.

We looked at each other, nodded, and took the first, momentous step down.

“Hey, Miyoshi.”

“Yeah?”

“What do you think is going on here?”

We’d been down *thirteen* floors by now, and yet another set of stairs stretched into the darkness before us.

If Yokohama Dungeon was really only nine floors, there was only one explanation that made sense. Taking another look at the set of stairs in front of us, I drew a deep breath.

“Miyoshi, can you think of another situation that resembles this?”

“Actually, I can. I was just thinking about the time with the drone!” Miyoshi reached into Storage, pulled out an ordinary traffic cone, and set it on the floor. She’d purchased a set thinking we might line our wheat field with them.

“All right,” I responded. “Time to go check on the cone.”

I descended the next flight of stairs and, as expected, one vibrant cone greeted me a few seconds later.

“So,” I intoned, “what we’re looking at here is”—I looked up at the flight of stairs behind us, the same stairs I’d just come down—“your standard progress-blocking loop.”

“We should be so lucky. Kei, what if we see the cone again when we try to go up?!”

Y-Yikes.

“Burst into tears and slowly accept our fate,” I responded.

If that happened, we’d just have to steel our nerves and try beating the third-floor boss.

However, luckily, that turned out to not be the case.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Who would’ve guessed the Yokohama staircase acted that way?” I asked.

Miyoshi plopped herself down on the other end of the couch. She’d come out of the shower wearing pajamas even though it was only early evening.

“We can’t be the first ones who’ve noticed, so it’s weird that it doesn’t come up anywhere.” She’d been running through one search term after another on her laptop. She shook her head.

Going upstairs had taken us back to the second floor. We knew we’d made it back up thanks to the glowing wall sign. After that, we’d headed back down to the third floor one more time to grab our traffic cone, then left.

“It is weird. But either way, we should report it. At any rate, it looks like everything’s wrapped up at Yokohama, so we can finally relax.”

“So what do we do about all this?” Miyoshi closed her laptop and set it on the table.

“About all what?”

“This.”

Miyoshi took all the notes she'd jotted down regarding our meeting with Dr. Tylor out of Storage and spread them across the table.

"Oh, *that*..." I folded my arms and tilted back my head, staring helplessly up at the ceiling.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" I unfolded my arms. "That was Dr. Tylor. *The* Dr. Tylor. We'd expected to meet him based on the last page of *The Book of Wanderers*, but thinking rationally, everything we saw is insane."

Even I hardly believed it. But maybe our story would find acceptance in a fiction-obsessed land like Japan.

"Right," Miyoshi responded. "People being disincorporated and reformed and all that. Not to mention reforming with all their memories intact. It's practically a form of immortality."

"But time seems to move for Dr. Tylor once a physical instance is constructed. If each instance overwrites the base file, he'll eventually age."

It would be hard work maintaining a perfect copy of the "software" in perpetuity. Of course, I knew the dungeons' workings probably weren't as simple as that analogy implied.

"It's almost too much to take in," I admitted. "We learned about the dungeons' origin and the goals of whatever's on the other side."

"But we've only heard part of the story, so to speak," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Yeah. I guess we don't know if we can fully trust it. But right now we have at least four things to think about."

Miyoshi adjusted herself so that she was sitting cross-legged on the couch, then turned toward me and stuck one finger up in the air.

"Let me guess. First," she enumerated, "whether we tell America the truth about what happened three years ago. Which, as a matter of course, would involve telling Naruse too."

"Yeah... Simon spilled the beans about Dr. Tylor the other day. We probably owe it to him to let him know, but..."

“But?”

“The DSF works directly for the president. If Simon has to report the news upward, guess who it’s going straight to?”

“You might just get a very forceful gag order from the CIA.”

Hey! That goes for you too!

“Sure wish assassinations were still banned...” I lamented.

In the 1970s, President Gerald Ford, twice the target of assassination attempts himself, had issued an executive order banning political assassinations. However, the order had supposedly since been revoked.

“Oh well. Not like it would come to that anyway.” I grinned bitterly and scratched my head. “We met Dr. Tylor in a dungeon and he told us about their origin. Who’s actually going to believe that?”

Eventually his words might lead to the cracking of all sorts of mysteries, but for right now they would just be the rantings of two raving mad people—that is, unless we had evidence. It was cold comfort to know that any assassination attempt wouldn’t be worthwhile because it would just risk validating an otherwise unbelievable tale. Plus, we already had constant surveillance on us.

“We don’t even have any footage,” Miyoshi responded glumly. “We have nothing to show people at all.”

“I’d bet money the door on the thirty-first floor is gone too.”

Miyoshi was silent for a minute. “Kei, we may have some *indirect* evidence.”

“What?”

“We were teleported from the thirty-first floor to the first, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the time I exited the dungeon wouldn’t be long after I last spoke to Simon and the others.”

“Ah! So you could compare times and see that *something* must have happened to you?”

There was no way to get up from the thirty-first floor to the first in just a few

hours. But still, people would be more willing to suspect we had a teleportation skill than accept that we'd met Dr. Tylor's dungeon-imprint ghost.

"Well," Miyoshi responded after I'd run through my doubts, "I bet at least Simon would believe you."

"But I'm not supposed to have been in Yokohama at all. I can't claim I was randomly zapped to the thirty-first floor of Yoyogi."

"You, um, could just say that's part of the mystery?"

"Be serious! Okay, let's just table it for now!" I pantomimed throwing a crumpled ball of paper to my side. "Anyway, our second concern: whether to tell someone about the Demiurge and her goals."

"Tell who?"

"The JDA and Japanese government? The public at large?"

"The public at large'? I hate to say it, but we'd be lucky to get a few news cycles."

Miyoshi was right. We'd get a few panels of "experts" and entertainers on evening variety shows mixing their own reactions with a few studio-approved opinions, then next week the topic would have moved on to something else.

"Unless..." I offered. "Anonymous message board?"

"Then people would *definitely* think we were crazy."

"Right..."

"Anyway," Miyoshi said, sitting up straight. "Regardless of who we tell or how, what exactly do we say? That there's a godlike entity on the other side of the dungeons who wants to be humanity's savior?"

"Reeks of a cult for sure."

"We'd basically be trying to say we're speaking for the creator of the dungeons. You know we're just going to get a bunch of people saying, '*Wait, who the hell are you?!*'"

Right. Delivering divine proclamations without pushback was indeed the province of cult leaders.

“O-Okay! Table that too!” I crumpled another imaginary ball, throwing it to the other side this time. “Now the third thing: the decisions.”

“Dr. Tylor’s promise that some important ones lie ahead?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah. I got nothing.”

“Well, we’ve brought up two important decisions just now.”

“Yeah, but the way he said it seemed more...meaningful. I feel like they’re something else.”

“Well, then we can’t know until they come.”

“Right. Tabled!” I threw an imaginary paper ball over my head.

“Three issues tabled, zero solved,” Miyoshi commented almost admiringly. “Not a great score.”

“I know. I know! But these... These are uncertain times!” I smacked my hand dramatically against the sea of notes strewn across the table in front of us.

“You’re right. And...we’re just *ordinary* people...aren’t we?” she asked, voice dripping with meaning. Miyoshi uncrossed her legs, turned forward, planted her feet on the ground, and sank into a thinking pose.

Uh-oh. I know that tone, that posture. Nothing good can come from this.

“Yeah...” I responded. “Just ordinary people. Why?”

“It’s not up to *us* to decide the future of humanity! How can we shoulder such a task? You can’t blame us for freezing up like deer in the headlights!”

“Uh-huh...”

“So, an idea,” Miyoshi pronounced. “Let’s just leave this up to the experts. There are people paid to worry about global problems. Whether they believe our story is up to them!”

Miyoshi...seemed to have gotten a little too comfortable farming out problems to consultants. Though her suggestion had a certain appeal.

We wouldn’t have to figure out everything ourselves. We could just kick these questions about the future of humanity over to those already responsible for it. As long as we’d done our best to communicate the problem, we could wash our

hands of the rest.

“I don’t know,” I responded at length. “Doesn’t it feel kind of irresponsible?”

“Kei, the real irresponsibility would be failing because you tried to shoulder too much. Besides, diffusion of responsibility is one of humanity’s greatest tools. It’s the ‘Civil Servant Method’!”

“Seems like you’ve been embracing that method more and more recently.”

“Yes, well,” she responded flippantly, “the stress has been piling up.”

What stress? You’re sitting here cozy in your pajamas in the early evening.

“So we let Simon know about the dungeons’ American connection and wash our hands of it after that?”

“Now you get it! And we let Naruse know about the Demiurge’s goals, and that’s that.”

“Not having proof doesn’t stop us from telling them,” I reasoned. “And our burden of responsibility ends there?”

“See? And like you said, if we disclose this stuff before there’s any hard evidence, we probably won’t have to worry about assassination attempts!”

“Still, no matter who the official announcement comes from, if the only backing is our word, the public’s never going to buy it...” I folded my arms again, and sank back into the couch. “Maybe if we put the final page out there...”

“Whoa. Now *that* would lend us some credibility.”

Sure, some people would claim it was a fake. But our young friend Monica Clark at the DSF could confirm the veracity of the otherworldly language translation, which would lend it quite a bit of credence. Since the Otherworldly Language Comprehension skill only enabled you to *understand* the dungeon language—but didn’t teach you how to write using it—it would be nearly impossible to fake a decipherable page.

“I’m not saying I have any plans to release it,” I clarified. “So we’re stuck at having no hard proof. At best, we hope this becomes the topic of watercooler conversation.”

We didn't know what either Simon or Naruse would make of this yet. But being able to pass the buck on to them would let us relax a bit more... Probably.

"It's not a bad plan," I conceded, frightened by the realization that I was starting to come around to Miyoshi's point of view. "Will we call it 'Operation Drag All Parties Involved Down with Us'?"

"Project Civil Servant!"

This girl really has it out for civil servants...

"Hopefully we can use the same method for that third element we brought up: those other big decisions Dr. Tylor told us would come our way!" I said, spirits buoyed.

"You know, I feel like it just might," Miyoshi responded, brimming with confidence.

"Then last," I uttered, voice growing more somber, "there's the 'cornucopia' riddle. What's that?"

I'd just adjusted myself on the couch, ready to go into deep-thinking mode, when the front buzzer rang. We had a guest.

"Were we expecting anyone?" I asked.

Miyoshi shook her head, then got up and went to check the entryway feed. Standing there was Saito.

"A commercial?"

"Yes," Saito responded. "All of a sudden I'm drowning in offers."

Saito had just been by our office last night, albeit apparently when we weren't there. She probably wouldn't have been coming by again so soon unless it was an emergency, I'd figured. Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be for an *ad*.

"That's great. But, er, did you come all the way here just to tell us the good news?" I asked.

"Now, now. You don't need to be so coldhearted," Miyoshi scolded. "Let's

listen...”

Apparently requests had come from three different companies at the same time. In addition, they’d all requested Saito specifically. Ultimately the ad firm her talent agency worked with had thrown up their hands and passed all the requests on to her.

“Is that really ‘throwing up your hands’?” I asked.

“There’s a delicate balancing act...”

The requests had come from MitsuChem, Shokubai Co., and Shinetsu. All major companies in the same field.

“Ah, that would be hard to navigate...” I crossed my arms.

They were the Big Three of dungeon sciences. No, probably the Big Three of dungeon products period. Perishable dungeon items sold much more quickly than weapons and gear, after all.

“I thought maybe I’d just finally hit my stride, but...” Saito glanced at Miyoshi, who was preparing drinks in the kitchen. “If you want to shoot a general, first shoot his horse.”

Saito was making waves as a dungeon-diving actress, and then there was her archery performance to boot. Companies with their antennas up for good sponsorship opportunities might already have her on their radar, but veteran companies would know better than to buck normal protocol by specifically requesting her. No, if she had that much value, it was probably due to her connection to Miyoshi.

“If anyone’s doing shooting, it should be Artemis, shouldn’t it?” I asked.

“Right?!”

You’re supposed to act embarrassed and say, “Oh, stop it!”

“Ignoring MitsuChem, it’s pretty weird for Shokubai and Shinetsu to be running ads at all,” I commented.

“Really?”

They didn’t make many consumer products, so they had no need to advertise

on TV. Shokubai had previously done some artsy-fartsy spots hiring premier Finnish and Taiwanese directors, but recently had settled solely for radio ads, and end consumers hardly heard anything about Shinetsu at all. It was pretty weird that they'd be investing in sponsorships now.

"What if you just turned them all down?"

"Forget it! This is a huge opportunity!"

"Fair." This was Saito after all.

"Ugh, why are you so unconcerned?"

"Huh? I mean, unlike the whole 'coach' thing, this doesn't affect me directly."

"Isn't that a little cruel? Here's your darling pupil, thrown to the wolves..."

"What wolves? I thought this was a big opportunity?"

"Which contract do I sign?"

Why ask me? Won't every place be about the same as the others? Or just sign whichever has the best perks.

"Does one of the contracts include an introduction to Miyoshi as a clause?"

"Come on..."

Right, no way they'd be so brazen.

"So what do they look like?" I asked.

"All about the same."

"Then what does it matter? Or couldn't you just accept them all?"

They were all companies at the forefront of their industry. It wasn't like she'd be cheated. Plus, if she appeared in advertisements for all three, she'd pretty much be the face of scientific manufacturers in Japan.

She puffed up her cheeks. "These aren't pinup shots in a magazine. You can't go around representing three rival companies in commercials at the same time."

"So that's out?"

"Picture it. The same actress advertising Asahi and Kirin at the same time,

declaring both the best-tasting beer in Japan.”

I shrugged. “Commercials are fiction after all.” [\(1\)](#)

So this was what had been causing such a headache for her agency. Normally only one request, preselected, would make it to a talent at a time. But this time the three competing companies were all at the top of their field. None could be written off. It made more sense for the agency to just throw up their hands and let the starlet herself pick one. Plus, each contract would probably have a noncompetition clause. Someone would have to make a selection.

“So anyway, I have to choose,” she concluded. “And I need help picking a company. You used to work in STEM. I thought maybe you could give me, like, your assessment of the companies.”

“Couldn’t you just *make* your agency choose?”

“They’re asking me which one I want.”

Her agency really was throwing in the towel.

“Uh, let’s see. My assessment of the companies... MitsuChem has the highest sales. Probably by around twice as much.”

“Whoa,” Saito exclaimed. “Really?”

“But Shokubai has had the most success with dungeon-related products specifically.”

The legendary Powder might have been a joint development with the JDA, but Shokubai was the company that manufactured it. The chance to be their brand ambassador would light a fire under anyone’s ass.

“Hm. I wonder if their commercials would have me endorsing specific products.”

“Maybe. But then beautiful budding actresses don’t poop.”

“Huh?” Saito looked scandalized.

“Their main product is a dungeon-use excrement dissolver. Anyway...”

A cushion came flying toward me, accompanied by an outraged shout.

“Pervert! I am *not* representing poop-remover! No way!”

I smiled wearily. “They make other things too...”

“What about Shinetsu?”

“In terms of total profit and overall technical prowess...”

“Yeah?”

“They’re the best.”

Also the value of their stocks was way up.

“So the highest sales is MitsuChem, and the one with the highest number of product successes is Shokubai, but Shinetsu has the highest profit margins and know-how?”

“It depends on the specific area,” I responded, “but that’s the gist.”

It looked like Saito was even more confused than before. “Plenty of pros and pros to consider.”

“You mean pros and cons?” I asked.

“From what you just told me, there aren’t any cons,” she responded.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “But you don’t have to reinvent established phrases to say that.”

“Okay, well, ‘strengths and weaknesses’ and ‘advantages and disadvantages’ all have negative connotations too. A rising actress must be careful not to offend. I’m practicing my *tact*.”

“I don’t think you need to go that far. It almost feels like you’re making fun of them instead.”

“I’m being *respectful*.”

“Give it up.” I tossed back the cushion that had been thrown my way earlier. “Anyway, look, if you can’t choose, they’re really all the same. If the contracts are the same too, you might as well roll a die.”

“Hm... Got it!” She looked up with fiery determination in her eyes.

She’s finally made a decision!

“I’m going to decide with a dice roll, just like my coach said!”

She wrote all three companies down on a piece of scratch paper on the table and drew a circle around each one. Just then I heard a trill, and Rosary came and plopped down on one of the circles.

“Huh? What is this? What a cutie!” Saito squealed.

“It’s uh...” I hesitated. “An American robin? Her name’s Rosary.”

“Why did you say that like a question?”

“Because she *looks* like an American robin, but really we’re not sure what she is. She came from the dungeon.”

In truth she’d come from a lump of benitoite that might or might not have been the vessel for someone’s soul, but it wasn’t wrong to say she’d come from the dungeons.

“Huh? Like Aethlem and the others?”

“Probably. But unlike for the Arthurs, we have to file a notice to keep her. And that’s got us in a bit of a jam.”

Much like with the Arthurs, the WDA had no clauses specifying procedures for adoption of a dungeon-based creature. Other than us, no one had ever tried it before. That meant we had to follow local regulations for registering or reporting pets. But it wasn’t going to be as easy as simply adopting a stray cat (which, incidentally, required the least paperwork of all).

As far as we could tell, the American robin wasn’t on the invasive or endangered species lists, nor was its import prohibited by the Wildlife Protection and Hunting Act. But keeping her did require filing a notice with the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. And while filing the notice was all that was necessary to keep her as a pet...

“The notice contains fields for country of origin, country of export, and area of departure...”

I could just imagine the turmoil if we wrote “Yoyogi Dungeon” in those spots. All we’d needed to write for the Arthurs’ local dog registration was their descriptions and our address as the owners. But for a bird species not native to

Japan, all of the above additional information was required—probably from the perspective of wanting to contain infectious diseases.

“Plus keeping wild birds as pets is prohibited,” I explained. “So we can’t just say we found it flying around here.”

Then again, maybe there was hope. While the American robin was thought to not be native to Japan, there had been reports in the June 2014 edition of *Birder* magazine that claimed some had been observed in Takikawa City in Hokkaido. And apparently that was the second reported sighting. So we might have some wiggle room.

“Ultimately our only option may be to just let it fly around outside and claim we aren’t *owning* it—it just has a nest nearby,” Miyoshi, who had temporarily returned from the kitchen, added.

“Right, see? It’s not like it lives in a cage. We can’t control what it does or where it builds its nest.”

Miyoshi and I nodded as if trying to convince ourselves.

Saito burst out laughing. “Like the bluebird of happiness,” she added dreamily.

“Blue?”

Rosary’s chest was reddish-orange. But her ordinarily gray-looking feathers did take on a bluish hue under certain light. And she *had* formed from benitoite...

“Now that you mention it, she is kind of blue, huh?”

“I guess one really does find happiness in unexpected places,” Miyoshi added.

“Wasn’t blue in the play just supposed to represent the unnatural or impossible?” I pointed out.

I’d heard that at the time the Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck had written the play *The Blue Bird*, there were no actual bluebirds in Europe.

“That’s sounding more and more like Rosary,” Miyoshi responded.

Hm... I couldn’t help but agree.

“Isn’t ‘bluebird’ also slang for policemen sometimes?” I added.

“So Rosary’s some kind of surveillance scout sent by the dungeons?”

“Shhh. That almost seems plausible. Don’t jinx us.”

After having a laugh at how genuinely flustered that got me, Saito had a peek at the table.

“Well, why don’t we just go with Rosary’s choice?” she asked.

The circle Rosary had landed on was Shinetsu’s. “Shinetsu?” I asked. “Not a bad ch—”

“Ah, Shinetsu!” Something seemed to have clicked for Saito. “That reminds me! They actually had a clause I was curious about.”

“A clause?”

“Take a look.”

Saito took out the contract and pointed to a certain section.

The section contained a jarringly specific clause about having to appear in sponsored variety shows.

“Still, TV appearances? Isn’t that normal?” I wasn’t sure what had her on edge. She was an actress. Did she hate the idea of being on a variety show that much?

“Doesn’t this remind you of a certain ‘Dungeon Exploration Squad’?”

“Say what?!”

Had Shinetsu picked up the pilot as a sponsor? Even if they were a sponsor, would they really need to hint at it so brazenly in a contract like this?

“I can’t change the contract, but I also can’t have you following me into the dungeon for protection every time if I need to do the show again either. What should I do?” Saito asked.

“If the timing works out, we could loan you Aethlem.”

We didn’t want him showing up on TV and getting famous, but if push came to shove, it would be better than leaving Saito unprotected. If the cat got out of

the bag, we could always just say he was a servant of Artemis...er, right?

“Really? I don’t know. I’d almost worry for myself more with that drill sergeant.”

Ever since we’d sent them out for slime training together, she’d taken to calling Aethlem a drill sergeant. Nevertheless, the two got along.

“Okay,” Saito said resolutely. “Let’s not question fate. I’ll do it. I’ll sign on with Shinetsu.”

She put the contract away, then put her legs together, planted her feet on the floor, and straightened her posture.

“Now,” she said. “The main reason I came.”

“The main reason?”

It wasn’t for advice on the commercials?!

“The truth is there’s something I have to apologize for.”

“Apologize?”

I was starting to get a sense of déjà vu. I furrowed my brow and shivered a bit involuntarily. From my limited but recent experiences, nothing good ever came of acquaintances suddenly showing up and saying they had to apologize.

“Yep. I’m sorry, but, Yoshimura, I accidentally let your cat out of the bag with your dedicated supervisor.”

“My cat?”

I leaned in closer to see what Saito was trying to show me on her outstretched phone screen. Unfortunately it wasn’t a cat video, but the World Dungeon Association Ranking List. And her finger was pointed right at the top spot.

“Wh-Whaaa?!”

How the hell does Saito know about that?!

“Wh-What are you talking about?” I added, playing it *totally* cool.

“What are *you* talking about?” I felt a sudden tug and realized she’d grabbed

my left hand and pulled me forward. “Do you think there are any two people on *Earth* who both have a weird ring like this?”

Adorning my left pinky finger was the ring with tribal carvings I’d obtained from Ngai. The thought that I’d been wearing the same ring as the Phantom struck me with horror. At first I’d figured it didn’t matter since I’d be wearing gloves, but after deciding the gloves would make it hard to use the sword in the event the handle slipped, I’d ditched them...and forgotten all about the ring.

“So, *coach*.” Saito grinned. “The jig is up.”

“C-C’mon!” I stammered. “I don’t have time to be the number one explorer with my busy career.”

“I don’t even know what your ‘career’ is!”

“H-Harsh...”

This would be tough. Unlike people who knew me from other circumstances besides dungeon training, she didn’t have any preconceptions. She was just calling things as she saw them.

Miyoshi came back out, carrying drinks. “Oh, is Kei finally busted?” she asked.

“M-Miyoshi! What are you saying?”

“Kei, it’s just Saito. It’s going to be more trouble than it’s worth trying to convince her at this point. Better to just admit it and bring her into the fold.”

“Better, huh? O-Okay... You got me.”

“So that *was* you in the cape?!”

“It was, it was!” Miyoshi responded excitedly. “Check it out!” She struck a “Sirius Nova” pose in the middle of the living room, shouting the attack name and all.

P-Please stop. I’ll die of embarrassment.

“Pretty cool for Kei, right?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah!” Saito stood up and struck a Sirius Nova pose too. True to form as a professional actress, she was actually pretty convincing.

I put my hand over my eyes, rubbed my temples, then stared up at the ceiling.

“That’s right!” Miyoshi said suddenly. “We’ve got something new too!”

“Something new?”

“Check it!”

“H-Hey! Miyoshi!” *That next bit’s still under wraps!* “Wait,” I said as realization dawned. “You told Naruse?”

If that were true, she might have passed it up the chain to her square-shaped boss by now.

“Yes,” Saito responded. “But I’m not sure— How do I put this?” she paused. “She seemed surprised.”

Unlike Saito, Naruse had interacted plenty with me in other contexts. She wasn’t likely to simply swallow the claim that I was the first-ranked explorer and leave it at that. She’d probably rejected the idea outright... I hoped.

“Right after I told her, Cavall jumped out, and the whole thing ended kind of vaguely.”

“What do we do about this, Miyoshi?”

If Naruse asked us about it, we could always feign ignorance. It’s not like she’d demand to see my D-Card...would she? I could refuse, but that’d be as good as admitting it.

“Admit it,” Miyoshi repeated, “and bring her into the fold.”

“But she’s a JDA employee. She has work responsibilities.”

Including the responsibility to pass anything she learned from or about us up to her superiors.

“It’s so unbelievable, she could always say she thought it was just idle talk if you ever got publicly found out. No reason to report jokes.”

“I’m not sure that would fly. Either way, she’s the only one who can actually decide what she’ll do.”

“If you ask sincerely, I’m sure she’ll help keep your secret,” Miyoshi said earnestly.

“Whoa,” Saito interjected. “Are Yoshimura and Naruse like that?”

“Nope!” I butted in.

“Like that?”

“Never mind that,” Miyoshi piped up, saving me from the awkward moment in a rare act of sympathy. “Check this out!”

Or at least I’d *thought* she was saving me.

“Whoooa!”

The two watched the footage of my battle with Cimeies, taking turns shouting, “Metatron Pillar!” and laughing.

I would have to do something about this. Starting by crawling into a hole.



Kyudaimae, Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture

A gaunt man concealing his face with a scarf and carrying a shoulder bag opened the door to the slightly dingy café. The interior was dimly lit, the pulse of faint R&B tunes carrying over the speakers. A staff member with a voice as dim as the lights and as even-keeled as the music directed the man to sit wherever he liked.

The man felt the eyes of the few other customers on him. However, they quickly returned to their own little worlds. The man looked around, searching for something, then made his way to a table near the back where a rather portly gentleman had raised his hand in greeting.

“Thanks for coming,” the portly man said with a grin. “I know this is a busy period for you.”

“Please let’s just get on with it,” the gaunt man grumbled. “I’ve only got thirty minutes before I have to be back.”

He reached into his shoulder bag and pulled out some sort of bulging envelope, which he extended to the portly man under the table.

“Welcome.”

The gaunt man jolted back at the sound of a woman’s voice behind him. He shot the waitress a glance.

From his reaction, the waitress knew she’d just witnessed something shady. But she didn’t let it show on her face. She wasn’t paid enough to butt into customers’ affairs.

“You haven’t eaten yet, right?” the portly man confirmed. He turned to the waitress. “One hot sandwich combo with...” He glanced back at the gaunt man. “Drink?”

“Get re— Ah. Ah, I’ll...” Suddenly aware that he was drawing attention, the gaunt man settled on the simplest option. “Hot coffee, please.”

“Got it. That’ll be one hot sandwich set with coffee. That’ll be out in a bit.”

The waitress walked away. The portly man looked pityingly at the man sitting across from him.

“You’ve got to keep your head on. Can’t have people staring.”

“That’s why I said we should just hurry!” The gaunt man’s voice was breaking. His face contorted, as if he were about to cry.

“There, there,” the portly man responded. “Time is of the essence. Have no fear.” He closed his eyes and grinned a Cheshire cat grin. When he opened his eyes again, he spoke in an altogether different tone—flatter, more serious. “Still, you’re wiping away your debt in one lunch break. Not a bad deal.”

The portly man placed the package he’d been handed atop the table and extracted a plastic food container. He cautiously opened the lid, inspecting the circuit board inside. The gaunt man watched with worry, before the waitress returned and set one hot sandwich combo on the table.

“You’d better eat that,” the portly man mumbled, still examining the board. “It’ll get cold on you.”

“Right...” The gaunt man brought one of the wedge-shaped sandwich halves to his mouth with trembling hands.

Now Jay Sean’s “Stolen” was playing over the café speakers, the chorus echoing “stolen” over and over again. By the time the lyrics “It’s crazy but I’m going insane” came around, the gaunt man couldn’t help but smile, cursing his own fate.

The portly man finished his inspection, then looked up, seeming satisfied. “It’s real. Now then...” He pulled out a plastic container identical to the one he’d been inspecting.

“Are you sure this won’t get flagged?” the gaunt man asked.

“Don’t worry,” the portly man replied. “I was working off of very detailed photos.”

The plastic container the gaunt man had handed over was a D-Card verifier—a device that could detect whether someone had a D-Card. Replacing one of the rentals with this fake wouldn’t raise any eyebrows—when it failed to flag

anyone, the users would simply assume that was because none of the subjects possessed cards. Rental equipment tests had already finished, so no one had a reason to poke around again. It would be some time before anyone caught the fake—far too long to pinpoint a culprit.

“The security seal on the market version is a real ally here,” the portly man commented. “Going to help prevent anyone from poking around.” He flashed another unsettling grin. “Ah, and I owe so much to you and the other testing sites for leaning on the manufacturers. Thanks to their rushing, the market model appears to use entirely commercial parts, and there’s nothing concealing the mechanics. Very helpful.”

“P-Please,” the gaunt man protested. “Don’t pin this on me.”

“Of course not. Now...”

The portly man handed over an envelope of his own, which the gaunt man snatched frantically, like one might grab a proffered canteen after days in the desert.

“No other copies?” the gaunt man asked.

“Don’t be so presumptuous,” the portly man answered. “This transaction is based on trust. And I have to trust that if anything were to happen, I could count on you to take the fall. Consider the extra copies a little motivator toward that end.”

“You...!”

“Now, now. Only thirty minutes, right? Don’t worry—I’ll get the bill. It’s the least I can do.”

The gaunt man’s face was red with anger as he stuffed the fake verifier into his bag. Without even a glance at the rest of his half-eaten sandwich, he stood up and bolted for the door as if rushing toward the surface from underwater—as if his feet couldn’t carry him fast enough.

A new song played on the speakers, its lyrics wailing, “If I could only do it over again...”

If only, he thought.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Good evening...”

Naruse showed up well after the end of business hours. Not that there were business hours on a Sunday. She seemed to lack her usual energy.

“Welcome.” Miyoshi took her coat at the door with an overly polite smile.

Naruse let out a sigh. “Just when I thought my day couldn’t get any more stressful trying to manage staff for the National Center exams, you two had to go and pull your disappearing act.” Her lips curled into a pronounced frown. “And then after finding out everyone’s safe, there’s the discovery of a safe area to deal with.”

Since it was still Sunday, news hadn’t spread far, but come tomorrow the JDA would be inundated with inquiries.

In preparation for the storm to come, the JDA had apparently been using a map sent by the JSDF to plot out potential commercial development zoning.

Thankfully the ones to discover the floor had been the JSDF, a group with no commercial ties. A certain famous USDSF team had been present as well and had tried to make a bid to secure land on the floor, but they’d been unable to compete against the JSDF’s numbers in terms of speed of discovering new areas and mapping out the floor.

“Thanks to the Yokohama incident and the National Center tests we had nearly every staff member in office even over the weekend,” Naruse explained. That had allowed them to process the JSDF’s claims quickly. “On a normal weekend with no one in, that safe area might be the fifty-first American state right now.”

Naruse plopped herself down on our sofa, sinking deep into the cushions.

“Sounds rough,” I said. “Now, about the official report—”

“Can I just have a minute?” Naruse smiled. “And some praise?” She took a tablet out of her bag.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to leave the praise to that square-shaped boss of yours.”

Naruse ignored me. “First of all,” she began, reading over her report, “regarding Mr. Yoshimura’s presence at Yokohama, I have the two of you entering Yokohama earlier in the day, on the record. After that, there are no official records of either of you entering or exiting Yokohama Dungeon. That *would* allow you to make the claim you weren’t present in either dungeon. However...”

As I’d been expecting, she turned her tablet around and displayed the entry and exit logs for Yoyogi.

“Explorers matching *both* of your ID’s were recorded exiting Yoyogi later that night.” She pointed to the relevant spot on the list. “The problem is, you were never recorded entering.”

If anyone ran an error-check code, our records would come up straightaway. Since the DSF and JSDF teams still hadn’t come back to the surface, ours would be the only codes pulled showing an anomalous entryless exit.

Yokohama, where we had direct access to the dungeon sans JDA checkin, was an outlier. All of Yoyogi’s entries and exits were recorded. Leaving the dungeon without having checked in would normally be impossible. If such a record were detected, it would be treated as a major error.

After all, leniency brought on legal risk. A criminal could escape into dungeons to avoid arrest. Or someone like I, who had obtained a D-Card before a WDA license card, could slip in undetected and explore off the record, becoming an unregistered human weapon.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Don’t look at me,” Naruse responded. “Even if I deleted the exit record itself, a record of that deletion would remain. Besides, editing requires admin access.”

Apparently grunts like Naruse were limited to read-only permissions.

“But why are you so concerned about proving you weren’t in Yokohama in the first place?” she asked.

She was right to wonder. In this case, we weren’t the only ones who’d been transported. A whole group had gone with us, and they were already in contact with the surface via the JSDF’s communications network. There was nothing in

particular for us to hide—no secrets we’d have that the JSDF hadn’t already reported. At least, that *would* be the case, except...

“Um...” I fumbled for my words.

“Now, the other day Saito told me something I found *slightly* hard to believe,” she continued, speaking past me.

Naruse was a dungeon professional. She wasn’t just going to roll over and accept any cockamamie story Saito told her. But then, the evidence was pretty strong in Saito’s favor.

“U— Huh?” I stammered.

“According to the report that went around yesterday, the JSDF were saved by a certain mysterious figure.” Naruse kept talking at a fast clip.

Internally, I was sweating so much it looked like a waterfall. At least, I hoped it was just internally.

“The DSF members corroborated their account. Someone who wasn’t a member of either team showed up and made the save. And then, after all of it, this mysterious...masked gentleman disappeared into the ether. Or rather, melted into the shadows, I should say.”

“W-Wow. That’s a...pretty fantastic story.”

“Miyoshi, you were there,” Naruse said pointedly. “You’d let me know as your supervisor, right? If you heard anything?”

“Uh...” Miyoshi’s voice filtered in from the kitchen, where she was preparing coffee. It would be easy enough to say she hadn’t, but both Naruse and I knew well enough that if she’d been anywhere near that commotion, she would have come back with stars in her eyes shouting, “Kei! Kei! You’ll never believe what happened in the dungeon.”

“You know, actually I *did* hear something...” I could practically hear the grin in her voice. She stepped out and set the mugs on the dining room table. “Kei. This is your chance to come out.”

“Come out...?”

Naruse bolted forward, slamming both hands onto the coffee table. “So it’s

true?!”

I sighed, defeated, reached into my pocket, and pulled out my D-Card, in a plastic case that obscured the skill list.

Naruse looked at the rank and blinked. “I-Is this real?”

Miyoshi burst out laughing. “I asked the same thing.”

“You also implied I was cheating,” I huffed.

“I... I might have wondered if you were cheating somehow too,” Naruse responded, grinning awkwardly, still trying to compose herself.

“Come *on*!” What did everyone take me for?

“I mean, it’s only natural,” Naruse replied. “You just got your D-Card last October. It hasn’t even been four months.” As if trying to steady herself as she spoke, Naruse wrapped both hands around the cup Miyoshi handed her and brought it to her mouth. “You’d have had to jump past people who have been diving for three years.”

“See, Kei? It wasn’t just me.” Miyoshi placed her hands on her hips. *Okay, I get it. Everyone thinks I’m a cheater.*

“But also,” Naruse continued, “the Phantom appeared on the rankings *before* you got your WDA card, right?” She looked up at me pleadingly, seeming desperate for any information. “What on earth did you do?”

Miyoshi brought me my cup from the dining room, plopped herself onto the couch, then put a finger up to her chin.

“Right, Kei. Did you find a dungeon out behind your apartment and plop a storage shed over it for personal use? Or have a micro-dungeon form inside a desk drawer? Or secretly go on a journey to another world and come back with cheat powers?”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, you said you’d tell me eventually, but you just left me hanging!”

“Did I say that?”⁽²⁾ I’d totally forgotten.

Apparently when I’d first showed Miyoshi my D-Card, she’d asked how I had a

D-Card without being registered as an explorer. We'd been on lunch break, still working at our old company, and had run out of time before I could explain. I'd promised I'd give her the full story later.

"Well, if you still want to know"—I gave in—"I guess this would be the best time."

"Of course we want to know. Right?" Miyoshi asked.

Naruse nodded vigorously.

And so I began my tale of what had started with what I'd thought was an earthquake last fall.

"...and that about covers it." I wrapped up my saga, glanced at the dregs of coffee pooled in the bottom of my cup, and downed the room-temperature liquid in one gulp.

Naruse had been wearing a serious expression since halfway through the story. "This wouldn't have been on September 27th, would it?"

"Huh? Uh..." I tried to recall. "I'm not sure."

"The day you treated me to lunch was the last working Friday of September," Miyoshi answered. "The day before that would have been the 27th."

Whoa, what a memory. Though it might have just been because of the food.

"Then that might have been..." Naruse trailed off.

"Might've been?"

"At around 2:30 p.m. on that date, a dungeon genesis tremor was detected near the Ayoma gate of the new Japan National Stadium," she responded.

"What?"

"I'm the one who recorded it. I was helping out the Monitoring subsection that day."

Miyoshi and I looked at each other. So the dungeon I had picked up my D-Card from had been recorded after all.

“The dungeon recorded should have been massive-depth. Five times deeper than Yoyogi!”

“Five times?!” Miyoshi squawked.

“That explains why the rebar took almost twenty seconds to fall, judging from when I heard the impact.”

“Any rebar around that area would have been for pretty heavy-duty construction,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Yeah. They were probably D41 bars. Or if not, D38. They look pretty similar.”

D41 bars had a diameter of forty-one millimeters, with the D38 variant following suit. I only knew those two off the top of my head, but it seemed like the naming conventions corresponded to diametrical measurements in general.

“That’s about four centimeters. Taking some assumed weights, falling for twenty seconds...” Miyoshi crunched some numbers in her head. “The depth must have been...at least a thousand meters?”

It seemed like she’d arrived at the same conclusion I had. If it took something as dense as rebar, falling vertically and encountering minimal air resistance, twenty seconds to reach the bottom, we were talking about a considerable depth.

“Actually, if my calculations are correct,” she continued, “it would even be greater than *fourteen hundred* meters.”

Even though I knew it was a long drop, that figure still took me by surprise. However, there was one thing weighing on my mind.

“Why didn’t the rebar get stopped by the first dungeon floor?” I asked. “Each level is supposed to be its own subspace.”

“Probably because of the Genesis Rule,” Miyoshi answered simply.

“Genesis Rule?” I repeated.

“Kei, we were just talking about this the other day. That professor in Chicago who theorized that bosses act as D-Factor generators?”

“Oh, right. Like cores for the dungeon, pushing D-Factors up from the bottom

floors.”

“Exactly. And the basis was observing a dungeon forming under an abandoned church in Indiana. They were able to record data as the central column was forming.”

According to the observations—which they’d gotten by pure happenstance, being in the right place at the right time—first something like an invisible drill bored its way into the ground. Then a core—a bundle of D-Factors, probably the dungeon’s boss—began emitting D-Factors that spread upward and coalesced into the dungeon’s various levels.

“Judging from the timing of each observation drone’s destruction, it seems like the dungeon floors don’t become separate spaces until they’re fully formed,” Miyoshi explained.

Naruse had been listening intently. “That could explain why the deeper the dungeon, the longer its tremors last. It takes a longer time to bore all the way down, and for the D-Factors to spread upward.”

“How the heck did those Chicago scientists manage to get drones into the dungeon mid-genesis again?” I asked.

“Fluke of timing,” Miyoshi replied. “The professor himself said so.”

“Then it was probably the same kind of luck with the rebar. They fell just after the dungeon started forming, before any of the floors could fully form, and dropped down straight on the boss’s head.”

Just that single fluke of timing had allowed me to beat the boss of a dungeon five times as deep as Yoyogi.

A one-hundred-kilogram bar falling at a speed of six hundred kilometers per hour would contain 1,387,700 joules of energy. One ton of TNT produced about 4.2 billion joules.

“Hold on. That’d still be a force less than one one-thousandth of a ton of TNT,” I observed. “That doesn’t seem like it’d be enough to take out the toughest boss ever encountered.”

“You’re not taking area into account,” Miyoshi scolded.

TNT explosions spread out spherically. In my case, all the force of one rod would be concentrated into an area of impact with a radius of about two centimeters. That was a much more focused application of force than a TNT blast.

“Plus,” Miyoshi added, “the dungeon was also taking a while to form, and maybe the boss was too. A baby dragon’s scales take time to harden, after all. Maybe you hit it when it still had a weak spot.”

“I don’t know if I love what you’re implying there.”

“Ten-meter D41 rods weighing around one hundred kilograms—each practically its own holy staff. And you had a truck bed full of them? Forget it. I don’t think *any* monster is walking that one off.”

“All right,” I responded. “You’ve got me convinced.”

Plus, it wouldn’t have just been one TNT-plus-level impact. As soon as the first rod struck, it would have been joined by dozens of others—a deadly heavy-metal rain shower. With the dungeon having just started to form, the boss wouldn’t even know what had hit it.

“So there you have it,” I said as I turned to Naruse, having processed Miyoshi’s explanation. “My dumb mistake probably killed a freshly formed, massive-depth dungeon boss, and as a result I got a stupid amount of experience and was able to jump to number one.”

“I see. That clears up the mystery of last year’s massive-depth dungeon too.”

“What’s the official record on that, by the way?”

“They did maintenance on the monitoring equipment soon after that, so it was probably chalked up to technical error.”

Although she was fairly certain they hadn’t found anything wrong during checks, she added, which my revelation also helped explain.

Now Naruse’s demeanor changed. She set aside her stunned amazement and regained the look of a fastidious JDA employee, returning to the matter at hand.

“Thank you for explaining. Now then, the matter of the dungeon entrance

records,” she began. “Yesterday, we received contact from the JSDF at 10:31 p.m.”

“Uh?” I cocked my head, unsure of what the JSDF contact time had to do with our entrance and exit records.

“When we got word from the JSDF, we shut down the entry-and-exit log system for a period of two minutes in order to investigate any influence the apparent connection between Yokohama and Yoyogi might have had on it.”

Wait, don't tell me...

“All entrances and exits during that small window were recorded by hand by reception staff from the Dungeon Management Section,” she continued.

“Wait...”

“But...” She grinned. “With the National Center tests, and the crisis at Yokohama, we hardly had any staff to spare. Recording entries and exits during the maintenance period fell to one dedicated supervisor. All logs were handwritten, to be turned over to a system admin for entry later. Who’s to say mistakes weren’t made?”

Y-Yes! One point to our dedicated supervisor! Where our physical prowess proves powerless, her administrative acumen is authenticated! Our champion! Our hero! She should be wearing the cape!

“Miharu Naruse,” Miyoshi proclaimed.

“Yes?”

“You’ve got a serious devious streak.”

“Naruse, you deserve a reward,” Miyoshi continued. She extended a tablet to Naruse.

“What is this?” Naruse cocked her head.

As soon as she saw what was displayed, she froze.

“Th-This is...”

It was the entirety of Miyoshi’s knowledge on Storage.

“They found a safe area, so I figure Storage’ll be necessary sooner or later,”

Miyoshi explained.

“That’s true, but...is all this real? Are you sure?”

The data contained unbelievable claims, like that Storage probably didn’t have a mass limit—and even if it did, it exceeded two hundred tons. Even more shockingly—

“It really slows time?!” Naruse pronounced each word as if not believing what she was asking.

“That part’s actually a huge pain,” Miyoshi responded. “Any future users better prepare themselves.”

“A huge pain? How so?”

Pretty much any modern electronic device contained an internal clock, which would become offset by being put into Storage. I had reservations about putting my phone in Vault for the same reason.

“You have to resync to an NTP server [\(3\)](#) every time you get your devices out,” Miyoshi explained.

“But surely there are other benefits to slowing down time by one half.”

“You’d be surprised.”

It had a net negative effect when storing electronic devices, and while it could keep foods hot or cold for a certain amount of time, that wasn’t all that much. Perishables would last longer but still spoil—they were usually better off in a fridge. Finally, you could increase an orb’s shelf life to forty-eight hours, which was nice, but rarely if ever useful. All told, we hadn’t gotten much benefit out of Storage’s halved time yet.

If anything, having a way to *speed up* the passage of time by one hundred percent might have been more beneficial.

“I see,” Naruse replied.

“Anyway, the skill’s functionality might also depend on the user’s INT stat. Just as a warning, that data’s all from when my INT was 16.”

“Got it,” Naruse responded. “Th-Thank you.”

“So, where do we say Kei was all that time?” Miyoshi asked. “If he wasn’t in Yokohama.”

“Oh, right.” We’d solved the issue of my coming out of Yoyogi, but the explosion at Yokohama would have been at around 6:15 p.m. We could say I went into Yoyogi anytime before 11 p.m., but how were we going to explain the five missing hours? Plus, what would I have been doing diving in Yoyogi so late?

“If you think about it, it isn’t just the time that’s an issue. Diving in Yoyogi under these circumstances is weird on its own,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Can I just say I had a divine revelation or something?”

“You cannot! What if the, uh, shock from the blast in Yokohama knocked you out while you were in our lab? That’s why you headed out so late.”

“But Naruse came by to check on the cleaner and didn’t see me.”

“But I was alone.” Naruse noted. “And I can say I only checked the area by the front and the cleaner tank.”

“Since the lab is still littered with cardboard boxes, it’d be easy to miss someone sprawled out in the back.”

“Okay...” I relented. “If you think that’s going to work.”

“It’s better than chalking it up to divine revelation!” Miyoshi shouted.

“Fine...” I wasn’t so sure. Divine revelation could excuse just about anything.

There would still be the problem of me not showing up in any public-transit security cameras on the way from Yokohama to Yoyogi. But this was Japan. Unless I were accused of a crime, no one would have grounds to investigate.

“By the way, Naruse!” Miyoshi added excitedly.

“Yes?”

“What the heck is up with the staircase at Yokohama?!”

Naruse’s face lit up. “I’m assuming you know what it’s like, then?”

“We sure do.”

Apparently the phenomenon was well-known among a certain segment of

explorers and the JDA. That tracked. If you had people plunging down to the eighth floor with nothing stopping them, you'd be looking at some major liabilities. At the very least, it would have been established as an off-limits area like Batian Peak.

"People probably think we'd try to stop them if they asked, so plenty of explorers do try sneaking down," Naruse revealed.

"Then they don't spread the word because they're worried about being found out?" Miyoshi asked.

Naruse nodded. "Even though it's not actually against JDA rules."

The JDA knew how the stairs worked, but since there was no active risk present, it hadn't widely published their properties.

"It's like a rite of passage among Yokohama explorers," she commented.

Back when the dungeon had been more populated, you often saw experienced parties side-eyeing newbies about to try to sneak down.

"Jeez..." I grumbled, suddenly feeling embarrassed. *But still, what the heck? That sounds almost like dungeon hazing.*

"I never expected you two to be inducted into the fold," Naruse laughed.

"Happy to be here. And here we thought we were all the way down on the thirtieth floor!" Miyoshi's face scrunched up in mock anger, but soon all three of us had broken into laughter.

"With that settled," I said, steeling myself, "we do have a few other things to run by you."

"Okay."

"The first one's kind of tough, the second one's a major headache, and the third one is the most difficult consultation you've ever received in your life."

"Can I go home now?" Naruse shot back.

Oh, right. She'd only come over here to talk about how to handle the aftermath of Yokohama. She wasn't expecting such a serious conversation.

"Kei, of course she's not going to want to listen if you put it like that." Miyoshi

wagged her index finger. “Try ‘This is earth-shattering information that can only be delivered here and now, and if you miss out, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.’”

I gave Miyoshi the most plaintive smile imaginable, then turned back to Naruse.

“I’ll start with the one that’s just ‘kind of’ tough and work up.”

Naruse’s shoulders slumped. “Must you...?”

“Miyoshi?”

“Um, right.” Miyoshi responded. “We’ve decided to market our anti-slime tools.”

“The anti-slime tools? You mean those anti-slime suits and the—what was it?—MakiroGun? I *was* planning on asking about those soon...” Every bit of Naruse’s body language seemed to indicate she’d rather discuss this tomorrow.

“There’s no time. The JSDF and Falcon are going to be analyzing samples from the equipment we gave them.”

“That’s...true,” Naruse admitted.

We’d given them full access to equipment doused in and filled with the fluid. It would have been weirder if they *hadn’t* taken a sample for their own analysis.

“High performance liquid chromatography tests will reveal its composition. That’s why I’m hoping I can ask the JDA to make it known far and wide that we’re pursuing a patent.”

“The JDA...” Naruse began. “You mean specifically the Commercial Affairs Section?”

Affectionately known as “the Guild” due to its work’s resemblance to various fictional counterparts, the Dungeon Management Department’s Commercial Affairs Section—a sister section to Naruse’s Dungeon Management Section—took care of nearly anything and everything related to dungeon economics that didn’t pertain to direct supervision of explorers.

Miyoshi nodded.

Naruse kneaded her brow. “I’m glad it’s not us for once, but does this conversation really need to happen right now?”

One could get their hands on benzethonium chloride anywhere. Miyoshi was going to be applying for a patent on the method⁽⁴⁾. That would prevent anyone else from trying to market the same technique or product in relation to slime-killing.

Ordinarily that would also mean negotiating complicated licensing deals to allow for the method’s use, but simply selling our products through the Commercial Affairs Section would take care of all those issues. It depended on the price, but given the convenience, lots of people would probably prefer to purchase the substance from the JDA rather than prepare their own, even after finding out how common a substance it was.

“If possible, I’d also like to request the Commercial Affairs Section help with production,” Miyoshi added.

“Of the liquid?” The JDA didn’t possess any chemical processing plants.

“Nope!” Miyoshi pulled out a tablet with a business plan open on it and passed it to Naruse.

“The D-Card starter set...” Naruse read out loud. “D-Parture Kit?”

She seriously called it that?!

“We can’t go selling MakiroGuns, but this should do. How about the name? Pretty good, huh?” Miyoshi asked proudly.

“I...” Naruse paused. “I see.”

“Naruse, you can be honest,” I offered. “We can always change the name.”

“It’s certainly unique.”

“Unique.” Miyoshi frowned. “I know a backhanded compliment when I hear one.”

Name aside, the set contained a small squirt gun with specific, precise nozzle measurements, and a small spiked hammer that looked like a meat tenderizer—everything one would need to kill their first slime.

I'd wanted to keep our slime-killing technique secret a little longer, but I'd always known we'd have to unveil it someday. We were sure to get questions after our demo at Yokohama, so we'd decided there was no time to waste in producing a market-ready version. Someone with more resources, like a government organization or large corporation, might have been able to wait for slightly more advantageous timing, but we were a company of two.

I'd been worried about having more people hanging around on the first floor of Yoyogi, but Miyoshi had pointed out how unlikely that was. People might try farming slimes out of curiosity early on, but they didn't have any drops. And even knowing how to abuse slime-farming for maximum XP intake, we found it so unpleasant we considered it a monk-like regimen. The average person with no way to easily measure their own stats wasn't going to stick around offing slimes.

If information on their orb drops went public, it might be another story, but we had no plans to unveil anything like that yet. Even if we wanted to, we couldn't specify how we knew the full list of possible orbs.

No, if there were any major problems, it would be ones for the JDA to deal with—how best to manage D-Card acquisition tours using our new starter sets.

"With this, a family could book a trip to the dungeon so that even Junior could obtain a D-Card. Risk free!" Miyoshi exclaimed.

D-Card acquisition tours usually involved the use of small firearms or crossbows. It was dangerous, and also expensive, due to the need for extra guards alongside the tour guide, and it went without saying that children need not apply.

But this could change the equation.

"Still..." Naruse began.

"Relax," Miyoshi interjected. "There's nothing but slimes on the first floor of Yoyogi. Even if one glommed on to you, one spritz from the squirt gun would take care of it. You saw how well the liquid worked in Yokohama."

"Yes, but..."

If Miyoshi were correct and even preschoolers would be able to safely obtain

D-Cards using the set, people might start to view the dungeons as play areas, rather than potential hazards.

“I guess we’re kind of making this sound like a toy,” I pointed out.

“It *is* a toy,” Miyoshi countered.

Touché. A squirt gun.

“But I get a feeling that isn’t the main issue.” Miyoshi looked at Naruse, who seemed to be nursing an increasingly onerous headache. “Either way, given that Yoyogi’s smack-dab in central Tokyo, I’m pretty sure this’ll make bank.”

The kit was practically a hyperlocal item for Yoyogi’s first floor. This made it the perfect product for the Yoyogi JDA dungeon shop, which sold useful equipment for the location it was connected to. The dungeon shop was also run by the Commercial Affairs Section.

“But I get the feeling the sales projection isn’t the problem either,” Miyoshi continued.

Considering how big a seller it would be for them, it made perfect sense to have the JDA handle production as well, but the Dungeon Management Section was currently dealing with the triple punch of the testing issue, Yokohama’s aftermath, and the discovery of a safe area. Its staff were probably all in zombie mode. Adding production of a major commercial item on top of that? Sure, it would be a different section, but as the two sections were both under the Dungeon Management Department, personnel apparently got shuffled between them fairly regularly. Forget zombie mode—we might just wind up with death from overwork. Of course, zombies were *already* dead.

But when it rains...

“We’re going to wind up with more minors trying to get WDA Cards,” Naruse said at length.

“Probably...” Miyoshi admitted.

“Then we’ll have to prepare.”

It did seem like more minors going through the JDA’s seminars and getting licensed was likely to pose a problem in the future. That would mean even

more work for poor Naruse, given that she was in charge of dungeon starter seminars.

Her shoulders visibly slumped.

“Okay,” she responded. “I’ll pass word to Commercial Affairs tomorrow.”

“Great! Now, you wouldn’t happen to know anyone who wants to obtain a D-Card but doesn’t have one, do you?” I asked.

“Erm?”

The truth was, we hadn’t tested our D-Parture Kit to see if it really worked for D-Card acquisition. Since someone other than the user would be loading the mixture into the squirt gun, we weren’t sure if the dungeon would recognize the user as the person who killed the slime. The rules surrounding D-Card acquisition were strict, and it was already a well-known issue that having someone else load a gun with bullets for you would result in not getting a card.

It stood to reason that the same logic might apply to loading fluid into a squirt gun. However, the boundary wasn’t clear. We couldn’t be sure until we tested it with someone who didn’t have a card. Unfortunately we didn’t currently know anyone who didn’t already have a D-Card but wanted one.

“With a trap, the person who made it gets the credit, but we know you don’t have to manufacture weapons yourself to get the kill to register, so I feel like it’ll probably work. I haven’t heard anything about people missing out on a card because someone else bolted the blade to the handle on their pickaxe or a hatchet. But you never know.”

“So you just want someone to test it?” Naruse clarified.

“Yeah. I was thinking there might be someone at the JDA who doesn’t have a D-Card yet.”

We’d heard new Dungeon Management Section employees were all sent to a nearby dungeon for some of their early training, but it wasn’t a requirement that they get a D-Card while there.

“There might be a few,” Naruse responded. “But the Commercial Affairs Section would check the efficacy of any item they sold anyway.”

“Oh! Right.” They’d be running tests as part of the production request. “In that case, we’ll leave the testing up to the JDA. Just let us know if the process doesn’t work as a method to obtain D-Cards.”

Although come to think of it, I did somewhat doubt the kit’s sales potential. What would really clean up would be the liquid itself. Even if people knew it was just benzethonium chloride, they would be more likely to trust the mix sold through the JDA. There was the concentration to think of, and the JDA mix would be tried and tested. No one wanted to leave any more than necessary up to chance in a dungeon.

That was one issue down. I put my cup up to my lips. The remaining coffee had gone cold.

“Want a refill?” Miyoshi asked.

I nodded, and she headed off to the kitchen.

“So, next. The major headache.”

Naruse let out an audible groan.

“We met Dr. Tylor.”

“I’m sorry?” Naruse blinked. “Dr. Tylor? The person who’d signed the last page?”

“The same.”

“The one who died in Nevada three years ago?”

“Correct.”

“Then he’s alive?!” Naruse leaned forward over the table.

“Um...I’m not exactly sure?”

“Huh?”

To assuage Naruse’s confusion, I regaled her with the tale of our encounter with Dr. Tylor. Naruse listened, but I couldn’t tell from her expression—blanker than a sheet of fresh printer paper—whether anyone was actually home in Naruse Central Brain Command.

“So the...dungeon...” she said as she began to parse what I’d told her,

“made...him? This Dr. Tylor...construct?”

“Um, yeah,” I responded. “That’s actually pretty accurate.”

The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted in from the kitchen. Naruse’s look of confusion switched to one of pity.

“Oh, Yoshimura. You really went through a lot at Yokohama didn’t you. You’d better get some rest.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. You are not pinning this on a mental breakdown.

I spent the next few minutes emphatically pleading my sanity’s case.

“Then it’s true?” Naruse asked.

I nodded.

“Do you have any evidence?”

“About that...” I scratched my head. “We were recording the whole time, but...”

“That! Footage! That’ll do it!”

“It all came up blank.”

“D-Did it?” Naruse’s shoulders slumped even lower than before. It was a wonder they were still hanging on.

In other words, for evidence: bubkes.

“That’s not all,” I continued. “We also got the lowdown on what happened in Nevada three years ago.”

Now it was time to bombard a freshly expressionless Naruse with a story that sounded like it was straight out of a paperback sci-fi novel. It lined up with most of Simon’s hypotheses, but I’d never guessed I’d get validation from one of the vanished scientists themselves.

“So the experiment in Nevada connected Earth to some other world, and the twenty-seven personnel present were...disincorporated?...by some entity on the other side in order to learn about humanity, leading to the dungeons’ creation?”

“That’s the gist.”

Twenty-seven. It struck me now that was the same number of books in the New Testament. It was *probably* just a coincidence...but the dungeons seemed likely to make something of it.

“And all this was—in your words—like ‘a plane striking a UFO.’ A total freak accident?”

“That’s basically how he put it.”

“And he left it up to you whether to reveal this information?”

“He said he hates getting involved in political diplomacy.”

“Diplomacy...” Naruse responded. “Right, we have to think about that...”

“You mean the JDA’s, or rather Japan’s, relationship with America? Either way, it’d be best to keep them informed right? Or at least, that’s one of the things we wanted to ask about.”

Naruse put one hand up to her eyes and rubbed them. “It doesn’t really matter what’s ‘best’ at this point. They’re going to ask how we know, and we’re going to have to say someone met with a scientist who’s supposed to be dead, without a scrap of evidence.” Our story might as well be idle gossip, she explained.

“I guess when you put it that way...”

“We can’t decide whether to inform them until we actually have something more tangible to bring them. At worst, this could basically be seen as slander.” Naruse sighed. “Personally, I’m not in a position to put this through.”

“Fair enough. Got it.”

Seeing how easily I gave up on pushing the conversation seemed to conversely put Naruse on edge.

“What are *you two* going to do with this information?” she asked.

“Nothing, for now,” I promised.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay,” she responded. “That was certainly a headache. Now you said you had one more thing that would be the most

difficult consultation of my life?”

“It has to do with our meeting with Dr. Tylor,” I explained.

Naruse scrunched her shoulders together, her expression a mix of anticipation and dread.

“Right,” I began. “So, first off, there’s an entity that made the dungeons. We call it Demiurge.”

“A mythical creature that turns ideas into reality?”

“Right.”

“You can call it Ms. Maker too,” Miyoshi piped up, coming back from the kitchen and setting a freshly poured cup of java on the table. “Dr. Tylor seemed to like that name more. It’s so feminine and cute!”

Naruse smiled politely. “F-Feminine? Wait, then did you actually make contact?”

Contact...? I guess, if you count a one-way mental projection.

“That’s a little hard to say,” I explained. “But either way, we learned about not only Demiurge’s existence, but also its goal.”

“You mean the reason it made the dungeons?” Naruse asked, voice breaking.

I nodded. “Its goal is...”

“Its goal is...?” Naruse gulped.

“To serve humanity.”

“I’m sorry?” Naruse blinked repeatedly again. “To what...? Serve humanity? For dinner?”

“No. Like, to help us out.”

“I don’t follow.”

“It’s, uh, well, you see...” I put my hand up to my chin, lowering my head as I thought. “It’s like...it wants to offer us things.”

“Something that wants to *help* humanity took twenty-seven scientists apart?”

“Well, wait, hold on, the order there is wrong. See, first it took apart the

scientists, then...”

“A being that can create magical worlds at will needs to give things to humanity?”

Uh... The more I thought about it, the less I understood, and I was the one telling the story.

“Fine,” Naruse continued. “You learned its goal, so that means you made contact.”

“Well, see, that’s kind of hard to say too.”

Naruse’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand *anything* you’re telling me!”

“Forget the contact bit—it’s confusing. Apparently it—she, I guess, probably—she’s shy. But wants to help. She needs to feel like she’s offering something. Like—like a submissive maid type!”

“Kei, main points only!” Miyoshi rolled her eyes and plopped herself down on the couch.

“What is going on?” Naruse asked.

“Look, believe it or not, that’s our info. So we’re doing our due diligence and reporting it to the JDA. What you do with the info now is none of our concern.”

“I barely understand a thing you just told me,” Naruse responded.

“Well, it’s like we just explained. Naruse, I do have one piece of advice.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Just this once, check your common sense at the door.”

“Okay.”

“So, to recap: we met Dr. Tylor, who was thought to have died but was reconstructed in the dungeons; he told us what happened three years ago; and he told us his theories about the being on the other side—his own maker, at this point.”

“O-Okay...”

“Whether that was real or an illusion produced by the dungeon doesn’t

matter. Although we're pretty sure it was real."

"Uh-huh."

"Now, acting on all that information is beyond us, so we're just reporting it to the JDA. What gets done with this intel is up to you and the rest of the JDA. You're the experts. We're just letting you know what we saw."

"Uh...huuuuh?"

To be honest, I couldn't blame her. We didn't have any proof and had just unloaded a bevy of earth-shattering revelations...that anyone would dismiss.

Now Miyoshi tried speaking up. "Naruse, the JDA works with the JSDF sometimes, right?"

"What? Y-Yes."

"Ask Team I, or even Team Simon, when they last saw me on the thirty-first floor. It was just before they discovered the safe area, so they should remember."

"Does this have something to do with the odd time you left Yoyogi?" Naruse asked.

Both Team I and Team Simon were spending extra time in the dungeon to map out the safe area, but even if they booked it back as fast as they could, the soonest they'd reach the surface would be tomorrow. But Miyoshi had been down near the safe area, then exited Yoyogi *minutes later*.

Her exit time was already unusual, but it would have been even weirder with someone testifying when they'd last seen her.

"We were, er, teleported to the first floor after our conversation with Dr. Tylor," Miyoshi explained.

"It still won't be direct evidence...but all right," Naruse responded. "I'll ask."

With that, she entrusted her whole body to the couch, sinking back into it as if it were a bubble bath.

"So how was it?" I asked. "The most difficult consultation you've ever gotten in your life?"

“Don’t act so proud. You know some people are just going to take this as another D-Linquent prank.”

“D-what?”

“How am I going to even begin to bring this up with Saiga...?” She looked up. “I’ll think of something.”

She stood and grabbed her coat.

“Thanks for coming,” I told Naruse outside the entryway.

“Not at all. Thank you for all the enlightening news.”

The night had been nothing *but* news—how enlightening, I couldn’t say.

But having news was one thing. What to do with it was another.

“By the way,” I stopped Naruse before she walked off. “About Rokujo.”

“About her?”

“We’d like to try to get her to the twenty-first floor this week.”

“This week?! But it’s only been around ten days since you picked her up. Can you get her ready that fast?”

I could practically feel the Naruse-Scanners on me trying to probe for extra secrets.

“It might be a little quick,” I admitted.

But it was only a matter of time before someone found another Mining orb, given its drop rate and the number of genomos—the monsters which dropped the orb—running around the eighteenth floor.

“Either way, now that the National Center tests have wrapped up, you may want to have the JDA focus on those Mining restrictions,” I advised.

“I’ll do my best. Thank you for the warning.”

Naruse climbed into the back of the waiting taxi and waved goodbye through the rear window as it drove off.

Miyoshi and I headed back up to the entry.

“Are you serious about aiming for this week?” Miyoshi asked.

“I think so.”

“Isn’t that seriously too hasty? How much SP does she have?”

“How do I put this scientifically...?” I mused. “Buttloads.”

I opened the front door and we stepped inside.

“What’s she been doing?” Miyoshi asked.

Mishiro and Rokujo had been diving nearly every day since the day after the boot camp, and I’d been meeting up with them for spot checks or having Drudwyn act as a courier. Since I hadn’t been able to loan them Drudwyn since the eighteenth due to the trouble at Yokohama, I only had their numbers from the last time we’d met up, but they were impressive, to say the least.

“They’re dividing the slimes between the two of them, and there’s plus or minus some efficiency based on how well Drudwyn’s feeling that day,” I explained, “but their average number of slimes per hour is 120.”

“One hundred twenty,” Miyoshi repeated, “*apiece?*”

I’d had high expectations, but they’d exceeded them by an astronomical amount. My earlier predictions of half a month’s prep seemed comically overcautious.

“It’s only been five days,” I pointed out. And yet she’d already gained upward of sixty SP. “Judging from Saito nearly reaching the top thirteen hundred after earning seventy-four points, their rankings are definitely somewhere in the quadruple digits.”

It seemed like we hadn’t fully realized how monstrously efficient the Arthur slime-grinding method was. The same pace for just 505 hours would allow them to catch up to me. With a regimen of eight hours per day, they could steal first place in two months.

“Wow. If we only had enough hellhounds, we really could manufacture an army of superhumans.”

“And do what?” I asked.

“Uh, have the ultimate team?” Miyoshi responded. “Just for kicks?”

“That’s enough ideas for right now.”

I had no interest in inviting more scrutiny than we were already under. Plus, who had time to train a whole team of superhumans?

“But still,” I said, inflecting a more serious tone, “even though their stats might be up there, they lack actual dungeon experience.”

“Then doesn’t thrusting them into combat on the lower floors sound a little...suicidal?”

Death came for us all eventually, but dungeon diving was like actively courting danger.

“Yeah...”

And if you didn’t know the right way to court danger, it would lash out. Knowing how to handle it, how to maneuver around it, was the product of experience.

“Either way, I’ve gotten the ball rolling on bringing them down to the lower floors, so all that’s left is to think of a way to supplement their lack of experience. Not like I have all that much myself.”

“Forget dungeon experience—I doubt you have even a lick of survival-skill knowledge.” Miyoshi knew how to twist the knife.

But it was true—and I hadn’t exactly been working on developing such knowledge, instead spending most of our diving time in Dolly. We also had a follow-up to Dolly planned—a project named “Dungeon Mobile Base Igloo #1”—which would be completed soon. Storage being public knowledge actually worked out great for us—we could use our new igloo out in the open, no questions asked.

“I don’t suppose there are any crash courses in essential dungeon survival skills,” I suggested.

“Actually, Kagero hosts one,” Miyoshi answered.

Kagero was one of the most famous teams of Yoyogi regulars—alongside Shibu T. Unlike Shibu T, though, which was one party, Kagero was an intercollegiate network of different cooperating chapters. As a result, they were big on education events too.

“What about the JDA?”

“They don’t have enough retired dungeon veterans to choose from to run a course like that,” she pointed out. “That sort of conversation is probably at least ten years out.”

Retired veterans returning as drill instructors wasn’t uncommon, but the dungeons themselves had only been around for three years. Anyone well-versed in the dungeons was still making a better living actively exploring than they would as an instructor.

“Hm...”

“Kei, we should probably do a proper expedition-style dungeon campout. Just once.”

“Yeah.”

Now that the boot camp was starting in earnest, we’d have more interactions with everyday explorers. It was important that we have some of the basics down. Storage being public knowledge would explain some of our lack of general exploration skills, but I wasn’t sure we wanted to exhibit *just* how little we knew, or how we’d gotten so involved with dungeons while avoiding learning the basics. Not while I was trying to keep my identity hidden.

“One must know the enemy to defeat it,” Miyoshi intoned. “And in this case the enemy is putting up with normal exploration methods.”

“You have a point, but...what do you even bring on a normal diving trip?”

“See?” she pointed out. “We don’t even know that.”

We really had been spoiled rotten by our storage skills. We’d just brought along anything and everything we thought we might need. Perhaps because of that, it seemed even harder to wrap our minds around what to take and what to leave.

“One must recognize one’s weakness in order to overcome it, huh?”

“And to recognize ourselves,” Miyoshi replied, a grin spreading across her face, “we need a shopping trip.”

“Shopping?”

“Well obviously. Knowing our own weaknesses isn’t going to help if we don’t have the right things to make up for them.”

“But where are we going shopping?”

“The Yoyogi Dungeon shop, obviously.”

Getting to the twenty-first floor with Mishiro and Rokujo in tow would probably involve a few days of diving. We’d need to outfit everyone with some gear.

“Right. I guess we may as well go as soon as we can then.”

“Agreed.”

“Also, hey, Miyoshi. What was in that envelope earlier?”

Before Naruse had sped away in the taxi, Miyoshi had handed her some kind of envelope, but hadn’t said anything about it to me. I had a sneaking suspicion—a bad feeling.

“Ah, you saw that? That was the footage of your performance in Yoyogi Dungeon.”

My shoulders slumped almost as quickly as my heart sank. “You didn’t...”

I had plans to delete that footage one of these days, but a copy of the data was stored safely within Miyoshi’s Storage...

“Naruse hadn’t seen the Phantom yet. But don’t worry, I told her not to share.”

As if that needed specifying! You’re putting my secrets on the line!

“But she *had* already seen him,” I responded. “Tenko’s channel, remember?”

“Oh!” Miyoshi exclaimed. “That’s right. Oh well. This time she’ll get the actual footage and not just a still. ‘Sirius Nova!’”

“Grr...”

Miyoshi whipped around and started picking up the cups, throwing me a wink. She wasn't asking for anything, but this practically felt like extortion.

“But thankfully Naruse listened to our whole conversation,” she said over the clinking of porcelain. “We were able to foist all those difficult questions on her.”

“Don't be so sure. That's all going to be pretty hard to report up to the national government.”

“She'll probably just draft a report and foist it all on her boss—your bad influence rubbing off on our poor, sweet, diligent administrative worker.”

“*My* bad influence?”

And was that even bad? Thinking back to my days as a company man, reporting difficult problems to your superior was exactly what you were supposed to do. They had more experience, more skills. Problems too big for you to handle were supposed to go up the chain.

I wasn't sure how big the ripples from our latest batch of revelations would be, but given our lack of evidence, I suspected about as big as a drop of water landing in a pond. The report would probably languish in a file cabinet, forgotten until some new development emerged.

The report might hold more sway if people knew it was coming from D-Powers, but we had no intention of making the story public on our own.

“This wraps up things for today,” Miyoshi commented, “but I still wonder about that ‘cornucopia’ weirdness, don't you?”

I grabbed a tablet and threw myself horizontally across the couch.

The cornucopia was a horn of plenty. Specifically, it was a sheep or goat horn broken off by Zeus and presented to his foster mother, Amalthea. It was said to have the power to produce whatever she wished. Consequently, it was a symbol of bounty.

“I can't think of anything much like a cornucopia in our inventories,” Miyoshi commented.

“There's the horn from the Hound of Hecate,” I observed.

“But that doesn’t really fit the image.” Miyoshi sat cross-legged on the couch and crossed her arms, looking puzzled. “It isn’t a goat or a sheep, and it isn’t filled with fruit.”

“Plus it doesn’t seem like we can get rich off it,” I added.

The cornucopia was also associated with autumn harvests and American Thanksgiving.

Pivoting away from its appearance, I started thinking about items that could provide whatever we wanted...

“Skill orbs are a kind of bounty, right?” I stared up at the ceiling, still lying on my back, weakly holding up one finger to indicate I was about to make a point.

“Of course,” Miyoshi replied.

“Then what does that make something with the power to conjure skill orbs?” I asked.

“You mean Making?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

I tipped the tablet screen up again, my hands resting on my chest. I searched for “cornucopia” online and glanced over the write-ups again. A symbol of prosperity. The power to conjure whatever one wished.

It had been associated with Dionysus, then became a symbol of Hades...

Something about that last bit gave me pause. *Hades...*

“Hey, Miyoshi. We found out that the dungeons displaying text in one’s native language is probably a matter of sending signals to each individual’s consciousness, right?”

“Right...”

“At first, I thought ‘Making’ was ‘May King,’ just going off of the Japanese characters. The King of May.”

“Well, yeah. That’s what it would be using the National Language Council phonetic character guidelines...”

“But then I reframed my thinking. Maybe it was actually ‘Making.’ The English

word for creation.”

“Though in that case according to the Council of Cultural Affairs⁽⁵⁾, it’d be written with a specific long-vowel character. What a mess.”

“Well, I think that was wrong too.”

“What?”

“Because...” I bolted up, looking Miyoshi in the eyes, “I think it’s actually mixing in Japanese. *Mei King*: the king of the *underworld*.”

Miyoshi opened her mouth but no words came out. Then, after a slack-jawed moment, “Like Hades?”

“Like Hades.”

“One half Japanese, one half English.”

“Probably.”

“That’s a pretty roundabout way of utilizing individual language comprehension.” She shook her head.

It made a certain degree of sense to me. Thanks to playing cards and other sources, I was probably more used to seeing the phonetic English “king” than I was its Japanese equivalent. On the other hand, I didn’t encounter “underworld” in English very often, so it had displayed the Japanese equivalent, *mei*, rendered phonetically.

I wasn’t sure why the first part wasn’t displayed in kanji in that case, instead relying on the more ambiguous phonetic katakana, but it could simply be that the combination of the kanji and phonetic characters for “king” would also feel unnatural. If it were tapping into my native language comprehension, I could see why it would have registered the way it did. Though this was all just conjecture.

“Dungeons are literally underground worlds,” Miyoshi commented.

“Underworlds. King of the underworld...equals king of the dungeons?”

Of course. The dungeons were a literal “underworld.” The phrase was sometimes even used for the video game counterparts, opposite to “overworld.”

“They might even be underworlds, in a mythological sense,” I added. “We did talk to a ghost in one, after all.”

“And that ghost called the skill in question—we assume—a cornucopia.”

“Right.”

“If Making really is the cornucopia, then it has the power to conjure whatever we wish. In other words—” Miyoshi’s speech suddenly sped up. “Manipulating D-Factors?!”

“Just by thinking about it?” I asked.

“Just by thinking about it,” Miyoshi answered.

“Making anything?”

“If it works like the cornucopia, then yes, making anything.”

I sat in silence, contemplating the conclusion we’d just reached.

I didn’t know if we were right or wrong, but we could already feel the weight of the possibility bearing down on us.

January 21, 2019 (Monday)

Prime Minister’s Office, Nagatacho, Chiyoda City

“A vote to condemn?” Ibe repeated, disinterest obvious.

Across from him, a flustered Foreign Minister Kawano put his hands on the prime minister’s desk and leaned forward. Behind Kawano, National Security Advisor Uchitani and Administrative Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Takeo Akiba sat silently on the office’s reception sofa, flanked by several other members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“Of course!” Kawano cried. “They used a nuclear weapon on *our* soil! This is no time for worrying about Russian and Swiss relations!”

Ibe had finally been feeling relieved that the incident at Yokohama was behind them. This afternoon he and his wife were supposed to fly off for consecutive diplomatic visits to Russia and Switzerland.

“No time?” Ibe repeated. “You’ve *seen* the official report.”

Kawano began backing down. “I have.”

According to the write-up, there had been no unusual measurements recorded in Yokohama—no fallout, no residual radiation, nothing at all.

That’s for the best, Ibe thought.

“So how do you intend to prove such a device was used?” the prime minister asked. “A condemnation would be...” He paused, searching for the most tactful wording, then took the direct approach. “It could be taken as slander.”

Kawano was silent for a moment. He looked behind him to the members of the Foreign Affairs staff. No one seemed eager to speak.

“But we have the word of the soldiers who came out of Yoyogi,” he protested. “They reported being caught up in a blast.”

“And where’s the *proof*?”

Those gathered behind Kawano understood the severity of making an accusation without proof. It might have been a bitter pill, but the situation required swallowing it.

No doubt Albert Handler, the American president, had swallowed the same acerbic medicine when deciding to go over the heads of his legislature to approve the use of the bomb. A strong sense of morals was important to any lawmaker, but so was the ability to make calls in the national interest.

Those who chose wisely when the time came for dubious choices were coddled forever by the warm blankets of support and success. Those who chose poorly joined the ranks of those removed from office before their time or scorned forever as war criminals in the annals of history.

“B-But!”

Ibe eyed his foreign minister. A genuine sense of outrage had probably propelled Kawano here, but his backers likely included a number of staff who simply wanted to prove Japan still had weight to throw around. A UN Security Council censure would have had some binding power over the actions of member nations, but a single condemnation from Japan carried no practical

ramifications—all the more so when based on circumstantial evidence.

Worsening relations with America over this incident would be all risk, no reward. If there were any gain at all, it would be just a bit of cheap, worthless pride.

“In addition,” Ibe continued, “this time several top DSF members were caught up in the blast. If anything, America could argue that they deserve compensation for going so far as to risk such valuable personnel to address a problem in a foreign nation.”

Although—Ibe now thought—something about the American response had seemed strange. The initial problem with the monster respawns had been happenstance—nothing anyone could have planned for—but everything that occurred afterward rubbed Ibe the wrong way.

Regardless of what world-threatening situation they might have been facing, America’s decision to jump to nuclear weapons was questionable. He’d heard that the prototype grenades brought in by ATLA—the Acquisition, Technology, & Logistics Agency under Japan’s Ministry of Defense—had been effective. Even if Japan hadn’t had enough of the prototypes to resolve the situation, America should have been able to bring in experimental weapons at least as effective. It had been too soon to jump to nuclear weapons—*unless* their use was itself the goal.

But to whose benefit? Ibe could think of several countries poised to gain from weakening US-Japan relations, but none that could exert influence over the US president.

Then who?

“There will be no vote to condemn. Understood?”

The other MOFA members nodded.

A small grunt of frustration escaped Kawano’s mouth.

“But Mr. Prime Minister,” National Security Advisor Uchitani chimed in, saying, “some national news outlets *have* started to bring up the irregularities surrounding our ‘dud bomb’ disposal.”

“What outlets? Ones that traffic in conspiracy theories? Their audiences will move on overnight.” Ibe switched to a tone that denoted the end of the conversation. “The 102nd Nuclear Biological Chemical unit was deployed to assist in the disposal of a dangerous unexploded bomb discovered underneath Sakuragicho. The unusual time frame and disregard for protocol was due to the danger the bomb posed. We’re terribly sorry for the panic. That is all.”

It was 10:14 a.m. when Kawano and the other MOFA members left the Prime Minister’s office. Ibe spent his remaining time before his next appointment contemplating America’s actions.

“If a nuclear explosion really went off in the dungeon...” he muttered out loud.

That would mean the dungeons had the power to absorb or dissolve all of the radiation. The dungeons were already known to dissolve any foreign items left in them. Did that include the radioactive substances, dissolved in their entirety? That would solve nearly all their problems surrounding the cleanup of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and the decommissioning of the Monju plant.

“Could testing that have been their...?” Ibe shook his head, chasing the thought away. “No.”

America wouldn’t have needed to risk an international incident if it simply wanted to test how the dungeons processed radiation; working with small amounts on home soil would have been sufficient. Although...perhaps they’d arrived at the point of needing a large-scale test.

He shook his head again, burying himself in materials relevant to Russian and Swiss diplomacy.

Miharu Naruse’s Residence, Arakicho

In the middle of the night—so late it was technically already Monday—Miharu walked out of the shower, bath towel still draped around her, set a kettle on the stove, and plopped herself on a chair to open the envelope she’d received.

“What could this be?” she wondered out loud.

Inside was a memory card. She inserted it into her laptop, turned on the power, and set the envelope on the table. The envelope let out a small clink.

“Huh? Something else?”

A second hard, small object seemed to be inside. She turned the envelope over and let the contents fall onto the table. Out slipped a rather generously proportioned diamond.

“Wh-Whaaa?!”

She goggled at the round brilliant cut.

“I shouldn’t be handling this bare-handed.” *Or bare*, she thought.

She grabbed a tissue and wrapped the diamond in it.

“‘Get this appraised.’ Is that it? Read you loud and clear,” she said to an imagined Miyoshi.

Next she examined the contents of the memory card. It contained a text file and some videos. The text file contained a description of the footage, along with the message “Here’s one of the diamonds. You know what to do! Please and thanks!”

The kettle whistle blew. Miharu got up and took out a teapot with a Herend brand rose dragée design, which had been a favorite of hers since college. Midori had teased her that it looked too girly, but that hadn’t made Miharu any less fond of the ceramic vessel. She lamented the fact that she was only steeping a tea bag rather than loose leaf, but it was late and the bag would save her cleanup.

She poured herself a cup and sat back down in her chair, playing the first video file, simply labeled “31st floor.”

“What is this?”

In the video footage, one of the world’s top explorer teams, Team I, watched helplessly as a figure who looked like he’d stepped out of a video game went toe-to-toe with a giant mantis.

“Is that really Yoshimura?”

Miharu fought back a smile. His acting was ridiculous. By the time the footage was done, she was laughing uproariously. She was actually worried she might earn a knock on her wall from her neighbor due to the noise. Thankfully, though, none came.

After watching the other files in quick succession, she followed the instructions in the text file and deleted them from the memory card, then disposed of the card itself. If she ever needed the videos again, Miyoshi could supply new copies.

“I don’t have to report his ranking,” she told herself. “Besides, no one would believe me if I did.” She took a sip of tea.

Better to focus on writing up the Mining regulations and reporting D-Powers’ other findings to Saiga. The information on Storage would be welcomed, but the conversations about Dr. Tylor and the dungeon maker would be a mountain—no, a whole mountain *range* of trouble.

She decided to take a page out of Yoshimura’s book—not troubling herself too much with responsibility and just reporting up the chain. She dashed out a document explaining what she’d been told.

Then she settled into an uneasy sleep, waking up late into the morning. She scrambled to get ready to head into the JDA.

“Those two really are going to work me to death,” she grumbled as she slipped through the station gates at Ichigaya.

Dungeon Management Section, JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

Miharu arrived at the Dungeon Management Section just before 11 a.m. The office was a battlefield.

“I thought all the work for the National Center tests was supposed to be over...” she stammered, seeing her frantic coworkers.

“Ah, the dedicated supervisor graces us with her presence!” one of her coworkers replied teasingly.

What was keeping them so busy?

“They found a safe area, duh. We’re up to our ears in dealing with land usage rights.”

“Shouldn’t Legal Affairs be handling that?”

Besides, she thought, they already had D-Powers’ land purchase in Yokohama as a precedent.

“Not quite. The zoning’s our job.”

“I heard everyone was rushing through that yesterday.”

Yesterday’s zoning plans should at least have prepared the section for questions from partner companies. Any adjustments at this point should have been minor.

“Ah, yes, we had a plan, but... You can thank Primary Sales for that.”

“The Primary Sales Section?”

Less than a full day had passed since the discovery of the safe area, but the news had already traveled far and wide among organizations connected to the JDA. As a result, the Dungeon Management Section had been swamped with requests from sponsor companies.

“Has it been like this all morning?”

“Just about.”

“But if you had all the zoning worked out, can’t you just turn down new requests? Wait... Don’t tell me Primary Sales has been accepting everything!”

“All right, I won’t tell you then. But for real, that’s exactly what they’ve been doing. Any deals we accept get counted toward their section’s accumulated profits for the year.”

“But there’s no way we can meet every request!”

“That’s no concern of theirs. *They* just need to promise we’ll do what we can. Then we have to sort out the fantasy from reality. Hence the workload that’s been hounding us since yesterday.”

There were space requests coming in every minute. And just when things

seemed sorted out, there would be a request from a company with more clout that Sales would ask the Dungeon Management Section to accommodate instead, and they'd have to rezone all over again. To make matters worse, the bigger the fish, the longer they felt they could wait before making their request, so most of the requests coming in at this point were the ones Sales was most eager to prioritize.

"But there's no direct link between being a sponsor company and getting space on the safe floor," Miharu pointed out.

"On paper."

Sponsor companies helped or had helped with development for dungeon management, which might have entitled them to a bit of preferential consideration, but that was no guarantee. There was no requirement that companies must have sponsored projects with the JDA before to be allocated space on the floor.

"You have to cut the requests off somewhere," Miharu offered. "There's only so much space."

"That's what Sales is leaving up to us."

If a request worked out, it worked out, and if it didn't, they could just blame the Dungeon Management Section while smugly tallying up their own section's successes.

"That's so dirty."

"You're going to talk to the chief, right? Put in a word for us out here in the trenches."

"I will."

"Counting on you, Soldier!"

Miharu headed toward Section Chief Saiga's office with a sigh.

Saiga lifted up his head from his paperwork and gestured with his thumb to the chair next to his desk.

“You’re here,” he said to Miharu. “How’re our problem children?”

“They’re aiming to take Komugi down to the twenty-first floor.”

Saiga tossed his pen in the air and entrusted the weight of his entire body to the back of his chair.

“You’re kidding,” he responded. “It’s only been a week.” Getting someone with no dungeon experience down to the twenty-first floor in a week was unheard of. They must have had some sort of trick. “What the *hell* are they doing at that boot camp?”

“Apparently they used a different training method with Komugi.”

“If it isn’t one thing it’s another.” Saiga scrunched up his face, then brought up a particular file on his computer. “Did you know Team Simon from the DSF participated in their program?”

“I did. They joined the recent trial run of the camp.”

“It must have gone well. Judging from the results.”

“The results?”

Saiga displayed a list of foreign entities applying for organized access to Yoyogi on his screen.

“The DSF is sending over subteams,” Saiga responded. “Lots of ’em.”

“To enroll in the boot camp?”

“Given the timing...” He leaned back. “I can’t think of any other reason.”

The applications had come in before the panic at Yokohama, so that couldn’t have been a motivation. And if their goal had just been to obtain Mining, they would have submitted applications weeks ago. Nothing else major had happened in the interim. Since the boot camp was held past the Yoyogi gate, one needed to enter the dungeon to attend.

“Just how effective was that camp?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have access to that info. Stats are personal information, after all.”

“I suppose even dedicated supervisors have their limits. But in any case, it

must have been pretty impressive. Otherwise, even with the focus on Yokohama right now, the DSF wouldn't be sending more members in such a rush. When are they starting the regular training sessions?"

"They're doing a preopening run on the twenty-sixth, followed by official classes in February."

"Getting a spot is going to be like winning a golden ticket. We should try to establish special opportunities for JDA staff."

"Do you want me to put in a request?"

"If you could." Saiga closed the document. "Now, what brings you in today? What happened?"

"Er, nothing *happened*, per se."

Saiga squinted. He'd been half expecting something else to come up now that the National Center tests and crisis at Yokohama were finished. "Hmm..."

"Don't look at me like that! Here, I'll start with the good news."

"Meaning there's also bad news?"

"I got the details on Storage."

"What?"

That *was* good news. Just the other day, Dungeon Management Department Director Michiyo Tachibana had told Saiga that the decision whether to sell or use the orb would be up to him. Given the skill's potential value and possible applications, Saiga had the distinct impression that he needed to make a choice quickly. But it wasn't one he could make without more details to go on.

"What did you learn?" Saiga asked.

"It probably has a mass limit, but they haven't hit it after testing up to two hundred metric tons."

"Two hundred?! What are they putting in there?"

Miharu smiled at the fact that that was Saiga's first concern. "Since they seemed to know exact weights...train cars, maybe?"

Old passenger cars had their weights indicated by certain characters in their

serial numbers—ranging from the “*ko*” character for the lightest to “*ka*” for the heaviest. Across the seven characters used, weights ranged from 22.5 to nearly 50 metric tons, with each character representing the next increment of 5.

But those passenger cars were no longer used.

“Current Yamanote Line cars each weigh around thirty,” Saiga observed. “But they’re hardly ever delinked. And even assuming they had a chance to try putting a group of train cars into Storage, they wouldn’t have gotten a clean two-hundred-tonne quantity.”

Yamanote Line cars were normally linked in chains of eleven, for a total of 330 metric tons per chain.

“Maybe boats?”

Boat weight was officially measured in terms of its water displacement, in metric tons. But the displacement was equal to its mass, so a boat labeled two hundred metric tons would indeed weigh that much. The issue was—

“The publicly reported measurements for passenger and fishing boats are all aggregate tonnage.” Aggregate tonnage measured the total spatial volume of areas in boats—not mass. “About the only vessels for which you can find actual displacement figures are historic battleships and the like, which obviously aren’t being used for material transport.” But those museum pieces usually came in at far more than two hundred tonnes, so he couldn’t imagine D-Powers had used them for testing.

About the only two-hundred-metric-ton warships currently in service in Japan were *Hayabusa*-class missile boats, and they were only found at bases in Maizuru, Sasebo, and Ominato.

“I don’t think they’ve broken into any naval bases recently...”

“Hopefully not.”

“Give them *some* credit.”

“Either way, being able to store more than two hundred tonnes is great news.”

Large-scale aerospace rockets typically weighed between four and ten metric

tons. The world's largest, the American Delta IV, only weighed thirty. Two hundred was more than enough. It wasn't rocket science.

Tachibana had brought up the International Space Station during their talk. The entire station weighed between three and four hundred tonnes. With Storage, they could have gotten half the materials necessary to complete the station up for the cost of sending a single astronaut into space.

The ISS's construction in 2010 had cost 150 billion dollars. It had been completed across thirty-six shuttle trips, to the cost of 1.4 billion dollars apiece, meaning over 50 billion had gone into the cost of transporting materials alone.

By comparison, the orb's forty-five-billion-yen price tag was a fart in the wind. Tachibana's prediction that the orb could be used for aerospace projects had been a shot in the dark. Now it seemed highly plausible.

But the orb was also valuable to dungeon exploration. They could bring in tanks with ease. The Type 10s only weighed fifty tonnes, and modernized third-generation tanks used by armies throughout the world weighed at most sixty-five. They could deploy at least three by using Storage, plus additional equipment. Attack helicopters were all under ten tonnes, so Storage could carry an entire squadron. They could even use it to easily move prefabricated buildings to establish forward operating bases.

With the discovery of the safe area in particular, the orb was likely of more value to the JDA as a tool than as a source of revenue. They would need to move materials down sooner or later.

"In addition, the skill's maximum capacity might depend on the stats of the user," Miharu reported. "This information is all from a time when Miyoshi's INT stat was 16."

"Sixteen? That's pretty high."

When D-Powers had announced their stat-measuring devices, they'd noted that the human average in all stats was thought to be around ten. Perhaps a stat of 16 was fairly common among regular explorers? All they knew now was that 16 INT was the reference point for this data.

"There's one other important thing about the orb."

“One other thing?”

“Time passes more slowly for items carried inside Storage versus outside. At about half speed.”

Saiga audibly gulped.

“They said that if anything, it’s actually an inconvenience,” Miharuru added.

“I don’t see how that could be.”

With that attribute, Storage would allow them to double the shelf life of vaccines. It could make the difference between successful transport to undeveloped areas and failure. Doubling the shelf life of *anything* was nothing to sneeze at.

“If you could keep a skill orb around for forty-eight hours, you could deliver it to buyers farther out too,” he pointed out.

It didn’t explain D-Powers’ three-day auctions, however. Saiga crossed his arms.

“Sir?”

“Nothing. Just thinking.”

Whether they sold the orb to an aerospace organization or kept it for dungeon exploration, it was sure to turn that field on its head. But which to put it toward...?

“Say, Naruse.”

“Yes?”

“Do you want the orb?”

“Wh-Whaaat?! Me? No way!”

Miharuru waved both hands in front of her and shook her head.

“Then can you name a *better* candidate? I mean, there’s Sakai, but...” Sakai was the assistant manager in the Dungeon Management Section. Saiga’s direct interaction with the section eliminated the need for a traditional vice-chief role, with the assistant manager position fulfilling similar duties. “I don’t think Sakai could make it down to the thirty-second floor if I asked.”

“I can’t go to the thirty-second floor either!”

“Right, but in your case...” Saiga paused. “Hmm, just think it over.”

“I *am* thinking, and I *still* don’t understand how you’d expect me to do that!”

Miharu pulled out her tablet and transferred the Storage report over to Saiga’s personal folder.

“I’ve moved the details along with some other materials from my most recent conversation with D-Powers over to your folder.”

After bringing up the relevant folder on his computer, Saiga confirmed the presence of the files. “Okay. I’ve got it. And some extra reports? All right...”

He furrowed his brow, sensing trouble. After looking Miharu in the eyes, he perused the first file.

The title read—

“‘Regarding Mining Regulation’?”

The file contained D-Powers’ theory about the mechanism behind Mining’s mineral selection.

“Hold on.” Saiga scanned the report. “You can choose what mineral drop you get?”

“I wrote about some of D-Powers’ tests at the end.”

Saiga scrolled to the bottom. “D-Diamonds...” He looked up, then looked back down at the location written in the report. Then looked up, then back down again. “The first floor of Yokohama?!”

“According to Miyoshi, the ‘first’ floor of Yokohama is actually deeper than the twenty-first.”

“What is this...?”

“Mr. Kunai’s theory might have been correct.”

“Diamonds just happen to drop on the floor we let them lease?!”

“It isn’t quite like that. As the report says, the Mining user sets the drop by thinking of a particular mineral. In this case, according to the theory, diamonds

didn't drop there until D-Powers thought about it."

"The dungeon reads minds somehow?"

And if the dungeons could read minds, did that imply they had some kind of sapience?

"I'll explain that later." The revelation about D-Powers' Demiurge would be best delivered after Saiga had been given a moment to take in this first batch of information. She could see Saiga mandating a full psychiatric eval if she tried bringing it up now. "But yes, according to D-Powers, the dungeons appear to pull from the Mining users' thoughts. If explorers use the skill without knowing that, they're likely to set each floor's drops to iron."

"If this is accurate, that's a pickle. What do you propose we do?"

"There might not be any going back once the drop is set. For now, we'll just have to prohibit Mining users from accessing any unexplored floors."

"There are few enough Mining users at present to make that feasible, but..."

"There are also the world's resources to think of, and dungeons in other countries." Miharu finished her section chief's thought. "We should report this to the WDA. Although..."

"Will they actually believe us?" Now it was Saiga's turn to finish Miharu's thought.

"We should send a report either way. We already have iron drops confirmed on the first two Mining-compatible floors in Yoyogi. That's strong enough evidence to make the theory worth considering."

Saiga thought for a moment.

"Okay. We'll frame this as the result of JDA research and send a report to the WDA. We'll leave out the part about it hinging on one party's speculation. Will D-Powers be okay with us swiping the credit?"

"I'll double-check, but I don't foresee it being a problem. Given the choice between freedom and fame, those two will choose the former every time."

Saiga lowered his brow. He'd been right to be afraid. Not two days after the start of the commotion at Yokohama he was already dealing with another bit of

earth-shattering news.

“What a pain...”

“Mining is a big deal, sir.”

“I know. If it were any other time, I’d probably be thrilled to have gotten more info on it.”

The Dungeon Management Section was currently pouring all its energy into preparing the safe area. He would have preferred to table the Mining talk for later, but he understood the urgency.

“Now,” he said, moving on to the next file. “What is this? ‘D-Parture’ starter kit production?”

Saiga glanced over the starter kit details. “We can’t help a product launch right now. I’ll see if I can kick the whole thing over to Amikari. We have our hands full with the safe area.”

Konaho Amikari was the Commercial Affairs Section chief. Executive director Makabe had been impressed with his sales background and appointed him directly to the role. There was a rumor that the characters in his name were better read by their alternate pronunciation—*Moukari Masse*—meaning “raking it in.”

“Right,” Miharuru responded. “Speaking of the safe area, someone had better set Primary Sales straight regarding our section’s workload.”

“Of course...” Saiga sighed, setting aside the materials he’d have to bring to Amikari. “There’s no rule that says we have to grant land to sponsor companies.” If anything, the sponsorship and land grant systems should remain completely separate. Sponsor company applications had been running since long before the safe area was discovered—it wasn’t fair to tack on extra benefits now. “But...Sales seems to want to imply that being a sponsor company guarantees preferential treatment. And right or wrong, if that’s their decision, I can’t exactly overrule them.”

Ordinarily, Sales would perform its work and leave adjacent sections to do theirs. If there were any practical issues, Sales would simply liaise with the client. But in this case, their tack was placing an undue burden on the Dungeon

Management Section.

“What if we just designated overall districts and had all companies bid for spots?” Miharuru suggested.

“Hmmm...” Saiga shifted uncomfortably.

“Sales seems to want to just ask the clients’ wishes and throw all the planning over to us. We have to come up with some sort of policy or our staff is going to keel over.”

It was easier to put in the work to come up with a policy now than to let the burden of case-by-case decision-making grind down staff morale. They couldn’t afford to make empty promises or simply say they didn’t know. They needed some sort of firm stance to fall back on.

“Got it,” Saiga said after a moment. “Call Sakai in.”

Miharuru nodded and stood up.

Noritake Sakai, assistant manager of the Dungeon Management Section, had spent the past several days on dispatch to the University Entrance Examination Committee as the Dungeon Management Section representative. His main task had been coordinating procurement of the D-Card verifiers.

Now the National Center tests were over, but there was still the return of the verifiers to deal with, plus the safe area response on top of that. And now—

Apparently he’d received a direct summons from the Dungeon Management Section chief, who had just been talking to Miharuru Naruse. If the conversation awaiting Sakai had something to do with D-Powers, he figured it might be about that mysterious clause in the verifiers’ lease contract about “endeavoring” to stop leaks. But the JDA hadn’t even finished checking the returned verifiers, so it wasn’t likely to be a problem along those lines.

“You called?”

Sakai poked his head into the section chief’s office. What awaited him was a very different conversation from what he’d imagined.

“We’re redoing our policies with regard to the safe area zoning,” Saiga

blurted out.

“What?!” Sakai shouted. “Are you out of your mind?!”

Miharu started chuckling. That was quite a question to ask his direct superior.

However, walking back all their work over the last two days for no reason certainly wasn't the policy of anyone in their right mind.

“Don't worry. We're not going back on the zoning divisions themselves.” Saiga held up his hand. “But we're going to take a slightly new tack. We'll divide the commercial space into two districts—special priority and general. Companies can bid for space in the general district.”

Sakai blinked. It was such a simple solution. Up until now they'd simply been trying to accommodate each company's needs.

“That'd certainly be easier,” Sakai answered. “I-I mean I'd be grateful, but...sir, is that...going to be okay?” Sakai looked pointedly up at the ceiling. Sales sat one floor above.

“It's better than letting our whole section collapse.” Saiga looked out at his staff, still scurrying to meet the constant requests. “We can't keep wasting time on these requests. We can't have dedicated staff for a hundred different companies like they're all D-Powers. This may be a safe area, but it's still not worth quibbling over individual square meters. Don't worry. I'll lay down the law with Sales. This is on me, so if anyone gives you guff, send them my way.”

It was no different than ordinary real estate practice. If a popular building with a set number of rooms went on the market, the realtor would put a system in place—first come, first served; an auction; a lottery; or some other method.

“We'll give sponsor companies who get a spot a break on their rent. Or, no, we'll make it so that only sponsor companies can put in bids for the general-use area. Sponsor companies only bidding against other sponsor companies. Sounds fair, right?”

“That sounds all right, but there are some organizations we'll absolutely need to give spots.”

National government research organizations, the JDA itself, and the JSDF

would all need to have land reserved. Although Sakai couldn't be sure exactly what they'd be, other affiliate organizations would probably receive special permission down the line.

"That's why we'll implement a special district," Saiga explained.

Special district, or, in other words, special interest.

"No matter how fair we try to make the system, there'll always be someone who complains. We'll hold several spots open for government organizations and the Dungeon Agency, and they can be responsible for doling them out to affiliate organizations dangling off their teats. That'll take a load off our shoulders, and I doubt we'll hear any complaints from the organizations granted the special privilege."

Sakai emerged from Saiga's office a changed man. He was all smiles walking back to his desk.

Miharu looked in awe at Saiga. Her boss really could get things done.

"What is it?" Saiga asked.

"Nothing. Just, you know, thought you did a great job there."

"What are you, my boss?" Saiga gave her a withering smile, not seeming truly offended. "Now," he said, "was that all?"

"Ah, erm..."

"So there *is* more."

"Well, you see..."

"Good grief."

Miharu leaned in and whispered into Saiga's ear.

"Do you want to hear a state secret?"

"Come again?" Saiga's brow was all waves. "Wh— Why do you even have info like that to throw around?"

"I learned a thing or two from D-Powers."

Of course. America's top explorer was a regular guest at their office, and

despite the premises being surrounded by spies, no one had been able to break in. According to intel from Terasawa, all foreign agents who had tried to investigate D-Powers had already been sent gift-wrapped to Cabinet Intelligence for deportation.

Some had joked that their office was a covert WDA attempt to establish a sovereign nation. To tell the truth, Saiga wasn't so sure it was a joke.

"Huh," he mused. "My subordinate's gone and become a rogue international player before my very eyes."

"Don't be so dramatic," Miharu said teasingly.

"So I guess I can take it that those two are privy to some national secrets as well."

"You could say that."

"So?" Saiga asked. "What am I in for? Anyone want you dead?"

Saiga had posed the question as a joke, but Miharu responded seriously.

"If word got out that I knew, maybe."

"You've got to be kidding." Saiga glanced at his watch. It was almost time for lunch. He grabbed the jacket from his chair, threaded his arms through the sleeves, and stood up. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but here. It's almost lunch. Let's grab a bite." He nodded toward the door. Whatever conversation was to follow, it would be best to have while on the move. Someone might overhear them in the office.

Miharu nodded back.

What she was about to tell him was so significant it would no doubt one day be a matter of public record. Whether that day came while Miharu herself was still alive depended on their next course of action.

"It's been a while since the world's best boss treated me to a meal," she replied pleasantly.

"Me, treat you?" Saiga countered. "If anything it should be the other way

around. You do know you'll be making a dozen times more than I will this year, right?"

"Sir?"

"What? Don't you know how the WDA's dedicated party supervisor pay scheme works?"

"Like...a normal salary? Although I did notice a little more in my bank account in November."

"Sure, the salary framework is normal. But its bonuses are special. Did you check the one you got for December?"

"There was all the fuss with Otherworldly Language Comprehension, followed by the commotion with the tests and Yokohama... To tell the truth, I haven't looked."

"It'll be smaller than you expect."

"Why?!"

It'd been a month since her promotion. She'd been expecting the full bonus.

"You were appointed as a dedicated supervisor on November 5th. Your December bonus took that into consideration, so the number of days over the one-month probationary threshold was lower."

"Whaaat?!"

"Don't worry. The party supervisors' bonus system also includes a commission incentive—it gets calculated at the end of the fiscal year in March, and paid out in April."

"Commission incentive?"

"There haven't been many dedicated party supervisors, so I'm not surprised you haven't heard. They get a bonus of 1.6 percent of the profit the party they oversee brings in for the Dungeon Association."

"One point six?"

"It's a WDA standard. Parties with dedicated supervisors are generally ones bringing in over one million USD. For that amount, sixteen thousand dollars

seems like a fair bonus for anyone.”

If a dungeon association brought in one million dollars in profit through selling items, taking into account the standard WDA service fees, that would mean the party itself had earned ten million. Attaching a supervisor to parties making that much for their corresponding dungeon association was the same as a boutique department store assigning someone to facilitate orders from their most eminent and reliable customers—commission incentive included.

“Ch-Chief...”

“Right. Your party sold Otherworldly Language Comprehension. That alone earned the JDA 41.6 billion yen in service fees.”

“Wh-Whaaa...”

“Incidentally, the JDA’s total profit from D-Powers for the year comes to...” — Saiga pulled up a document on his PC—“45,216,860,000 yen in just three months. You’re looking at a bonus of around 723 million yen. Congratulations. That’s more than some people make in a lifetime.”

“A l-life...”

“But one note of caution. You’re also going to hit the highest income tax bracket. And this is all on record as employee earnings, so no setting up a corporate entity for cuts. You have my condolences.”

“This is bad...”

“Well, there’s nothing to do about taxes. But since the commission bonus doesn’t pay out until April, you don’t have to file a return for it until the following spring. That gives you a year to budget. If anything, it’s incentive to do proper financial planning.”

“That’s not the bad part!”

“Then what is?”

“I’m jumping up past all my coworkers and superiors in pay despite not doing anything. Do you have any idea what that’s going to do for my work relationships?”

“It’s not like we go around posting our salaries. Although, well, the WDA’s

policies are public, and that party of yours isn't exactly low profile." Saiga shrugged.

"Sir!"

"It's out of my hands. The WDA sets the rules. We're merely the local branch. Just think of it as winning the lottery. Plus, you *have* earned it. No one else could have bent D-Powers' arms on Otherworldly Language Comprehension." He shrugged. "Or at least, I couldn't have."

"Siiiiir...!" But now Miharu couldn't conceal her grin.

"But anyway, keep earning it. I'm counting on you to get those JDA-reserved boot camp slots."

"I hardly know what to say."

"Don't sweat it."

"No one's going to let me hear the end of this..." She said it like a joke, but the apprehension was real.

Then again, nothing had changed from a few hours earlier. The policy had been on the books from the start for anyone to look up. The only difference was that she was now aware of it herself.

"You might get the odd whisper here and there, but the Dungeon Management Section isn't full of such clown shows that they'll give you crap."

"And other sections?"

"Well..." He paused. "I won't lie, it can be tempting to villainize people you don't directly work with."

"My point exactly."

Maybe that was one reason full-time work-from-home schedules hadn't caught on. A major part of fostering camaraderie was simple proximity.

"But hey." Saiga softened his tone. "Otherworldly Language Comprehension sold back in December. It's already been more than a month and a half. If you haven't heard anything yet, I wouldn't worry about things changing now."

"Here's hoping."

Still, even if no one was saying anything, the thought that someone might be talking about her behind her back was enough to put her on edge. She was normally a stickler for not letting things she couldn't control get to her, but this was beyond even her compartmentalization skills.

Just act like normal, she told herself.

Of course, that thought itself was very much *not* normal.

“Anyway, let's get that lunch.”

Miharu spoke up as Saiga was just about to leave the room.

“Sir...”

“What is it?”

“Please introduce me to a tax agent. One focused on personal exemptions and cuts.”

The JDA contracted various tax and social insurance agents for employee deduction management. It probably had someone in those ranks who could be hired for personal guidance.

“I'll do that,” Saiga responded.

At least he takes care of his staff.

Sotobori Park, Yotsuya

Miharu and Saiga pulled their coat collars up around their faces as they walked into the cold. They headed silently toward Yotsuya, walking with the outer moat of Edo Castle to their left. As they began to climb the upward incline of Korikizaka, Miharu gestured to one side and they turned toward Sotobori Park. Miharu remembered it being fairly unpopulated from a similarly sensitive conversation with Yoshimura—the one in which he'd brought up Simon's suspicions about Dr. Tylor.

She found the same bench they'd used then. There wasn't another soul in sight. She passed Saiga her tablet.

“Look at this.”

“What is it?”

“The rest of my report. I didn’t feel like I could put this on the JDA server.”

“Right. The ‘national secret.’” The fact that she’d been serious now dawned on him.

“I’ll go grab us something to eat,” Miharu offered. “You look over that material.”

“A-Ah, I will.”

Miharu went off to the neighboring Doutor coffee shop, where she got a hot dog and an ABC set of three Milano sandwiches, along with a medium latte and hot chocolate, returning to the park as fast as she could. “Sorry for keeping you waiting.”

She laid out her bounty on the bench. Saiga placed the tablet on his knees and folded his arms. He looked like he’d swallowed a bug.

“Chief?”

“Naruse. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Um...congrats on all the great work you’ve been doing lately?”

Saiga let out a sharp breath, then said, “Have a seat,” while gesturing toward the other end of the bench.

“O-Okay. But first, here.” She offered him the hot chocolate.

“How’d you know just what I wanted?”

“I pay attention to your orders.”

“Can’t underestimate your powers of observation, I see.”

Most people would take one look at Saiga and assume he was a man who preferred the bitter to the sweet. Those who got close to him knew better.

At Doutor, he’d order the hot chocolate. At Starbucks, the white chocolate mocha caramel steamer. The plain black coffees he sometimes ordered when out with subordinates were purely for show.

She handed the drink over and sat down with her own latte, letting the cup

warm her palms.

“Take whichever of these you like. I’m fine with anything” She nodded toward the hot dog and sandwiches.

Doutor’s hot dogs looked simple, but they paired nicely with its coffee. Miharu had been quite fond of them as a student, and had often gone to the Doutor by campus during breaks. It was so crowded that its nonsmoking seats were often all filled, but it thankfully offered takeout.

Saiga picked up the Milano C and took a bite.

The Milano C’s recipe had recently been revised, adding some scallop and clam extract and Camembert cheese to imbue the hot sandwich with the flavor profile of a seafood gratin.

“So, what is this?” He tapped a hand against the tablet.

“The first bit is a translation of the last page of *The Book of Wanderers*. Given what it contains, that’s the sole page Miyoshi decided shouldn’t be published.”

“‘Shouldn’t be published’? You mean on Heaven’s Leaks?” He put his hot chocolate on the bench and picked up the tablet again. A picture of the original inscription sat up top, with the translation below.

“‘An announcement to my fellow man.’ Pretty pompous. Also, this part looks like it’s in a different language.”

“That’s Klingon, sir.”

“Kl-Klingon?!”

What was a terrestrial science-fiction language doing in a dungeon inscription?

“That’s right, sir.”

“When did this get discovered? I haven’t heard anything about Earth languages showing up in dungeon inscriptions before, much less fictional ones.”

An inscription in a familiar language would at the very least have made headlines with debate over its veracity.

“D-Powers got it directly from the Wandering Manor,” Miharu explained.

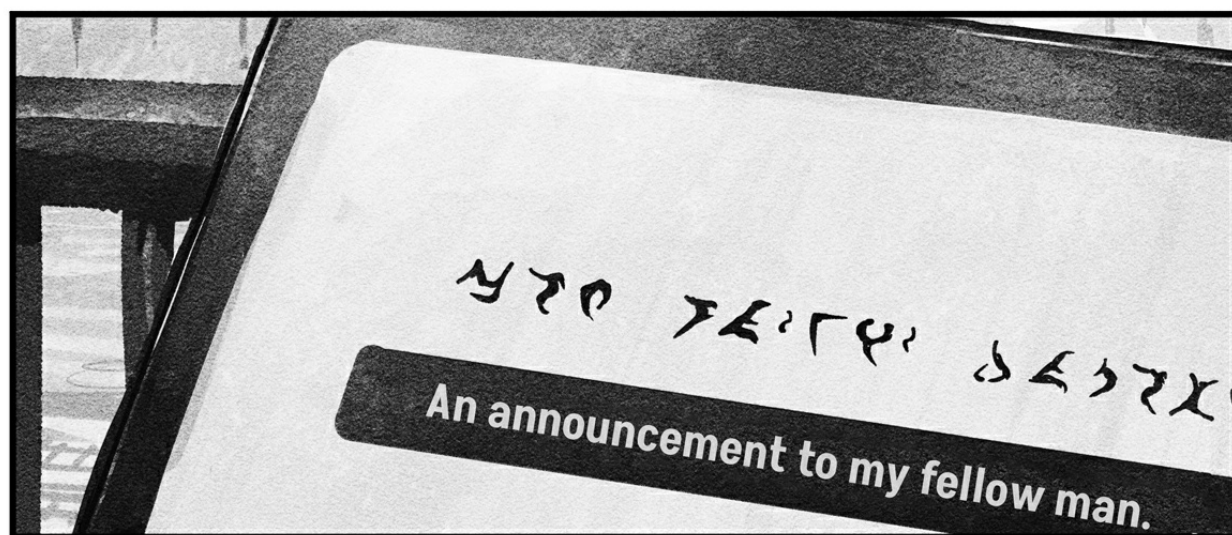
“I see.”

It might have been best for their safety to not publish it then. The signature, which could tie the formation of the dungeons to the events in Nevada three years ago, would have been shocking enough on its own, but the inscription also hinted at more damning evidence potentially existing within the “manor house” study, which it invited the reader to visit.

“So what’s the ‘manor house’?”

“Probably one Dr. Tylor’s mother owned on a hill near Monterey Bay. But it was demolished in ’89, and the land sold off.”

“You’ve already looked it up?”



“A bit. It looked just like the Wandering Manor, at least from the outside.”

Saiga looked at the signature and exhaled. He took another bite of his sandwich. Miharu couldn't help but notice what large bites men always took of food.

“This is all hard to believe,” Saiga commented, chewing. “And then, they actually met this person in the dungeon? They heard it all from his mouth? Someone who was supposed to have died three years ago?”

“The official record is ‘missing,’ not ‘dead.’”

Not that the rescue crew had figured anyone made it out, but the bodies had never been found.

According to Miharu's report, D-Powers had met with Dr. Tylor and been told that the Nevada experiment had connected Earth to another world. As a result, the twenty-seven people present on-site had been disincorporated and used as a teaching aid by an otherworldly entity that created the dungeons.

“So an American experiment led to the dungeons' creation,” he concluded.

“It seems that way. Although we only have D-Powers' word for it. And to be clear, they say it was an accident.”

“Do you think America knows?”

“Simon told Yoshimura and Miyoshi that he had his theories. It's likely.”

“Simon?”

There was no point in hiding additional details at this point. Miharu nibbled at her food before answering.

“It was off the record, apparently.”

“Bold of him.”

Saiga couldn't imagine what kind of accident would be required to form the dungeons on Earth, but he could easily imagine what kind of turmoil would come after unveiling their origin. “There's no way we can go public with this...”

In addition, their only evidence was a conversation involving one of the people who was supposed to have been at the scene. They had no way to prove

said conversation even happened. No, wait. Person? Dr. Tylor was supposed to have been dead. Skeptics could even argue that what D-Powers met was some sort of reconstructed dungeon avatar designed to lead humanity astray.

“Sir?”

“Nothing.” Saiga shook his head. He was overthinking things, surely.

Who or whatever created the dungeons surely had the power to take over Earth through less roundabout means, if it wanted.

Now, The Ring... It was the sole dungeon under direct control of the American military. The most obvious reason for that exception was that it had formed directly under a US airbase. But was that the *only* reason? Miharu’s story cast doubt on that. According to the Dr. Tylor apparition, it wasn’t just any dungeon, but the origin point for all of them—ground zero for first contact. Accordingly, if any dungeon were going to contain a gateway to another world, it would be that one.

The Ring had subsumed the existing base structure. Its number of floors would be equal to the number of floors of the original complex. Since it had originally been a large-scale particle accelerator built 120 meters underground, it probably consisted of but a single floor. However, its circumference was 120 kilometers. Still, if the WDA poured all its resources into exploring it, they could probably get to the center more quickly than to the bottom of a massive-depth dungeon’s 128 presumed floors. Perhaps America’s goal in keeping The Ring under its control was making contact with the other side before anyone else, and monopolizing whatever benefits that entailed.

But then why were its top explorers in Yoyogi, soon to be joined by other US teams? And besides that, it wasn’t as though anything related to dungeons could be kept wholly under wraps—not while the World Dungeon Association Ranking List existed.

“It doesn’t add up...” Saiga mumbled.

“What doesn’t?”

“*Everything.*” Saiga glanced back at the tablet. “Now, about this...”

It was Miharu’s write-up on the entity dubbed “Demiurge” by D-Powers.

“This thing on the other side wants to serve humanity?” Saiga questioned.
“And that’s why it made the dungeons?”

“Apparently.”

“Why does this feel like the exposition of a sci-fi novel?”

“With a twist to come after humanity makes the mistake of trusting it?”

“Or the start of a new religion. Follow the will of the maker and achieve eternal happiness, and all that.”

“I can see it...”

“Anyway...” Saiga wiped away some dangling cheese with the edge of his sandwich wrapper. “Whether it’s something from another planet or another dimension, this is first contact, huh? For real.”

If America had succeeded in making contact, there was no way it wouldn’t have weaponized it somehow. At the very least, there would have been some sort of global kerfuffle. Judging from the lack of news, if America had indeed been trying to reach the entity, it hadn’t succeeded yet.

“They said the maker was feminine,” Naruse clarified, “but couldn’t definitively say they’d made actual contact.”

“What the heck does that mean?”

If they knew enough about the entity to say it was feminine, didn’t that mean they’d seen it? Saiga looked up at Miharu, only to be met with the same look of confusion.

“So what happens if we do accept her offerings? Do they come with a price?”

“We’re not sure.”

“Humph. Even if there is an entity who created the dungeons, how do we get in contact with it?”

“We’re not sure.”

That figured. Saiga gave a tired grin.

“So, what am I supposed to do with all this?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m just passing it up the chain”

Miharu’s face was as bright and carefree as if she were taking in the flowers on the first day of spring. Saiga grimaced.

His dedicated junior could only have picked up this kind of abuse of power structures—albeit an abuse from the bottom up—from one party. For the first time, Saiga began to regret having made her D-Powers’ supervisor.

“And who do I pass it to?” he asked. The report hinged on an encounter with someone who was supposed to be dead but had been reconstructed by some sort of entity that was responsible for the dungeons. “Should I tell the Dungeon Agency? They’re going to start hounding us for evidence.”

“Of which there is none, objectively,” Miharu responded.

Saiga merely stared into the distance.

Winter air pressure patterns had brought on a cold front. The news was reporting earlier than normal plum blossom blooms.

“We heard from the soldiers who were transported to the thirtieth floor of Yokohama at around 10:31 p.m.,” Miharu stated.

Saiga cocked his head.

“And?”

“Team I was with Miyoshi shortly before that. However, she exited the dungeon just one hour later.”

There should have been no way to get from the thirty-first floor to the first floor that quickly.

“Only an hour? Did she find some kind of elevator directly up from the thirty-first floor?” Saiga asked.

“Sir.”

“Only joking. But seriously, did they get some sort of teleportation skill? I wouldn’t be surprised at this point. But let me guess, you’re telling me this Demiurge sent them up?”

“To take their word for it.”

“Interesting...”

“Miyoshi isn’t sure how it worked either, but they went up from the thirty-first floor in an instant.”

“Her exit time might be strange, but it’s a long way off from proof,” Saiga cautioned. “Like I said, it’s plausible that they found a teleportation skill. At any rate, it’s too easy to raise the possibility.”

Saiga thought about what he was saying and laughed a little inside. *Plausible that they could teleport? What an age...*

“That’s true. Ah, but there might be a way to contact Dr. Tylor again. At least from what they told me.”

“What?! Did I miss that in your report?”

She shook her head.

“It’s way too speculative.”

Saiga was torn between the desire to ask for more information and the certainty he didn’t want to hear it. “What... What do you have to do to meet Dr. Tylor?” he asked at length.

“First, you have to summon the Wandering Manor. Then, you have to help someone who works there.”

““Help someone who works there’?”

“If everything goes well, you get some kind of item representing its spirit. Afterward, you find a vessel for the spirit, put the item in, and find a path to a secret garden. Probably!”

“An item...representing a spirit? A vessel? Probably? Naruse, you’re asking a lot of me here.”

Summoning the manor was hard enough. And then...helping someone there? The only creatures he’d seen in footage of the manor were creepy eyeballs and gargoyles, all rushing out on the attack. How was anyone supposed to help one of them? And help with what? Tearing someone limb from limb?

“Okay,” he continued. “Good call not adding that to the report. Not only does

it sound crazy in the first place, but there's also the chance it won't work twice. Damn. I guess the lack of evidence here aligns with the dungeons' goal of getting humanity to adapt slowly. It's going to make it hard for people to believe a word of this story."

"Exactly."

"But the more I think about it, the more I weirdly get the feeling that we really could report this to the higher-ups without being hounded for evidence. It might be buried or ignored. But even if it's not, I doubt anyone would come to us over it."

"Why's that?"

"Because it's originating from D-Powers."

Anyone reading the report might fear the revelation of further evidence more than they feared the lack of it. And given the party involved, that evidence might actually materialize. It was the group behind the seemingly impossible skill orb auctions, after all. If anything, if *they* submitted a report without evidence, people might find it more logical to assume it was because they had a reason to withhold that evidence.

"So people might think they're actually sitting on evidence," Miharuru surmised.

"Did you know that three or so months ago, a group of foreign residents living around them were forcibly deported?" Saiga asked.

"No."

"Quite a few, from what I've heard. Now, I say 'foreign residents,' but I really mean spies. And they were all sent packing. None could get close to D-Powers. The truth is, they have a pretty formidable reputation abroad. Over in Europe and India, people are calling them wizards. They're like urban legends, or maybe celebrities. I don't know. But people are definitely treating them with a level of fear."

"Wait, so, is the government looking out for them? Do they have personal guards?"

Miharuru was fairly certain she hadn't seen anyone who looked like they'd be

on guard duty around the office. Just that mysterious Tanaka person from time to time.

Saiga shook his head. “I don’t know how D-Powers is dealing with the spies, but sometimes they just directly call in to Cabinet Intelligence to say they have another bad guy who needs to be taken away.”

“Miyoshi and Yoshimura call in?” Miharuru asked. “Directly? To Cabinet Intelligence?”

Saiga shrugged.

“Anyway, no one wants to poke the hornets’ nest. And make no mistake, D-Powers are hornets. Who’s going to submit a wild report about meeting the late Dr. Tylor to discuss the dungeons’ creator without evidence? No, people will assume D-Powers has something, and they’re going to worry that they won’t like whatever it is.”

“That does seem likely,” Miharuru agreed.

Saiga took a slow sip of hot chocolate. He swished it around in his mouth as if preoccupied by some thought, swallowed, and looked up at the sky.

“But all this brings up another question. Why are we so beholden to D-Powers?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Since last year, they’ve laid claim to just about every major dungeon discovery. And they’ve been making them one after another.”

“At least it looks that way to us. But they seem to have a completely different perspective on the dungeons than most people.”

Most explorers were content to enter the dungeons, kill some monsters, grab their loot, and call it a day. The professionals made that their work, and amateurs simply enjoyed the act of hunting and adventuring. There were some dungeon YouTubers and other attention-seekers who ran odd experiments in the dungeons for views, but they were mostly amateurs.

Explorers who got rich off the dungeons by finding orbs and potions mostly wound up investing their earnings in existing companies. They never gave any

deeper thought to the source of their wealth. When it came to private explorers who were willing to buy up a whole floor of a struggling dungeon merely for research...Miharu knew she could search the whole world and only come up with D-Powers.

“To think the first time I met Yoshimura, I thought he was wandering in and out of the dungeon considering killing himself.”

“You’d think other full-time dungeon researchers would have a bit more to show.”

“But they’re usually not going diving. And certainly not to the lower floors.”

Sending in full-time researchers with teams of guards was possible, but cost and time efficiency limited the scope of such expeditions. Researchers like Komugi, who had high enough motivation to train themselves to go to deeper floors, were in short supply.

And even with the necessary drive, it just wasn’t feasible for researchers to get strong enough to reach the lower floors—not unless they had D-Powers’ special training regimen. Komugi had only needed one week of work. Ordinarily getting down to the eighteenth floor to get Mining, then lower than the twentieth to use it, would take years.

“I guess you need some strong motivation to actually go dungeon diving,” Saiga mused.

For most explorers the main motivator was money, plain and simple. Accordingly, to obtain it, they would employ the simplest and most direct means. If a monster could be killed with a sword, they would cut it, and if it could be shot by a gun, they would shoot it. No one would go out of their way to experiment with different methodologies, such as traps, when a proven method existed. And no one but the brave and foolish went up against unknown monsters when they had a choice.

Prior to the advent of the internet, magazines and newspapers sometimes saw the value of tackling the unknown—either partnering with those willing to pursue investigations despite the dangers or sending in their own staff. But in the information age, content creation had also become the realm of the quick, the formulaic, the simple. The content grind was for the least—rather than the

most—motivated. It seemed like a bit of a self-destructive model for the platform owners.

But D-Powers was different. They would go out of their way to test the untested.

Of that much Miharuru was certain. And she knew they could rely on D-Powers to provide whatever development the world most needed—as with Asha's recovery, and as with Yokohama.

A different thought plagued Saiga—D-Powers' ability to consistently make major discoveries couldn't have just come out of the blue.

"Do they have a special skill?" Saiga asked bluntly. "Something that gives them more insight into the dungeons?"

"Erm, well, if you think about it, Miyoshi has Appraisal, and they have something that let them make hellhounds into pets. Then there's Water Magic and all the other orbs they've put copies of up for auction, and you didn't hear this from me, but I caught wind that Miyoshi has used Super Recovery too."

"And then there's Storage," Saiga added. "Miyoshi may actually have the most skills of any explorer we know of. But..."

"Sir?"

"Why does she have all of them? There's another party member."

"Yoshimura?"

Miharuru knew he was the world's first-rank explorer. And that it was the result of what could only be called a freak accident. But she suddenly realized she didn't know anything about his skills. All the extraordinary abilities seemed to go to Miyoshi alone.

Were they still hiding something?

"Maybe we should change the rules," Saiga suggested. "Require all explorers to register their skills."

"The JSDF may take exception to that."

"Well, I'm only saying it's what we *should* do, not that it's something we

actually *could* do...”

The WDA had floated the same idea before, but backed off on the logic that criminals weren't going to register their skills either way. In addition, it wasn't exactly clear what the registration data would be used for, and it was likely to lead to administrative headaches trying to identify and track down skill-users who hadn't registered.

“Miyoshi must have anticipated that we'd come asking for her cooperation with development of the safe area when she turned over the information on Storage,” Saiga pointed out. “Seems unavoidable now that it's been discovered.”

“Of course.”

And offering up details on the skill was a point-blank admission she'd used it. With the recipient for the JDA's Storage orb still undecided, it was inevitable that the JDA would reach out to Miyoshi in the interim.

She could try to pass off the info as the result of examining their copy of the orb with Appraisal, but her write-up was far too specific for anyone to fall for such a pretense.

“But,” Saiga continued, “even if it's for a good cause, or for acquaintances, or however you want to frame it, it's certainly too big a favor to ask them to make repeated round trips between the surface and the thirty-first floor out of the goodness of their hearts.”

“Certainly.”

“More than that, knowing them, the more we try to pressure them into it, the more they're likely to resist. Try to mandate their cooperation somehow and...well, there's no telling what could happen.”

No telling except that it would somehow be the opposite of whatever the JDA wanted.

“Well,” he concluded, “that's where things stand, but I'll be counting on you to help gain their assistance when the time comes.”

Miharu cocked her head as if she didn't understand and smiled.

“Okay?”

“You can do it, right? I mean, you convinced them to sell us Storage under those unreasonable terms.”

“Please don’t call your own terms unreasonable...”

“Here. I’ll give you the Milano A.”

“I’m the one who bought it...” Miharuru grumbled.

The sky overhead was clear as the wind whistled through a glass wind chime. You could see for kilometers, if only there weren’t buildings blocking the way—that was how it felt to Miharuru.

But it seemed as though Saiga was fixated on a rain cloud that wasn’t there. He sighed, heavily.

“Naruse.”

“Yes?”

He held out the tablet. “Is this really okay for one JDA section manager to know?”

“One assistant-manager equivalent already knows it.”

“I feel like my hair’s going to fall out from the stress! If I wind up as a cue ball, it’s your fault!” Saiga scratched nervously at his face. “I know it’s sound wisdom to just pass things on to your superiors, but there are times when you should feel guilty about it!”

“I’m glad I have a superior I can trust.”

“Damn.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“I can’t just pass this up the normal chain of command. Though don’t get me wrong, I fully intend to pass the buck somewhere too.”

“Why not to the department director?”

“Passing this along within the JDA would mean tossing it to Miss Tachibana or Executive Director Makabe.”

“They’re both capable.”

“Capable, but that’s what has me worried. The most capable people are the first to try to use information for their own advantage. No, it’s too big a bomb to put in their hands. We may just get caught up in the blast.”

Trying to control the release of information solely for one’s benefit often carried more danger than those attempting it realized. The confident and the capable were the first to overestimate their own cunning.

“That’s rather disparaging.”

“No one asked you.” Saiga stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and downed it with a swig of hot chocolate. “But this isn’t the kind of info we can do anything with at the Dungeon Management Department level anyway. We don’t have any way to follow up on it, act on it. No, we should kick it up to someone with more reach.”

“Kick it up?”

“It’s an international issue. We ought to kick it up to the national government. I’m thinking the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a start.”

“Weren’t you just talking about the dangers of people who would try to leverage it for their own benefit?”

“Yes, but if the bomb goes off in *their* hands, we’ll be standing far away.”

Miharu feigned a smile at the rather cold, though not inappropriate, assessment.

“But we can’t use the normal chain of command reaching up to MOFA through the Dungeon Agency,” Saiga added.

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll leak like a sieve the moment that story gives off even the slightest whiff of being more than a fantasy. There are no secrets along official channels now.”

“Sir...”

Crazy as the story was, simply having the JDA report it via official channels

would certainly provide a whiff of veracity. There would be those eager to leak it at a glance, intending to get ahead of the situation, especially knowing it was on its way to the national government.

Miharu wasn't sure exactly how the information would be used, but she was certain that all routes led to someone wanting to make contact with the entity—Demiurge, or Ms. Maker—faster than anyone else. But how to make that contact remained elusive, with Demiurge's location unknown. If there were a possibility, perhaps it lay in the Wandering Manor's study, as the last page of the book—"Visit the manor house study"—indicated. But the contents of this particular inscription hadn't been made public, and she couldn't imagine D-Powers making them so and putting themselves in the line of fire. Even if they did release the page's contents, she wasn't sure how they'd deal with part of it being written in Klingon, and they couldn't ignore Dr. Tylor's signature adorning the page.

Regardless, if they tried to hold off on publishing the information now, then in the future, when contact had been made in one form or another, it would look as if the JDA had been trying to stifle information, hoarding secrets for their own use.

"It's a no-win situation," Saiga observed, "but we're just going to have to think of the best way to get this information out."

"And get the problem out of our hands," Miharu added. "Like carrying a bomb indeed."

"That about sums it up." He bit into the Milano A.

Wasn't that one mine? Miharu wondered silently, reaching for the Milano B, the last sandwich left. It was shrimp and avocado—a favorite.

"Spheo then," she began, mouth full. She stopped and swallowed. "Does that about wrap the conversation up for now?"

"For now."

"Then should we head back?"

She scarfed down the rest of the sandwich, brushed off her skirt, and stood up. The Dungeon Management Section needed every hand that could be

spared. It might have been lunch hour, but it didn't look good for the section chief to leave the office for too long.

They collected their wrappers and cups and started walking back toward the JDA building.

"We're going to want an Appraisal user in the JDA too," Saiga commented offhandedly. They were currently powerless to deal with unknown items and orbs. Until now, they'd accepted that as an inconvenient reality, but now that Appraisal was known to the world, the paradigm had shifted.

"There are plenty of eyeballs at the manor, but as we discussed earlier, it's a tough proposition getting it to show. It's probably easier just requesting appraisals from Miyoshi for now."

"But are they going to keep agreeing to provide them? There's going to be no end to the requests."

Even if D-Powers made it clear that their default stance was to turn down requests, the second they lowered their guard and took one, they would be opening themselves up to an endless stream of requests from every private explorer and research company in Japan. It wouldn't matter how many they turned down after that—opportunists would still try their luck. It was inevitable. That was the gist of Saiga's comment.

"I don't know. She actually seems pretty willing to accept requests when you ask her on the scene. After all, she appraised drop items on the thirty-first floor and shared the results with Team I."

"Really?"

"Yep. It may depend on *how* you ask, but..."

"Any ideas for success on that front?"

An idea struck Miharuru. She brought up a certain plan she'd hatched with the Public Relations Section to revamp the Yoyo-D Information Bureau, Yoyogi Dungeon's official website, with the help of D-Powers.

"Could be interesting," Saiga said. "But it's all work and no gain for them, right?"

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? ‘Could be interesting.’”

“So?”

“Based on the three or so months I’ve been with them, that’s about as perfect an encapsulation of D-Powers’ motivation as I can think of.”

“What are they, children?”

Miharu grinned and gave a small tilt of her head that might have been taken for a nod.

“Aren’t all the geniuses of our time accused of that at some point? Curiosity is the fuel by which mankind is propelled forward.”

“Like geniuses, maybe...or like natural disasters. Also, there are some cats who might quibble with what you have to say about curiosity.”

“I’ll be sure to warn D-Powers to be more careful, since they each only have one life, rather than nine.”

Miharu passed through the automatic JDA doors.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure. I’ll be getting back to my work.”

“You aren’t going to join us in the trenches?” Saiga asked.

“I’m going to stop by the Gemology Institute. I have a little business to take care of.”

“The diamonds you told me about?”

“Nail, head.”

“Then I suppose there’s no putting it off. Remember, I’m counting on you to get D-Powers’ help with the boot camp slots and safe area materials transport.”

Miharu breathed a sigh. “I’ll do my best to get them primed for a request, but don’t hold your breath.”

The JDA already had its own Storage orb. D-Powers might just tell them to use it—that had been the deal after all.

Saiga watched his junior walk off toward the GIJ’s JDA branch. Who could have predicted that the true difficulty with using the orb would be that it was

just too valuable?

With that, he beat feet toward the Dungeon Management Section to start on the paperwork for the Mining regulation.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Kei!” Miyoshi burst into the room, practically blowing the door off its hinges. She was supposed to have been going to Yoyogi around now.

“What is it?” I asked.

I was at the kitchen island, cooking. I stopped what I was doing and looked up.

Simon and the JSDF were supposed to reach the surface any minute. But that didn’t seem to be on Miyoshi’s mind, as she audibly sniffed the air, wandering closer to the kitchen to get a peek at my in-progress work. *Well, whatever it is, it can’t have been too serious.*

“What’re you doing making soba?” she asked, getting a glance at my prep. “It won’t be long until dinner. It’s not in season anymore either.”

I glanced at my watch—a little after 4:30 p.m. Not long until dinner, but much too late for lunch. To make matters worse, she was right—fall harvest soba ⁽⁶⁾ had gone off shelves in late December.

“Waiting for news from Yoyogi has got my palms sweaty, and it beats mom’s spaghetti.”

“What?”

“Never mind. That isn’t actually about cooking anyway. Here. The wasabi is thick-stemmed *mazuma* ⁽⁷⁾. It’s in season.”

“I’ll have some!”

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation as she sat herself down at the table. Feeling put out, I grinned a little. *Didn’t she have some kind of urgent business when she burst into the room?* I grated a small sake cup’s worth of wasabi, put it on two small servings of soba, and passed one to Miyoshi.

“Thank you thank you!”

“See? Just the right amount for a snack.”

Miyoshi slurped down some noodles. “Are you usually the kind of person who just goes for salt and water with fresh soba?”

“Ordinarily I’ll use dipping sauce, but when I want to enjoy the buckwheat taste itself, I go with something lighter.”

Food was like fashion—everyone had their own tastes. Only a real dummy would try to push their own preferences on others.

I stared at the dummy in front of me, still slurping away at the soba. She was talking about her own likes, rather than pushing them, but someone would have to caution her on her tone.

“The *mazuma* wasabi’s okay, but you want something more pungent for soba.”

“They’re just dried noodles. Put some wasabi oil on it if you want,” I retorted.

“Mixing wasabi? I’d earn the ire of *mazuma* fans everywhere.”

“*Mazuma* fans...?”

The dried noodles didn’t quite have the ideal soba flavor, but they were good when you just wanted a snack. Though maybe that was a bit rude to the people who worked hard to make them.

I slurped up my own noodles and washed them down with tea. “Now, didn’t you have something to tell me?”

“Ah, that’s right!” Miyoshi exclaimed as if she’d just remembered. “Kei, look at this!”

Miyoshi pulled about one row’s worth of wheat out of Storage.

“Who do you think you are? Demeter?”

“Trying to say I’m a goddess?”

“The only one saying that around here is you. Demeter’s not the most flattering one to be compared to anyway.”

“What are you talking about? She’s the very image of femininity. She’s the constellation Virgo! Look, I’ve even got Spica!” She shook a bundle of wheat in her hand.

Spica was the star at the tip of the wheat stalk the maiden in Virgo was supposed to be holding. *Then again, isn’t Virgo supposed to be Astraea?* Greek mythology was way too complicated.

“Isn’t Virgo supposed to have barley, not wheat?” I asked.

“It could be barley, given the diets of the time. But if it’s Demeter, it’s wheat.”

According to the myths, Demeter had been the one to teach humanity how to grow wheat.

“I see. But come to think of it...” I eyed Miyoshi, gathering up the wheat. “Spica and wheat stalks actually call to mind elves more than Demeter.”

“What are you talking about?”

“‘Spica’ comes from the Greek Σταχυς. It meant ‘point.’”

“What does that have to do with elves?”

“You can call wheat stalks ‘ears of wheat.’ And pointed ears go on elves.”

“Elves having pointed ears comes up way after Greek mythology.”

The álfar—the old Norse word for “elves,”—appearing in the Norse *Prose Edda* weren’t stated to have pointed ears. The ears had probably come from the stories mixing with English and German legends, where they were conflated with pointy-eared imps and fairies.

“The Virgo constellation was already recognized in Babylonia as the goddess Shala holding grain. That’s twenty-five hundred years before any pointy-eared elves,” Miyoshi added.

“Wow. They really foreshadowed elves all the way back then. Those Babylonians were some good fortune tellers.”

Miyoshi chose not to dignify my words with a response. She threw up her arms and stared up at the ceiling, exasperated.

In fact, she almost looked like a deity exhorting her followers to pray. *Finally,*

a Demeter-like pose!

“So,” I said, “did you lug that all the way here from the southern hemisphere just to tell me about Greek mythology? It’s January, after all.”

“Close! It’s from the wheat field on Yoyogi’s second floor!”

“What’s close about that? But wait, the second floor?” Now I was speechless for a moment. “You said the latest batch had just sprouted when you checked during the boot camp. That was only on the twelfth.”

“The ones that bloomed are the ones left over from the slime attack. Though not the one I snipped, obviously. That one’s locked at its sprout stage.”

“So, wait, you can harvest yanagikubo after just about a month?” I asked, referring to the variety of wheat JA Tokyo Mirai had sold us.

“At least in Yoyogi, apparently!”

“Wait until the JA receptionist who told us how long it was going to take hears about this.”

“Though it seems like they take an ordinary amount of time to germinate.”

That had left us assuming it would take them the normal amount of time to be ready to harvest too. Since Miyoshi hadn’t observed any remarkable growth rates when she’d checked during boot camp, we’d let our guards down.

“Do you think the D-Factors sped up their growth?”

“Maybe.” Miyoshi shrugged. “Or maybe it’s because I thought, ‘I wonder if these’ll grow extra fast’ last time I checked on them.”

“That again?”

But it would fit the dungeons’ MO.

I sat down at the dining table and thought back over the experiments we’d been planning since last month. I asked the most important question.

“Did they respawn at full size?”

Miyoshi grinned.

“Bingo.”

I leaned forward.

“Then we did it!”

World hunger disruption, here we come.

“Jeez. I know we were anticipating this, but it sure feels different actually knowing it works,” I commented.

“Though we already basically knew it did thanks to respawning,” she responded.

I looked at the wheat sprigs on the table. As if symbolizing the bounteous future they promised, they shone a brilliant gold.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we have skill orb auctions and boot camp, but food production is a completely different ball game.”

We could patent and promote the process needed to produce respawning wheat. But we’d have to be careful. Telepathy had had a big impact on society already. This discovery threatened to redefine life on earth—along with disrupting the lives of those who profited from current systems.

“We’re going to be the targets of every major agricultural and grain organization. We might just put them out of work,” Miyoshi observed.

“You mean with seed distribution...”

Monsanto, which had spent boatloads developing glyphosate herbicide and soy beans with resistance to it, currently dominated the agricultural market. Several other major bio-agricultural companies followed close behind, each earning its profit by selling seeds that were easier to plant and maintain. If current agricultural demands were replaced by a dungeon respawn system overnight... You didn’t need to be an accountant to predict the rest.

“It’ll be sort of like potions to pharmaceuticals, except the low drop rates kept those from having too big an impact,” Miyoshi continued. “But this... There’s no way it’ll just be water under the bridge. It’s too replicable.”

This was a big enough discovery to worry about our lives being on the line. Then again, if we went public with it, they'd have to know that in the event of our disappearance, those companies would be the first place people would point fingers.

"Anyway," she went on, "the large-scale combine harvesters most readily available in Japan have a width of about two meters. They move at around a meter per second. Japan gets about five hundred kilos of wheat out of every one thousand square meters, so the amount of wheat we'd need to plant for the Ukemochi System would be..."

"Hold on. 'Ukemochi System'?"

"An unlimited food distribution system, from Japan to the rest of the world. I thought a Japanese-sounding name would be best."

The system we'd discussed involved a combine harvester or similar machine moving continuously around an elliptical track of wheat stalks, harvesting and then reharvesting the same wheat on the next lap after it respawned. But come to think of it, we wouldn't necessarily be limited to just wheat. Corn and soy—any staple crop would be possible. I'd been imagining patenting the harvester, but maybe it made more sense to patent the system as a whole. That said...

"Even in Japan, no one but weirdo history buffs are going to get that."

The "Ukemochi no Kami" was a god of food appearing in the *Nihon Shoki*, or *Chronicle of Japan*, the earliest known writing on Japanese history. Its use of an unconventional reading for two characters meaning "preservation" and "food" made it the easiest to remember of the many food gods in ancient Japanese texts. The naming schemes for the others were far more obtuse.

"How about Infinite Farm? Or maybe latinize it: Infinitum Villa," I suggested.

"The Japanese-style name is going to have more appeal abroad," she protested. "Picture it—'Ukemochi System' written on the side of the harvester in a severe Mincho font. Or even just 'Ukemochi no Kami.'"

"Maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves..."

"It's perfect. We're even doing naorai."

Naorai referred to the Shinto practice of splitting offerings of rice and sake made to gods during festivals after the festivals were done. It was said to earn the local gods' favor and protection. Miyoshi had a point. Replacing the gods with the dungeons did make it all seem like an apt metaphor, but...maybe that was reading too far into things.

"Either way, let's get back to hard numbers," Miyoshi said. "Say we get five hundred kilos of wheat from one thousand square meters. That's one kilo per second assuming the harvester covers two square meters."

"Which makes for...86.4 metric tons per day?"

"Just about. And with 365 days in a year, 31,536 metric tons, give or take."

And that was just from one harvester-track combination.

"Plus," Miyoshi said, pulling up the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries' home page, "the amount of wheat production across Japan last year was 765 thousand metric tons. Let's round up that to a million, to be safe."

"We could do that with just around thirty units," I said, wowed.

"Depending on how fast the respawn speed is, we may not even need that much area."

Harvesting two meters of wheat at a time, we would only need eight meters of width even with a generous four in between sides of the track. The outer perimeters of the curved top and bottom of the track would each measure around 25.12 meters. If the wheat respawned every thirty seconds, we could achieve continual harvest with straightaways three meters long. That brought the amount of space needed for one harvester to a mere eighty-eight square meters. Even if we bumped that up a little, one are—that is, one hundred square meters—would suffice.

"If the respawn cooldown is thirty seconds, we could feed all of Japan with fewer than thirty ares..." I commented, floored.

That was just three thousand square meters. Yoyogi's second floor alone offered more than enough space! In terms of how much wheat we'd be getting as a ratio of area, we were looking at something like a 75,080,000-fold increase in yield efficiency over the course of a year, compared to current practices.

Infinite indeed.

“Japan’s annual wheat consumption is six to seven million tonnes,” Miyoshi further explained. “With 222 Ukemochi harvesters, we’d meet demand. No more need for imports.”

The country currently dedicated two hundred thousand hectares to wheat production. Yet with our new system, we could meet the demand for all domestic consumption with just three hectares?

“We have to be careful with how we announce this. It might just cause a stock market crash, starting with agricultural firms.”

“It’s not like traditional farming practices will simply disappear,” Miyoshi protested. “I don’t think it’ll have *that* drastic an effect.”

“Never underestimate the urge to cut costs...” I advised.

After the cost of purchase, the hypothetical Ukemochi System could be run for the cost of maintenance on the machine alone. Assuming it ran automatically, you wouldn’t need labor to man it—just one person to start it and stand watch. You wouldn’t need seeds or pesticides. If I were a farmer, I’d be looking to sell off my current land and get in on the Ukemochi gig while the getting was hot.

“Though there are still a lot of hurdles,” I admitted.

Miyoshi had put in a request for a prototype machine with Takubo Machine Works some time ago. They were the largest agricultural equipment manufacturer in Japan, and the third largest in the world. They were mostly known for tractors, but were also apparently top in Japan for combine harvesters.

I thought that was why she had gone with them, but it turned out to just be because they had a manufacturing base in Utsunomiya. Iseki manufactured its combine harvesters in Kumamoto, and Yanmar ran R&D out of Shiga.

The Ukemochi wouldn’t require any complicated technology—the reaper just needed to run in a track along a small field of crops. In that case, one manufacturer was about as good as any other.

“Right,” Miyoshi agreed. “We still have to figure out a way to stop slimes from spawning in the harvester. Plus a way to get the fields set up across dungeons.”

For the first issue, we’d considered installing microcameras within the equipment, but we weren’t sure we could cover every angle. Plus, existing machinery hadn’t been designed with spaces for cameras in mind. Even using CAD⁽⁸⁾ models, we couldn’t be one hundred percent certain we had every spot covered. We couldn’t be sure it would work, period. We had evidence from using the same system with Dolly, but we had the Arthurs on board too. The fact that there hadn’t been any slime-based damage yet might easily be attributable to our furry friends. Still, our recent experiments with cameras at Yokohama gave us hope.

No, the real hurdle was the second issue. We knew respawning wheat could be grown from seeds that had absorbed D-Factors before planting. But to get the seeds ready, they’d need to be kept in some kind of container—containers we could safely leave in the dungeon.

“The crops themselves will be part of the dungeon by the end, so we don’t need to worry about slimes attacking them, but while the seeds dungeonize, and the soil...” Miyoshi lamented.

“We should use soil gathered from inside the dungeons,” I pointed out.

It would be easier to bring in soil from outside, but that would make it susceptible to slime digestion. Figuring out how to dungeonize outside soil would also take too long. It was more practical to use soil that already existed in the dungeons, making transfers from soil-rich dungeons to soilless dungeons as needed. Thankfully floors two through nine in Yoyogi were forested, and were filled with plenty of the stuff.

“Although,” I added hesitantly, “what do you think happens if you bring dungeon soil outside temporarily?”

“Are you asking about respawns?”

“I’m curious about that too, but no. It’s soil, so it’ll get outside water particles from the air and all sorts of other foreign materials in it. It seems like that would make it a prime slime target, right?”

“So you mean it’s ruined once it goes outside? It won’t be recognized as being part of a dungeon again?” Miyoshi asked.

“Possibly.”

Even if the slimes were able to target just the microscopic particles of foreign materials in it, in the process of eating they would probably disturb and scatter the soil.

“Then we can’t prepare plots in one dungeon to move to another either,” Miyoshi pointed out. “As soon as the plants hit the surface and start breathing and performing photosynthesis, they’re going to be polluted with foreign oxygen and carbon dioxide.”

“Right. Or... Hey.” I paused. “Do dungeon-based crops even photosynthesize?”

Normally, plants produced the proteins necessary for growth by combining starches produced through photosynthesis with nitrogen pulled up from the soil. But would plants whose growth had been stopped by dungeonization still conduct photosynthesis and respiration?

Either way, we could confirm whether they were photosynthesizing with middle-school-level experiments, but that wouldn’t rule out taking in any oxygen and carbon dioxide.

“If that’s a problem, we’ll have to enclose plots in terrariums before moving them to another dungeon,” Miyoshi suggested.

“Or just give up on moving them between dungeons and set up each plot in the dungeon where it’s going to be maintained,” I countered.

“Not even Storage seems like a safe bet here, huh?”

Time might have passed more slowly in Storage, but it still passed. That meant the crops would still be respirating, using the outside air contained in Storage. Or would it really be outside air? We still weren’t certain if the inside of Storage was considered dungeon space.

“We’d have to try it to be sure,” I observed.

We could try putting some soil and dungeonized wheat stalks into Storage,

wait a while, then take them back into the same dungeon and see if slimes dissolved them.

“Vault, on the other hand, seems like it would work,” Miyoshi observed pointedly.

“Hey, don’t expect me to be running any global distribution schemes as a one-man delivery force.”

“Fair,” Miyoshi sighed.

The cooldown time to obtain a Vault orb was still another three years, so it wouldn’t be possible to foist this job on someone else either.

“Forget transport for right now,” I said. “What about the boxes for the seeds?”

“The simplest solution would be to make them out of wood acquired inside the dungeons.”

We wouldn’t need to worry about dungeonizing a container as long as it was made entirely out of dungeon material from the start. The material alone would be enough to deter slimes from trying to break them down.

That was the theory anyway.

“Are you sure a man-made box in the dungeons, even if made of dungeon materials, would actually be ignored by the slimes?”

“No use wondering,” Miyoshi answered. “Why don’t I ask someone who may know?”

Someone who may know?

JGSDF Camp Mishuku, Ikejiri, Setagaya City, Tokyo

“Hey, Sicko! Phone call!”

“Oh?”

Kiyomaro Urushibara of ATLA’s Dungeon Capabilities Research Division had finally found a free moment to sit down at his desk following the commotion at Yokohama and pore over the capability test results for the porters—dungeon-

traversing vehicles codeveloped with Falcon Industries. He had been hovering over his chair right when a male coworker poked his head in the door and summoned him.

“A call?” Urushibara asked. “For me?”

“A call from a woman right at closing time. You dog, I didn’t think you had it in you.” His coworker grinned, then cast a meaningful glance toward the blinking “hold” light on the nearby office phone. “But hey,” he added, “if you’re going to be taking calls about dates, use your cell phone.”

“A-Ah. Yes, of course,” Urushibara responded sheepishly.

He’d wanted to correct his coworker, but the man was well-known as the office gossip. The situation would only seem worse if Urushibara protested—better to not add fuel to the flames. He stood up and walked to the phone.

“This is Urushibara spe—”

“Kiyomi! Hey! How ya doing?”

“—eaking. Uh, Miyoshi, right?”

For a moment he’d been taken aback by the name “Kiyomi,” but then he recalled hearing it once before.

“Yup!”

“This is a surprise! What happened at Yokohama?” His clipped words betrayed his desperation. He knew that Team I had disappeared in the dungeon, but after that he’d been issued a gag order and hadn’t received further updates.

“About that...” Miyoshi replied.

“About...that...?” Urushibara had worked with the JSDF long enough to understand when something was a secret, and when he was better off not hearing it, so he changed the subject. “Well, it seems like you made it back in one piece. Why the call?”

“There’s this teeny-tiny thing I’d like to ask.”

“Teeny-tiny?”

Hold on? What could someone known on the internet as Wiseman need to ask an unassuming dungeon R&D officer like him?

Nothing could have prepared him for the answer.

“Is wood edible?”

“I’m sorry?”

Flummoxed though he was, the ever-serious Urushibara launched into his response.

Wood was mostly made up of cellulose. It wouldn’t get soft enough to chew even when cooked, but there were certain edible extracts made of steeped bark, or bark-based spices like cinnamon, in addition to a few edible buds, like those of the Japanese angelica. Otherwise—

“You could break up the cellulose enough to mix into food, if you *really* wanted to.”

“Huh?” Now it was Miyoshi’s turn to be puzzled.

“As a matter of fact, this all came up just last year as part of the fifth revision of the New Foundational Environmental Response Plan. There were all sorts of potential new uses considered for trees and barks to help with carbon reduction initiatives, recycling loads, *etc.* Plenty of promising developments came out of the project, but, ah, when it came to foods...”

Humans lacked the proper enzymes to break down cellulose into useful nutrients. They couldn’t digest it.

“New Foundational Environmental Response Plan?”

“Yes. Although I have to tell you that the Ministry of Defense’s role was slight. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries looked into natural resource usage; MEXT handled research coordination; the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry tackled manufacturing issues; and well, that left us just looking into the potential of using nanofiber-reinforced resins as construction materials, and...”

“Kiyomi, Kiyomi, Kiyomi.”

Urushibara paused. He could hear a man’s voice on the other end of the line,

speaking behind Miyoshi.

“You can’t just ask like that and expect a reasonable response!”

That must have been Yoshimura, her partner from their presentation at Yokohama.

One round of explanations later, Urushibara now understood that the real question was whether he expected slimes would break down timber grown and harvested in dungeons. He cocked his head.



A bit of research on dungeon natural resources, including wood, had been conducted when the dungeons first appeared, but had quickly been left behind. Why dredge it up now?

It was a natural thing to wonder for someone who didn't realize that Miyoshi and Yoshimura's dungeon history only extended back four months.

"We know you can take wood out of dungeons, so we figured there had to be research being done on it, but we've never seen any results published. Isn't that strange?" Miyoshi asked.

Wood was one of the most readily available resources in the dungeons. Private companies and researchers had been interested in its potential at the start, but no published research had yet emerged. In a word, that was because there hadn't been any results worth publishing.

One might have expected some undergraduate theses, at least, but the dungeons themselves were too new. Any student set to graduate after they emerged and before the general lack of dungeon wood's usefulness was well-known would have had their advisors gently guide them toward something more reliable and in line with their studies. And by the next year, that particular area of dungeon-resource study was considered a dead field.

"Miyoshi, have you heard the tale of Glen Lumberjack?" Urushibara asked.

"A lumberjack named Glenn?"

Judging from her response, apparently she hadn't.

The story of the glen in question had made its rounds on the internet a few years ago and enjoyed a brief, fleeting moment in the spotlight. Nowadays you hardly even saw it referenced on the dungeon message boards populated by mega-nerds.

"I'll send over some files. You'll get your answer there," Urushibara responded.

"Really? Thanks a ton! If you could send it to..." Miyoshi rattled off her email address.

"Got it. I'll send it over in a bit."

“By the way, Kiyomi?”

“Yes?”

“We’d love to have you over at Shinshinan at Yokohama sometime.”

“Shinshinan?”

There were rumors swirling that D-Powers had set up some sort of mystery lab on the first floor of Yokohama, after leasing it from the JDA. He was pretty sure he’d heard it called Shinshinan before...

If that were the case, it would be the same lab where they’d produced the anti-slime suit, the anti-slime squirt gun, and who knew what other unreleased dungeon tech. He couldn’t deny that the invitation caught his interest—in the extreme.

“Me? You’d really be okay with me coming over there?!”

Urushibara jotted down the details and hung up the receiver with a smile on his face. He tore off the sheet from the office memo pad where he’d recorded Miyoshi’s contact details and turned to walk back to his desk to send over the materials.

“Hey, Sicko. I heard you say, ‘Miyoshi.’ That wasn’t...the Wiseman, was it?”

“Yes. We met the other day at Yokohama.”

“Then were you by chance jotting down her email?!”

“I-I’m just sending over some files.”

“You’re shitting me!”

“Am I?”

“You’re sending over files, which means you got an address!”

Well, obviously, Urushibara thought while listening to his coworker’s explanation.

Apparently D-Powers’ private means of contact were the crown jewel of crown jewels to a lot of “major players.”

“Major players?” Urushibara echoed.

“I’m talking journalists just for starters, but also research organizations, companies, even foreign governments. There are people who would kill for the email address you just got dropped.”

“Come on. You’re exaggerating. They’re a company; they’ve got a public phone number.”

“Yeah, one that no one’s ever successfully reached them through. At least as far as I’ve heard.”

Apparently there was even a cottage industry of scammers claiming to be able to provide D-Powers’ contact info or posing as their managers popping up.

Urushibara looked at the memo sheet in his hand. Just to be safe, he tore it up into several smaller pieces before returning to his desk, to the sound of someone clicking their tongue behind him.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“You... You aren’t trying to poach Urushibara, are you?” I’d shot her a powerful side-eye during her call, during which she’d invited him...to visit Shinshinan?!

“No, but I’d be thrilled! Think he’d join?”

“Take it easy. I don’t want any extra JDAG eyes on us.”

I could see how he might fit in with the likes of Nakajima and Miyoshi, but he came with one massive problem in the shape of the Japanese flag.

“Come on, you’re giving me too much credit!”

I squinted. “Am I?”

Miyoshi’s phone vibrated.

“Ah, speak of the devil!”

She forwarded me the email Urushibara had sent. I sighed, opening the attachment labeled “Glen Lumberjack.”

“Have you ever heard of this?” Miyoshi asked.

“How should I have? When it comes to dungeons, I’m as green as you are. Apparently this was only a big deal right after they formed.”

The second through ninth floors of Yoyogi mostly consisted of groves, forests, and plains. There was some concentration of lumber on each of them. I’d thought it was unusual that no one would have tried exploring it as a resource, but sure enough, someone had.

According to the write-up, there used to be enough demand for dungeon lumber that explorers could sell it at high prices. And so they started gathering in a valley, densely forested with suitably large trees, that was easily reachable from the fifth-floor entrance. The valley became known as “Glen Lumberjack,” in the style of a whiskey distillery.

I looked up from the report.

“You know, I’ve thought this before with the Turnspit on the eighth floor, but Japanese people sure love Western-style names.”

The Turnspit was the area near the staircase encampment where Jack sold his meat skewers.

“Americans and Europeans love the look of Japanese writing, don’t they?” Miyoshi responded. “Just the thrill of a language you don’t understand.”

In Japan you’d find cringeworthy English on all sorts of T-shirts, and in America you’d often see T-shirts or even tattoos with equally drop-dead cringey Japanese.

“According to this map, it’s upstream from the creek where you met Mishiro.”

That would have been around where we’d parked Dolly, an area we’d chosen because it seemed totally deserted. Granted, it had been night, but even so, it seemed like the area wasn’t frequented anymore.

The reason, to put a long story short, was that the lumber hadn’t had any value. It had amounted to a brief bubble, which naturally burst.

It turned out dungeon lumber didn’t have any special properties, was cumbersome to move, and even a cedar log four meters long and thirty centimeters thick only sold for a few thousand yen. It was nice that it

respawned, but wasn't worth the time and effort needed to retrieve it from the dungeon.

"But get this. Someone built a sign there out of wood," Miyoshi reported.

"A sign? In the dungeon?"

The sign had been constructed using some of the dungeon lumber and hadn't been broken down by slimes. Additionally, its letters had been carved, rather than painted on.

"Why wasn't this major news?" I asked. "An artificial construct surviving in the dungeon is game-changing."

"Is it? It might have been if it were made outside and left untouched, but this is basically the same as making a waypoint by moving stones around. It's useful for travelogues, not so much for academic theses."

"Ahh..."

The existing rule was that any foreign materials in a dungeon would be dissolved by slimes, while materials from inside the dungeon wouldn't be. Any exception to the rule would make for a compelling thesis topic, but there was no merit in merely showing that the known rule was indeed consistent. Whether you piled up rocks or hammered pieces of lumber together into a sign, the base principle was unchanged.

"But that's good news for us. It's proof we can build slime-proof containers using dungeon wood."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Miyoshi cautioned, scrolling down to a further page in the report and holding her tablet aloft.

"Huh?"

The page contained a brief note regarding the result of experiments constructing items using dungeon lumber outside of the dungeons, then bringing them back inside. Forget objects coated with surface-world varnish, *any* object assembled outside the dungeon then brought back in wound up being slime food.

"Seems like proof that contact with surface-world water and air is enough to

flag the material as foreign,” I responded, disappointed.

“Seems like it.”

“Which means our best bet is not only to use dungeon lumber, but also to construct the containers inside the dungeon.”

“Nailed it.”

“That’s rough. We have Storage and Vault, but most people aren’t going to have a way to haul in carpentry equipment like table saws and drills.”

“Maybe we set up a construction zone in the safe area? Equipment could be stored long-term down there.”

“Hm...” I put my hand to my chin.

We hadn’t been down to the thirty-second floor ourselves, which meant we didn’t have any claim to the space there as codiscoverers.

“Maybe if we demonstrate proof of concept, someone will take up the task.” In the meantime, just constructing one building for experimental purposes could probably be managed on any floor. “Though it’ll kind of suck having to build without nails...” I stopped short. “Hold on. Nails?!”

“What is it?”

“Miyoshi. Think.”

From Vault, I took out a certain ingot we’d been drowning in following the suicide leaftail fight—one that had almost bashed our heads as it spawned and was promptly tossed around by the explosions.

“What do you see here?” I asked.

“A chunk of iron.”

“That’s right. The iron we thought was totally worthless. But...this is a *dungeon material*.”

Miyoshi’s eyes widened. “In other words...slime-proof!”

We looked at each other. *Now* we were getting somewhere.

All of a sudden the most worthless drop in the world seemed poised to

become one of the most precious.

“But same principle—I’m guessing we’ll need to process it into nails inside the dungeon. If it comes out and oxidizes, it’ll be no good.” I observed.

“I’m not so sure. Pure iron is actually pretty rust-resistant... Speaking of—Kei! How did the purity test for the vanadium come out?” Miyoshi popped her head up from her position hunched over the table, leaning forward and slapping her hands against its top.

What spark just got lit under her ass?

“I haven’t heard back yet.”

It *had* been almost a month though, so I was expecting to hear back soon.

“If— *If* it’s as pure as we think, then we can probably expect the iron to be the same.”

“Okay, but I don’t see why that’s such a big deal, other than oxidization. It’s still iron. Why are you so excited about this?”

“*Because*, super-pure iron... The purest around right now is labeled 6N⁽⁹⁾.”

“Okay?”

Miyoshi cocked her head, frustrated by my lack of enthusiasm.

“Let me put this in a way. Iron of the 6N variety sells for at least two thousand yen per *gram*.”

“T-T-T-Two thousand...” I stuttered, “per *gram*?!”

These ingots were around one kilo each...

“M-Miyoshi. If what you’re saying is accurate, then just one of these is worth *two million yen*.”

She nodded. “A little over half the value of gold.”

“‘Over half the value of *gold*’? This is *iron*.”

Last year there were thirty-three hundred tons of gold produced around the world, but nine billion tons of crude steel, of which iron ore was the main component. That was a quantity difference of more than 5.7 million-fold.

Of course, 6N-purity iron probably hardly existed at all, so if we were talking rarity, it would have gold beat.

“The one problem is that it’s actually so rare that there isn’t much demand; you might not find a buyer,” Miyoshi mused.

“Then how’d you come up with a price?”

“Manufacturing costs.”

“Huh.”

Within the last decade, the New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization had developed an alloy called a Super-Pure Metal using a high-purity iron. The alloy had displayed zero deformation after approximately thirty-two thousand hours of creep-rupture testing in 973 Kelvin under a load of 120 megapascals. In addition, it was superlative in the areas of manufacturability, plasticity, ductility, corrosion resistance, weldability, stress corrosion and cracking resistance, and neutron irradiation embrittlement resistance. It was the metal of all metals.

Ultimately though, it hadn’t been widely adopted for use even in nuclear reactors. The reason, in a nutshell: cost.

The price of high-purity iron on the market was already one to two million yen per kilo. And the cost of producing the ultra-high-purity variant drove its price even higher. Using it in a building would be like constructing a facility out of gold.

Energy companies and heavy industry corporations probably took one look at the price tag and keeled over.

Ultimately the project shifted toward more practical applications, and the project itself, along with the prototype furnace used to make the alloy, was shuttered in 2011.

“With ingots like these dropping by the dozen, the field of metal alloy production could jump forward decades overnight!” Miyoshi said excitedly.

Even if these sold at twice the price of a vanadium ingot, that would still be less than a hundredth of their original market cost. The folks at the Tohoku

University Institute for Materials Research, which oversaw leading developments in that area, would probably be crying tears of joy. But—

“Hold on, Miyoshi. We’re counting our chickens before they’ve hatched. Let’s wait until we get those purity test results back. Right now we need to focus on whether dungeon iron is susceptible to slimes.”

We’d only been thinking of mineral drops as resources for construction *outside* the dungeons. But maybe their true value lay in using them *inside* the dungeons.

We were still stumbling around in the dark trying to find a way to dungeonize inanimate objects. Being able to construct complex items using dungeon materials that slimes wouldn’t target would probably help move that research forward. Plus, whereas up to now some special skill would have been needed to aid assembly, now we had the Yoyogi safe area, where we could establish permanent workshops.

“Kei, maybe this is *actually* what safe areas are for,” Miyoshi observed. “Manufacturing.”

The one safe area we’d discovered had limited space, the bulk of which would probably be used for research centers and military outposts. But maybe it was *intended* to be a place for dungeon-material-based factories.

Up to now we’d been limited in what we could even consider assembling inside the dungeon, but no more. Previously, complex electronics had required too many small components to produce within the dungeons, but if we could do it all using manufacturing equipment in the safe area, suddenly anything was fair game. We just needed to get the proper materials.

Imagine if we could make semiconductors in the safe area using dungeon-based mineral drops. We might have electronic equipment in the dungeons with infinite longevity.

Mining made this all even easier than getting Earth materials up to space.

“We could bring down last-generation manufacturing equipment to save costs,” I pointed out. “This is doable.”

“And Mining can net any resource we need for components!”

“Plus, it’ll probably be at crazy-high purity, as a bonus.”

“I guess that’s the catch though,” Miyoshi responded, her tone dimming. “You know that phenomenon people talk about by which gacha games give them every drop but the one they want? We have to be careful with how we set Mining drops.”

There were so many resources we could probably get under the broad category of “mineral drop.” Even oil probably counted. If we could get cut diamonds to drop, we could probably also get processed resins. We *could* get anything, but we *had* to make sure each floor’s drop was set to something useful. This was too valuable a chance to miss—more valuable now than we’d even realized.

“Anyway,” I said, wrapping up, “seems like we’ve got a basic plan for making containers for the Ukemochi plots. Our next concern, I guess, would naturally be food safety...” I glanced at the wheat.

“I mean, we could run tests with mice, but that’s about it on our own.”

“We still have a lot of wheat left?”

“Kei. I told you. It respawns.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

Well, that makes testing easy.

“Why don’t we send our data over to the WDA Department of Food Administration and have them take a whack?” I suggested, after a moment of thought.

“I see! It is their territory after all. They can probably get to the bottom of it faster than we can. I’ll get the Ukemochi system explanation ready to send over too.”

“Jeez.” I reclined into the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. “There’s still so much to look into.”

“Though a lot of it involves tests even a middle schooler could run. Kind of a pain, huh?”

“Middle schoolers who can get into dungeons, you mean.” I smiled. “You

know, this almost takes me back to our days in material science.”

““Back to our days...” Miyoshi frowned. “Listen to you. That was just a few months ago.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any way we actually could unload some of this work onto high-school interns?” I asked. “Wait!”

“What, Kei? Another unscrupulous, underhanded scheme?”

“*Me*, unscrupulous and underhanded? You’re the one who’s always— No.” I thought better of picking a fight I wasn’t going to win. “Never mind. Listen. Remember Saito’s dungeon explorer squad?”

“The show?”

“Yep. Think about it. How long do you think they can keep episodes going just diving aimlessly week after week?”

“If they’re just touring each floor like a travel show, I guess one per explored floor. So thirty-two?”

“I don’t know what their plans are for how long this thing’s supposed to run, but they’re going to need some kind of hook at some point. They’re not going to have any major through lines just diving half-heartedly in short spurts.”

They couldn’t count on running into foreign mercenaries every time they dived, after all. *Man, come to think of it, we really are living out a Hollywood movie.*

“You don’t think they’d get desperate enough to wander into a fight with Ngai, do you?”

“It’d be their highest-rated episode for sure,” I responded. “And their last.”

“So what about the show?” Miyoshi asked.

“Shinetsu Dungeon Corporation’s a sponsor, right?”

“Right.”

“So it’ll probably have a slightly scientific bent already. You know, like an edutainment travel show.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So what better place for bothersome experiments with high-school-level difficulty but major significance?”

The kinds of tests we needed running might have been simple, but following their results would bring in viewers, who could feel like they were making new discoveries along with the team.

“But then Shinetsu or the TV station would own all the findings.” Miyoshi frowned. “That’s not great.”

We weren’t exactly out to make money, but we didn’t want to run into patent issues trying to utilize our own ideas either.

“That’s where a certain sage-like celebrity comes in,” I said.

“What?”

“Think about it more. Putting Saito in commercials, doing a joint project with Hokkoku...those are just means to an end. The thing, or rather person, Shinetsu really wants access to is...”

“The Wiseman?”

I nodded.

“Signs point to yes.”

“Well, they can keep trying. I have no intention of letting them get their way.” She pouted. “I’ve got my own projects to look after.”

“That’s why we make them agree to two important terms.”

“Important terms?”

“First, we have to make clear that you’re only getting involved with the show due to a personal request from your good friend Saito. You won’t even *consider* other offers.”

“Okay...”

“The second condition is that any methodologies or information gleaned from the experiments has to be left in the public domain.”

“What?!”

“Shinetsu’s only access to the Wiseman will be through the show. But it’ll come with the caveat that they can’t base patents on any of the findings. Hardly ‘letting them get their way,’ now is it?”

“But why would they even agree to that?”

“They will.”

“What makes you so confident?”

“You’re literally that valuable.” Shinetsu’s accountants were no fools. They wouldn’t pass up a chance to develop a connection to the Wiseman, even if it came with strings attached. “As ridiculous as that term may seem, it’s no loss for Shinetsu to accept it.”

They were already sponsoring the show. Miyoshi’s connection would just be a bonus. The experiment results being unpatentable was a price worth paying to forge a relationship with the Wiseman.

“I see...” Miyoshi responded. “You do have a point.”

In addition, from the studio’s perspective, having the Wiseman’s cooperation was going to be a major ratings boost.

“Win-win.” I nodded.

Plus, Shinetsu would get a headstart on utilizing test results, thanks to the lag between filming and the finished episode airing. Thinking of things that way, we were letting them have their way a bit, but that was just necessary give-and-take. They would be running the tests for us, after all.

“Okay.” Miyoshi nodded. “I’ll play ball, put my name on it, and give them tests, but I’m *not* appearing on-screen.”

“No one’s going to ask you to,” I assured her. This could be a name-only deal.

“So how do I go about setting this up?” she asked.

“Well, normally you’d have an agent approach the production studio and have them make an offer.”

“Hm.” She put her hand to her chin. “I don’t have an agent, but I do have Himuro!”

A devilish grin spread across Miyoshi's face, and I offered up a silent prayer toward Minato City where he worked.

January 22, 2019 (Tuesday)

JGSDF Camp Narashino, Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture

First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu had awoken early the morning after turning in her full report on the incident in Yokohama and Yoyogi, and was now jogging leisurely along the track beneath the helicopter rappelling practice tower. Today was a recovery day following the tumult of their last mission.

The sky stretched on endlessly from Narashino, unbroken by clouds, mountains, or tall buildings. It met the horizon in a clean blue line. The sunlight cast the surroundings in a hazy warm glow.

In that tranquil interstice, the lieutenant's thoughts turned toward the masked man who had rescued her in the dungeon.

"I didn't even get to say thanks..."

By the time she'd come to, the man had already disappeared. Like a cloud of smoke, her troops had said. Though she wasn't sure how literally to take that.

Still, perhaps... From the way he'd apparently walked straight across the field where the death mantis and Cimeies were active, ignoring them without a care... One might almost have assumed he was capable of vanishing too. He was a...what? Dungeon master?

"None of it adds up..."

She'd questioned all those present afterward, but no one had a clue who he was, nor where he'd disappeared to. Miyoshi had vanished sometime between using Appraisal and the discovery of the thirty-second floor, so Iori hadn't had a chance to ask her. She'd requested a search party be sent out for Miyoshi the next day, but had been met with news of her sudden safe return. Even though Iori hadn't heard anything about Miyoshi passing by the thirtieth-floor encampment...

Either way, Miyoshi was the only person she had yet to question.

If she had anything to go on at this point, it was Simon's odd demeanor when she'd asked him. He'd said he didn't have a clue either, but had seemed somehow unsurprised. Almost...dismissive?

"Could he have been a DSF secret weapon...?"

No. His outfit had seemed vaguely European-inspired, but if anything, it had been more like cosplay than a uniform.

If he were DSF, he would have had proper gear. The cape left at the scene had been a cut of normal cloth—no advanced hypertensile fibers.

"He wore this into a fight? He had to be out of his mind!" had been Hagane's assessment afterward.

Let alone lacking proper gear, it almost seemed as though his outfit had been pure liability.

Iori picked up speed. Her body traced an even line along the track—her movements felt even sharper, more sure than usual. It was as if her legs knew no exhaustion; her feet rebounded from the pavement like springs.

That must be thanks to his souvenir, she thought.

As she ran, it almost seemed unbelievable that one of the legs now striking the track had been severed for a few minutes just the previous day.

But as proof, her D-Card now displayed, alongside Magnetic Field Manipulation, the grayed-out skill Super Recovery.

The same orb had sold once at auction before, to the tune of over five billion yen.

As a result, it had a preexisting entry in the WDA database, though there was no mention of dramatic effects like regrowing lost limbs. All the write-up said was that it hastened recovery from fatigue and small injuries.

Hastened my foot. It was instant. And it wasn't just normal recovery.

She squeezed and opened the fist that the skill had regrown, musing over the process that had occurred within her own body. She remembered the warm,

pleasant sensation enveloping her as she used the orb. It was a mysterious sensation—as if she could feel her cells gathering, reproducing, reforming the lost arm and leg.

Even just thinking back on it, she was getting a little lightheaded.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Thirty-Second Floor (Three Days Prior)

On their second day in the safe area, Iori told Hagane what had happened to her on the thirty-first floor.

“So then you really did... You were...” He’d *thought* he’d seen her lose an arm. So it really had grown back.

Iori nodded.

“That’s why your shirt sleeve was severed, and had blood all over it,” Hagane deduced. “The same with your leg. That also explains why we weren’t getting any readings from your vitals-monitoring devices. I could only infer that you’d lost and regrown two limbs. As unbelievable as that was, the truth is even stranger.”

“I’m the one it happened to and I can hardly believe it,” she responded.

Hagane scrunched his face and crossed his arms. “But I’ve never heard of any groups out there carrying around seventh-ranked potions. There are none on public record, anyway.”

“Even if someone did have one, who outside of the government would want to use one on me?” Iori asked. Then she thought for a second. No, even if the government had them, it would probably rather save them for VIPs. She might have led a unit with multiple members occupying the double digits of the WDA Rankings, but she was still ultimately just a first lieutenant.

And for someone besides the government to even consider using such a potion on her? No way.

“But anyway...” She thought back to the events of the prior day, her cheeks blushing. “He didn’t use a seventh-ranked potion on me.”

“It wasn’t a seventh-ranked potion?” Hagane raised an eyebrow. “Then what

on earth did he use?”

Iori held up her D-Card, passing it to Hagane. He eyed the skill list.

“Super Recovery?! Wait, you’re telling me it regrows limbs?!”

If the skill orb didn’t have a time limit for regrowing lost limbs, like potions did...

“Hold on...” Hagane recalled a story he’d heard from Terasawa just after the first Super Recovery was auctioned. There’d been rumors going around European upper-crust society about a socialite who’d suddenly regrown two missing limbs. “Could that story actually have been true...?”

“Sergeant?”

Hagane noticed Iori staring at him inquisitively.

“Hm? Ah, sorry. I was just thinking about something I heard.” He told her the rumors about the socialite. “Now I’m no expert, but isn’t that outside the realm of a seventh-ranked potion, or am I crazy?”

Seventh-ranked potions could restore limbs, but there was a strict time limit.

There had been tests on those who had lost limbs years ago, which produced no effect, but at least one successful result on limbs lost forty-eight hours prior to administering the potion. Consequently, their current knowledge only guaranteed regrowth up to that forty-eight hour mark.

Attempting to use healing potions to recover from injuries any older than that would be a yet-untested gamble.

But the subject of this rumor had lost her limbs *years* prior. What’s more, her body had healed without a scratch or scar on it.

“Wouldn’t a skill like that being in the database have caused a massive rush to get it by now?” Iori asked.

“Sure, but we already know the database entry isn’t complete. After all, it doesn’t mention regeneration at all, which... Well, the proof is in the pudding on that point.” Hagane smiled. “It’s possible some details were deliberately hidden when the entry was written, even if the user, that auction-winner, had experienced them.”

“Is that possible? To hide details?”

“Sure. If the user never reports them. Plus, there’s motive to hide them. You just said it yourself. If the world knew about Super Recovery’s true abilities, we might see a rush so great that even the current hunt for Mining would seem like nothing in comparison.”

“You think so?” Iori asked.

“Mining drops minerals, but it’s not going to synthesize mithril or orichalcum. It’s just gonna give us what’s already found, and mined, on Earth.”

“That’s true...”

“But this...” Hagane passed back Iori’s D-Card. “This is a whole other ball game. If word of this gets out, every bigwig fat cat and plutocratic corporation in the world will be hiring explorers to go find it. We might be talking about literal dungeon bloodbaths.”

D-Powers hadn’t revealed the monsters they got all their various orbs from, but just knowing they came from Yoyogi would be enough to draw in the crowds. And there was little doubt they came from Yoyogi—the orb counts on the ones the JSDF had purchased ruled out even transport from as close as Yokohama.

JGSDF Camp Narashino, Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture

Hagane may be right, Iori thought.

Just then she heard footsteps approaching from behind. She glanced over her shoulder to see Hagane keeping pace.

“Good morning, Lieutenant!” Hagane said with unusual formality.

“Why so serious, Sergeant?” she teased.

He smiled. “I noticed you were out running, so I’m guessing that means you’re feeling back up to one hundred percent?”

“Higher. Like I’m even faster and lighter than before.”

“That an effect of your new skill too?”

“Maybe. Now, judging from the fact that we just returned to the surface but you’re out here running in the morning, you have something to tell me.”

“You know, it wouldn’t kill you to let your guard down sometimes.” Hagane grinned.

“I learned from the best.” lori grinned back. They kept running side by side.

“I’ll come right out and say it. You’re up for a public inquiry. I just heard.”

Hagane’s words stopped lori in her tracks.

“You included the skill orb in your report,” Hagane said sympathetically.

“Well, I couldn’t very well hide it.” It was written on her D-Card. One glance and everyone would know.

“That may be, but... You said he *gave* it to you. Hence the review.”

On paper it was being taken as if lori had received a five-billion-yen gift.

“What? You know there’s no way I’m in cahoots with the masked man,” lori shot back.

For starters, no one even knew who *he* was!

“Exactly why they want an inquiry over bribery. Violation of the National Public Servant Ethics Code.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

“It was *five billion yen*. Just looking at the raw financial value, we’re definitely ‘exceeding the limit of socially acceptable conventions.’”

“Ethics Code Article Five? But without the orb, I’d be withdrawing Public Service Employee Occupational Accident Compensation right now. I don’t think the JSDF would have preferred that.”

Public Service Occupational Accident Compensation entitled the JSDF and other government staff members or their families to compensation in the event of major injury or death. The exact amount depended on regulations set by each jurisdiction, but the amount entitled to JSDF members had formerly been as high as ninety million when temporarily raised by a national special measure.

Hagane looked down. “I know. Plus, the entire unit might have been killed if

he hadn't shown up..."

"If anything, *we* owe *him*. Besides, under current legal interpretation, skill orbs exchanges without money involved aren't considered procurement or transfer of assets, since it's impossible to keep them."

"You've looked this up," Hagane commented.

"I did while I was writing my report. I got curious."

It was precisely that discovery which had allowed her to confidently include the orb.

"That's a good argument, and you should bring it up at the hearing," Hagane remarked. "But you'd have a better case if the orb hadn't recently sold for five billion."

"This can't be happening."

"They're going to want to look into who gave it to you too."

"To see if I'm receiving special favors?"

"Bingo."

"What do they even want me to say? Who's heading up the inquiry?"

"The JSDF Ethics Committee at Ichigaya, I'd assume. If it makes it to trial, it's going to be a public court. This is Japan. No military tribunals after all."

"Constitution Article 6? All decisions have to be made by a public judge? Right, right. Can't let the almighty constitution down."

"I'd keep any other complaints like that to yourself while you're in uniform."

"You can't even forgive me a little grumbling?"

"Don't forget the JSDF is always in a precarious position in the court of public opinion," he reminded her, stopping there.

Career JSDF members, while they were wont to grumble, knew better than to court controversy. Even in the confines of their own base, Hagane took no risks.

"Anyway," he said, shifting subjects, "you'll want to talk to Major Terasawa before you appear in front of the committee. I'd set up an appointment."

“U-Understood. Thank you.” She paused. “For worrying about me.”

Another problem now loomed over them. Iori hadn’t received a single skill orb since joining the JSDF. Yokohama had been her first time even using a potion. There were whispers that her gender was the culprit, with the men receiving preferential treatment—but those who worked alongside her knew the real reason: Magnetic Field Manipulation, the skill she’d brought with her, was simply too strong to justify pouring more resources into her over other members.

As a consequence, however, the JSDF hadn’t, strictly speaking, invested in her. If anything, the organization was indebted to her rather than the other way around.

If push came to shove, the government had no leverage to keep her from resigning. She could leave her post at any time.

Under Article 4 of the Self-Defense Forces Act, the JSDF could delay approval of a request for resignation if the timing demonstrated undeniable compromise to an ongoing mission, but that was it. They couldn’t keep her indefinitely.

In fact, if anything... She was the world’s eighteenth-ranked explorer, the highest on record in Japan, with camera-ready looks to boot. It might have been more *lucrative* for her to resign. If she ever lost interest in her JSDF career, or were for some reason forced out of it, that would be entirely the JSDF’s loss to bear.

“You know, I’d really hate to lose you, Lieutenant,” Hagane reminded her with a weary smirk as he started walking back to the barracks.

He meant that with all his heart. After all, he’d been the one to scout her.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

We spent the morning buying all the gear an ordinary explorer would buy, according to the Yoyogi Dungeon Stop staff.

After our mini-lecture from the employees, we felt like we just about understood what was necessary for traditional, expedition-style dungeon camping.

They'd even had little pamphlets about setting up camp in the dungeons. The JDA spared no effort when it came to educational resources.

"All right! Basic dungeon-camping knowledge acquired!" Miyoshi proclaimed.

"Hopefully."

Of course, we also stocked up on extras to pack into Vault and Storage. In a pinch it would be more important to protect our lives than our secrets.

"Azusa! Yoshimura!"

After we got home, just as we were spreading out our spoils, none other than Cathy thrust open our office door. She was still in her diving gear.

Of course she'd left her weapons and padding, but her Falcon-issued combat fatigues were certainly a far cry from casual wear. Something must have brought her over in a hurry.

"What is it, Cathy?"

"I got it! Finally!"

"Got what?"

"An orb! The orb! Mining!"

So another copy finally dropped. The odds were one in ten thousand—not exactly high, but we had known this day was coming. Were the regulations going to come through in time?

"Cathy, congrats! But was it so urgent to tell us that you didn't even have time to change clothes?"

"Ah, that's right! I rushed over here because I was going to ask you to store the orb."

"Huh?"

Now that one caught me off guard.

"I'll take it from here."

Simon walked up behind her.

"Simon!"

He was supposed to have come back up yesterday, but the fact that he was with Cathy now must have meant he had stayed an extra day to help with the Mining hunt. *What a workaholic!*

"Yo, Azusa. I'd like to say it's been a while, but... Anyway, I don't suppose I can trouble you for a cup of joe?"

"Coming right up."

"Come in," I directed the two of them to the sofa.

"So we've got two Mining orbs now: the one we got from your auction the other day, and this drop, right?" Simon asked.

"Right?" I answered.

"Good. Splitting them one each between the DSF and the USDD will allow us to put all this infighting over the user selection to bed."

For a minute I'd thought I was just being tested on my math, but it turned out the DSF and USDD were involved in some kind of tug-of-war over who got to use the orb.

"Um, we'd be happy to have you do that too. We can't hold that one you got at auction forever."

The DSF had never picked up the Mining they'd won at auction. That was partly on us for never setting a pickup deadline, but the current situation was equivalent to us storing the orb for a third party for free.

"See..." Simon leaned forward. *"The issue is time."*

"Time?"

Simon took a cup of coffee from Miyoshi and nodded after taking a satisfied whiff. He brought the cup slowly to his lips and took a sip before speaking.

"It takes around twenty hours to get from Dallas or JFK to Haneda."

"Hold on," I interjected. *"The intended user's not in Japan?!"*

"That's right." Simon frowned.

"They had you hunting every day for the orb eighteen floors down in Yoyogi and they didn't even have the intended orb users ready and on-site?!" I blinked.

“Forgive me, because I mean this with all due respect: is America stupid?”

“Don’t forget you’re talking to a national rep. Some folks back home are...persnickety. I don’t like it any more than you, but in this case I understand the hesitation of the powers that be.”

“What about using a fighter jet? They could come in through Yokohama.”

“You think a jet fighter can travel 5,900 nautical miles? Try half that.”

Nautical miles were aviation distance units. One nautical mile measured around 1,852 meters—compared to 1,609 meters for a land mile. Washington, D.C., was almost 11,000,000 meters from Tokyo, or approximately 5,900 nautical miles.

Just use metric! I wanted to shout. *This is way too confusing!*

“Couldn’t it just stop to refuel?” I asked, feeling somewhat in the dark.

“The last base before it flies over open ocean would be Elmendorf in Alaska. Still not close enough to make it to Tokyo.”

“Then stop and refuel aboard an aircraft carrier?”

Simon sighed.

“Yoshimura. The shortest flight path between Dulles and Haneda barely flies over the Pacific Ocean at all.”

“Really?”

“The earth is round, remember?” He chuckled.

I knew that, of course. I wasn’t an idiot. But I’d still figured any flight path between America and Japan would take them over the Pacific. Then again, it would take time to move an aircraft carrier into position too, especially if it had to start at the US Pacific Fleet’s base in Hawaii.

“The only planes we have that can make it ten thousand kilometers in one run are big boys used for transport. Too slow for this situation.”

“Private jets?”

“Even chartering a Gulfstream G650 isn’t going to cut down the time. It still only goes Mach 0.8.”

That would still take over fourteen hours, even if they dodged normal customs procedures by sneaking in through Yokota Air Base.

“What’s the orb count?” I asked.

“Around 570.”

I see. That means around nine and a half hours have pas—

Wait! They came all the way up from the eighteenth floor in just nine hours?!

I’d already been impressed by how quickly they’d managed to return to the surface in response to the Yokohama incident, but if the distance between floor staircases averaged ten kilometers... The men’s speed record for ten thousand meters was around twenty-six minutes; the women’s, twenty-nine.

They must have been running at the women’s world-record speed *continuously for nine hours.*

“That’s...impressive,” I responded.

“Coming from D-Powers, I don’t know whether to feel honored or patronized,” Simon answered with a grin.

Huh? Was he talking about how fast Miyoshi had come up from the thirty-first floor yesterday? If not, then...?

Anyway, even if the DSF reported their find to America right away, if it took around fourteen hours to get here... We’d be looking at twenty-three hours down on the orb count. They might just barely make it in time, but that was assuming they were able to take off right away and that the flight had no incidents.

“There you have it.” Simon held up open palms. *“One sought-after orb on our hands, and we can’t guarantee the user will be here on time.”*

“And if they don’t make it?”

“Someone already in Japan would have to use it.”

The aforementioned current political situation between the DSF and USDD made that an unsavory option.

Simon leaned back.

"We were hoping we could use that storage service of yours while we wait for the higher-ups to get their shit together."

Higher-ups...? Isn't the only person the USDSF directly answers to the US president? No, maybe he means people doing administrative work related to the two dungeon organizations.

"We can offer our services," I responded, "but strictly speaking, it isn't storage. That orb is still going to disappear when it hits the time limit."

"But you guys have a contract with the JDA to store orbs."

Wait, wait, wait. How does he know about that?

I looked at Miyoshi. She shook her head and shrugged. No clue.

"The other day some Japanese legislator visiting a VIP on holiday let it slip. Boasted, almost."

Wait, why does a Diet member know about our contract with the JDA? This demanded looking into.

"I'm afraid you've heard wrong then," I replied.

"How so?"

"We don't have a contract with the JDA to store orbs. We have an agreement to barter."

"Barter?" Simon scrunched his face. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"I can't offer any specifics, but..." I explained our deal with JDA—our cover-up story that we would use the orb provided and agree to provide an identical copy at an agreed-upon date.

"So you agree to hand over another copy of the same orb when the other party wants it 'back'?"

"That's about right."

"Then what the heck's the difference? That's still a storage service, as far as the user is concerned."

"Because." I held up a finger. "We're not just taking it out of a drawer and

can't just give it back at a moment's notice. We need time to procure the copy."

Simon folded his arms and closed his eyes. After a minute, he spoke up.

"Sounds good."

Come again? He'd said that with all the weight of someone agreeing to order a restaurant special.

"What?" I asked.

"I mean that setup sounds good. We're leaving you our copy of Mining."

Whoa, whoa, whoa. This isn't supposed to be such a light decision.

"Wouldn't it have been more proper to take this to the JDA, since you knew they had ties to an orb storage service? They are the relevant regulatory organization."

"How would I know that? Not through any official channels. At least, I haven't seen them publicly broadcast any info on it."

That's because they haven't, I thought to myself.

"But then the normal approach would be to sell the orb if the intended user can't make it and you don't want to use it yourself," I pointed out.

"No can do," Simon responded resolutely. That would be using government property for personal gain, and selling to a foreign power on top of that.

Miyoshi handed me a stack of papers.

"Here you go."

"Huh?"

She'd handed me a contract for storing the DSF orb that looked exactly like the one we'd used with the JDA—just translated into English.

"You sure about this?" I asked in Japanese.

"I'll explain why later," she responded. *"Just get him to sign."*

Given the devilish grin on her face, I sensed I had no choice. *Okay...*

"Well, Simon." I turned back to our American visitor. *"You're in luck. It looks like our CEO wants to deal. If these stipulations are okay..."*

Simon perused the contract, and soon thereafter pulled out the orb and wrote its count on the relevant line.

“Will that do?”

I checked the paperwork.

“That’ll do on our end. But I’ll reiterate—we can’t produce a new orb on the spot. You’ll have to give us some leeway.”

“A week, right? I got it.”

Hold on, I thought. A whole week?

“I’ll go put in word with the folks at home. Pardon me. You really got us out of a jam here, you know.”

“Then just do us the favor of not suddenly bringing more jams over here and asking for our help preserving.”

“I got it, I got it. Fair warning next time, I promise... At least, I’ll try.” He added that last bit with a wink, stepping out of the entryway, and was gone.

“What’s a cooler exit, that or your cape bit?” Miyoshi asked. She did the Phantom’s cape-furling exit pose.

Miyoshi, Miyoshi! Cathy’s still here! I shot daggers at her with my eyes.

“Drop it,” I uttered, voice flat as steel plating.

“Were you not going to go back with Simon?” I asked Cathy, who was still waiting on the couch.

“I figured since I have a minute, there may be some things you’d want to run by me about the camp.”

This weekend marked our boot camp’s inaugural run with general applicants. It *did* only make sense to hold one more discussion.

“Before that,” I responded, *“how was your first proper post-boot-camp dive? Enjoy it?”*

“Enjoy it?!” She lit up. *“It was amazing. Like night and day.”*

Apparently she’d been making full use of not only her new stats, but also the

Water Magic orb we'd given her.

"Everyone was asking where I got it. You should have seen the look on their faces when I told them it was a perk." She giggled.

All well and good, but we did have to try to be careful how many new recruits we picked up by word of mouth. I was grateful for the interest, but space was space.

"Great. We can hold a meeting, but feel free to shower first. Did you bring any other clothes? There're some extra towels in the bathroom. You can use them if you'd like."

"Thank you. I'll get cleaned up and be right back."

After making sure Cathy had fully shut the door, I turned back to Miyoshi. "What was that about a week? That's way more leeway for the orb return than in our JDA contract."

"America's going to choose two Mining users."

"Right..."

"Do you think they're heading back stateside as soon as they use the orbs?"

Oh, right. They'd probably want to test Mining in Yoyogi right away.

"Ah, Miyoshi! We've got to get ahold of Komugi! There's no time to spare!"

"You want to rush her down to the sub-twenty-first floors?" Miyoshi confirmed. "Right away?"

"It's now or never," I replied. "If we don't start this weekend, it's going to be too late."

"That's true..." Miyoshi furrowed her brow. "But are you going to be able to come back up by Monday?"

"Tell her to take some time off."

We just had to pray she could make it. I knew how sudden this was. Miyoshi started typing an email.

"Tomorrow's probably out," I said, "but maybe she can make it Thursday. Tell her to plan for a four-day dive. We'll get food ready, but tell her to let us know

by tomorrow if she wants us to get anything else.”

“Roger.”

“Get ahold of Naruse too. I want to ask her for the absolutely most up-to-date maps.”

The maps available online were only updated periodically.

The DSF would be putting in their request for the orb-user decision today. That meant our deadline was one week from now—Tuesday the twenty-ninth.

“Ah!” I’d just remembered something. “Look into that leaky legislator too.”

“Got it!”

Cathy spent a while talking to Miyoshi about the ins and outs of the boot camp, the two wrapping up pretty late.

Our sudden rush to get to the twenty-first floor would keep us away from the camp while Cathy was running it, so there wound up being plenty to brief her on.

Glas and Gleisad would swap places to let me know when to raise the trainees’ stats, but I’d have to keep track of who was running what course in order to know which stats to raise.

A short while later, Naruse came by, bowing deeply in our doorway.

“I’m sorry. That was our executive director,” she said, referring to the breach of contract confidentiality.

Apparently the legislator who had spilled the beans to the American VIP was a former member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

“Executive Director Mizuho saw payment forms related to our contract the other day, and boasted about it to the legislator in question—an acquaintance.”

“That guy,” I grumbled. “Does the word ‘confidentiality’ hold any meaning for him?”

“He was just boasting about JDA capabilities—‘We can even store orbs.’

Technically he didn't breach any confidentiality clauses, because he didn't mention who the contract was with."

"And so that legislator went on vacation and blabbed in the same way to an American friend," I concluded.

"That seems to be the case." Naruse bowed deeply again.

"Wait, but then Simon shouldn't have known it was us?"

If that was all he had heard, he should have gone to the JDA and not us.

"We *are* the only party running orb auctions," Miyoshi pointed out.

"Wah! So you think Simon tricked us into spilling the beans on ourselves?"

"He cast out the reel and you chomped down hook, line, and sinker."

Damn. And he always seems so friendly. You can't let your guard down for a second.

"Now, about the map, I've prepared it from the JSDF's most recent expeditions, but it hasn't been cleaned up for public release yet," Naruse stated. "Though it is all slated for official release, so there's no reason to be overly concerned about keeping it secret."

"Thanks, Naruse."

"We're getting highly detailed 3D maps from your expeditions, so it's fair play."

That must have been Miyoshi's ultrasonic-sensor mapping from the lower floors of Yoyogi the other day.

"You gave that to the JDA?" I asked.

"Of course," Miyoshi responded, taking a memory card from Naruse. "What would we gain from keeping floor maps secret?"

"I don't know. You're Queen of the Merchants. I assumed you'd think of a way to monetize it."

"Sometimes it pays to sell favors, not products." She gestured to the memory card. "Case in point."

“Um, I am right here.” Naruse grimaced.

“By the way, you said you’ve been emailing Monica occasionally?” Miyoshi asked.

Monica Clark was the American user of Otherworldly Language Translation. After the “AWESOME!” she’d first sent us upon seeing Heaven’s Leaks, we’d gotten word from her from time to time, but I’d never imagined she’d strike up a separate conversation with Naruse, whom we’d introduced during an English translation request.

“There was that translation of ‘magicule’ recently. It’s hard to think of how to translate dungeon-specific concepts like that on my own. I want all the opinions I can get,” Naruse explained.

“Huh.”

“The funny thing is,” Naruse added, “she said the reports describing the safe area reminded her of King’s townen.”

“‘Townen’? You mean ‘town’?”

“No, townen,” Naruse responded.

“Townen.” Miyoshi repeated the term with apparent understanding. “From ‘Crouch End,’ [\(10\)](#) a Stephen King short story.”

“What are you talking about?”

Knowing King for his horror works, I had a bad feeling about this.

“A ‘townen’ is...a townen; it’s said to be an old word for a place where druids would gather,” Naruse explained.

“In other words, a place where druids would assemble to conduct all sorts of spooky rituals, make sacrifices, the works.”

“But that’s just something King invented, right?” I asked skeptically.

“You think the dungeons will care about that distinction?” Miyoshi countered.

“Ah... Okay, but why would the safe floor be based on this obviously creepy and unsafe townen place?”

“I’m just guessing,” Miyoshi responded, “but maybe it’s supposed to be a location to offer up worship to the dungeons. A holy ground. That’s why no monsters show up.”

A place of worship? There had been an inscription found in Britain that said something sort of similar.

So the safe area wasn’t merely an oak forest, but a modern town for explorers?

“I’m going to hope for all our sakes that maintaining it doesn’t require sacrifices, or worse.” I shuddered.

Miyoshi scrunched up her face and gave a forced chuckle.

“Anyway,” I said, refocusing, “Monica’s correspondence is monitored by the DSF, so be careful.”

“Understood,” Naruse responded. “On the record, I’m just reaching out to her as a no-name inscription enthusiast eager to hear her thoughts.”

“Probably best to keep it that way.”

After that, we filled Naruse in on our plans for this week’s expedition.

“We’ll be diving for four days starting Thursday. Per usual, we’ll leave one Arthur behind, so if anything happens, have them swap to deliver a memory card.”

“Got it,” she answered. “Be careful.”

“Now, about Rokujo’s use of Mining...”

“I haven’t been told anything about that,” Naruse responded.

The JDA apparently still hadn’t formally decided on a user.

“Then we might just go ahead and use it,” I replied.

“What?!”

“Once you guys make the formal decision, we can just fudge the timeline on exactly when Rokujo used the orb.”

“And if the decision is made to have someone other than Komugi use it?”

“We’ll throw up our hands and hand over a new Mining orb as contracted.”

“Then I suppose there’s no problem,” Naruse responded.

Next, we explained how we’d had the DSF sign a contract that would prevent America from using its Mining orbs until Tuesday next week, and took the opportunity to once again highlight the need for some sort of Mining-use regulation.

“Yesterday Saiga worked with our International Cooperation Division to put through a notice to the WDA about the theorized Mining mineral selection mechanics. There should be an announcement tomorrow.”

“Good. Then make sure Rokujo is on the exception list.”

That would help her avoid being implicated in any penalties for our upcoming drop-setting venture.

“Of course,” Naruse responded.

After that, Naruse and Miyoshi engaged in some sort of conversation I couldn’t follow regarding intellectual property rights. I listened for a while, then retreated to the kitchen, tail between my legs, to make some tea. At least when it came to tea-steeping, I still had something on Miyoshi. I was pretty sure.

January 23, 2019 (Wednesday)

Akasaka, Minato City

The restaurant’s automatic doors slid open with a chime, and Haruki Yoshida slipped inside, heading toward a seat at the back where Tamaki Jo, the cameraman, sat waiting.

“Yoshida.” Jo looked up.

“You said you got word from the Wiseman?!” Yoshida asked frantically.

Jo smiled, noting Yoshida’s lack of pleasantries, and gestured with an open palm to the opposite seat.

Yoshida took off his coat and sat down. Jo passed him a menu.

Without looking, Yoshida called over a waitress and ordered a drink bar set, then turned back to Jo.

“Truth be told,” Jo said gravely, “I was contacted by a man named Himuro, not the Wiseman herself.”

“Himuro?” Yoshida asked. “Who in the blue hell is that?”

“Remember that conversation around New Year’s? About how there were rumors that a college friend of Ishizuka from Central Television had gone crazy? A director at some production company?”

“I do have a vague recollection,” Yoshida responded.

“Well...” Jo gestured.

Yoshida blinked, returning the cup he was holding to its plate.

“You mean the one Ishizuka hired to look into Saito? He reached out to you representing *the Wiseman*?!”

Everyone knew Saito had some sort of connection to Miyoshi—that was certainly behind the show sponsors’ eagerness to keep having Saito appear. But how the heck did Himuro factor into all this? What role was he playing, and who was making him play it?

“Does Himuro have some sort of prior relationship with Miyoshi?” Yoshida asked.

“I don’t know. But he helped set up D-Powers’ press conference.”

“There it is! A media type with direct access to D-Powers?! That’s the hottest ticket. How’s he not drowning in requests?”

Ordinarily you’d expect his name to be all over the industry. But Yoshida had barely even heard of him.

“According to those in the know, he rejected all inquiries after the press conference, looking decidedly shaken as he did so. He wouldn’t take any offers to hook people up with D-Powers, no matter how sweet the deal.”

“So what? He just wants to monopolize them?”

“Then wouldn’t he have tried to capitalize on them more?”

Yoshida couldn't help but agree. Yet instead of trying to monetize his connection further, this Himuro seemed reluctant to use it at all.

"So, what? He's wrapped up in some sort of devil's deal?"

Yoshida said it as a joke, but Jo nodded seriously.

"Seems like it."

"That was a joke! Stay behind the camera and leave the industry networking talk to the pros."

The restaurant's heater was working, but there was a strange chill in the air.

"Scared off by a little post-press-conference talk," Yoshida huffed. "Really. I don't know how he ever made it to a director position like that."

Anyone involved in production had to have pretty thick skin—especially when taking unwanted questions or dealing with demanding requests. Anyone who lacked it was weeded out long before they reached a directorial position.

"Back when he was an AD, he apparently used to be known as Ryuji the Fireball. There was no job he wouldn't take."

Neither of them could quite reconcile that with what they knew of Himuro, but—well, there were those who lost their spark once the "A" was taken out of their "AD" (assistant director) title upon promotion. Perhaps because they didn't feel they had to prove themselves anymore.

"Well, anyway, what did he say?" Yoshida asked.

"That the Wiseman would lend her cooperation to the show under three conditions."

"Really?!"

This was the Wiseman—everyone from major brands to news networks to politicians had been trying to contact her ever since the press conference, yet no one had succeeded. It was like a dream come true.

"Now if I can just manage something with Saito and that masked man..." Yoshida mumbled.

"Don't tell me you're seriously planning to use that footage!" Jo shouted.

“Give it a rest, Jo,” Yoshida urged. “How can we not?”



“I told you the other day on the phone, didn’t I? That footage might cost us our lives. We’re dealing with some seriously bad customers!”

“We leaked that frame with Tenko and nothing bad’s happened yet.”

“Yoshida...”

“Ishizuka is dead set on that part being in the pilot.”

“You *showed* him?”

“I’d already shown him by the time you contacted me.”

Jo sighed. *Once on shore, we pray no more.* Danger passed was soon forgotten in the pursuit of the next thrill.

“Okay.” Jo gave up. “Saito is gettable, but the masked man?”

“He was wearing a mask. We can use CGI, or...”

“Use CGI? To recreate *that*?!” Forget the ring of light and fire—they were going to animate an entire horde of monsters, and have it look believable? “You know how much that’d cost, right? Especially week to week?”

“Our sponsors have deep pockets.”

“But using fake footage opens us up to all kinds of legal trouble.”

“If the man himself has a complaint, he’s welcome to step forward.”

Jo furrowed his brow. He wasn’t sure he liked how much this felt like they were operating a tabloid, ready for lawsuits at any minute.

Yoshida leaned in.

“Jo, this is it for us. Do or die.”

More like this is it for you, Jo thought to himself. Though considering how much Jo had invested in the production at this point, in terms of both time and reputation, perhaps Yoshida was right.

“So what were the Wiseman’s conditions?” Yoshida asked. “Monetary?”

“If she were only after money, someone would have gotten her by now.”

“There are times when one is just fishing for the right price.”

“They make tens of billions on their auctions alone.”

“Sometimes people aren’t so logical when it comes to cash,” Yoshida said in an imploring tone. “But okay. If not money, then what does she want?”

“Here.”

Jo passed a plastic folder to Yoshida. He got up to refill his now lukewarm coffee while Yoshida read over the contents of the folder, but stopped dead in his tracks when thinking back over something Yoshida had just said.

“Now if we can just manage something with Saito and the masked man...”

Upon returning to the table with two mugs, Jo passed one to Yoshida, before asking the question that had occurred to him.

“Just checking, but do you not already have Saito lined up?”

“Ah? Ah, well...”

Jo shook his head with exasperation.

“Then why are we getting contact from Azusa Miyoshi?”

“Hm?” Yoshida didn’t seem to follow.

It was a natural question, though. Miyoshi had no reason to want to cooperate with a show to which Saito wasn’t contracted.

“Maybe Tenko made it happen?” Yoshida shrugged.

“He had Miyoshi on his channel once, but I don’t think there’s any deeper connection there.”

If there were, they could have gotten her even sooner.

“Then maybe Saito’s already indicated she’s going to appear on the show?”

“You convinced her, didn’t you?” Jo asked slyly.

“O-Of course! Right. M-Maybe I did!”

“Huh?”

“N-Never mind that! What the hell are these terms?”

“What can I say?” Jo asked. “Good luck.”

Written on the paper Jo had passed to Yoshida were some truly unreasonable terms. The kind that would ordinarily kill any chance of a deal.

It was true that the show had no hope of success if it was simply diving and pointing out their first goblin-sighting once a week. The age of vapid talent commentary on everyday occurrences currying favor with viewers was long past. Experiments run under the Wiseman's direction might draw audiences, but...

"Don't sponsors have some rights here? This is completely out of line." The terms specified that the results of any experiments run on the show had to be public domain.

"Hey, don't look at me. I'm just the messenger."

"Seriously?!"

Was anyone going to agree to this? Yoshida swished his coffee around his mouth. His sweet opportunity was suddenly turning bitter.

Ministry of Defense, Ichigaya

Major Terasawa sat in a small room in the Ministry of Defense branch office, arms folded in front of his monitor. Dim light pouring in through the blinds covering his windows cast streaks of shadows across his face.

"Damn it, why now?" he grumbled. "Just when Hagane and Iori are supposed to show up."

Another pesky email from a certain JDA section chief stared out from his inbox. There was one attachment, a text file, but its innocuous appearance belied the bombshell inside.

"He didn't even bother to encrypt it." Terasawa smiled.

The text file described the dungeons' goals, origins, and other tall tales.

"Payback for the wringer I put him through with Otherworldly Language Comprehension, I guess."

The contents had been enough to make Terasawa double-check the date to

make sure it wasn't April 1st.

But sending it unencrypted... By now, someone else had probably seen it. Packets of data traveling the internet without encryption were as secret as walking down a public thoroughfare. No one would stroll along a road out in plain sight and then assume no one had seen them. But Saiga knew that too. In other words, he'd *deliberately* chosen to let this revelation slip.

The content being what it was, it made sense. It was shocking news. *If* it were true, of course.

"I really am getting déjà vu over that time with Otherworldly Language Comprehension," Terasawa mumbled. "He has to learn to send less jarring emails."

If Terasawa were a spy, he would have assumed the unencrypted email was a trap. But if its contents *were* true, it would mean Japan had made first contact—kind of, probably—with whatever entity waited on the other side of the dungeons. It would be like a specific country making first contact with aliens from a super advanced culture and reaping the benefits. For a spy to pass on juicy information like this because they didn't believe it would be too great a risk to take. So who was Saiga trying to lure into reacting?

"This isn't just any kind of bomb, it's a land mine." Terasawa reclined in his chair.

Was Japan still in contact with whatever entity this was? Had they received any sort of special information? That's what anyone reading their correspondence would want to know. If they had ties to a government, they would also want to know how they could make use of any information gleaned for their own country, or at the very least for an international body like the UN—anything to try to break the exclusivity of Japan's access.

It was just one email—one email which didn't even proclaim to have verified the truth—yet it already threatened to throw the world's power balance into chaos. It was like jamming a stick into the gears of a great machine just to see what happened higher up.

"You look away from a JDA middle manager for one second and he goes and turns the world upside down."

Terasawa felt like he hardly even knew his old acquaintance anymore.

There came a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

“Sir.”

In walked Master Sergeant Hirohide Hagane, accompanied by First Lieutenant Iori Kimitsu.

“Thank you for granting us your time today, sir,” Hagane said stiffly.

Terasawa laughed.

“Hagane! There’s no one in here but me. Loosen up.”

“Lieutenant Kimitsu is here,” Hagane pointed out.

Terasawa looked at Iori for a moment.

“Ah, well, that’s fine, that’s fine. We can afford to be chummy around the lieutenant. Make yourselves at home.”

“Then I’ll get right to the point.” Hagane plunked himself down on Terasawa’s guest sofa, leaning forward.

“Lieutenant.” Terasawa gestured to the couch, urging Iori to sit too.

“Yes, sir.” Iori plopped herself down next to Hagane.

Terasawa got out three bottled green teas and set them on the table.

“Sorry it isn’t fresh.”

“Don’t sweat it. Coming from you, this is first-rate hospitality.” Hagane grinned, undoing the cap.

Iori looked on wide-eyed. She’d heard the two were close, but it still caught her off guard to see Hagane take such a flippant attitude. She was sure her eyes were visibly darting back and forth.

“So what can I do for you?” Terasawa waited until Hagane was just about to take a sip to ask.

Hagane lowered his drink.

“I’ve heard, well, you know... Iori here’s going to be subject to an inquiry.”

“An inquiry? Why?”

The major really had no idea. Hagane could tell.

“Haven’t you heard?” he asked.

There was no way the calling of a board of inquiry should have passed by Terasawa unnoticed. Hagane cocked his head, various thoughts and theories running through his mind, before briefing Terasawa on the situation.

Iori felt like a child accompanying a parent to work. She kept silent and listened.

“I see,” Terasawa responded when Hagane was done. “No, I haven’t heard anything about that, at least not from the JDAG. And no matter how you slice it, it’s going to be hard to make any kind of charge stick to you for this.”

Iori felt a sense of relief. She had guessed she’d probably be okay, but receiving a vote of confidence from Terasawa put her further at ease. She was thankful. She’d had no intention of giving up her life as a JSDF officer just yet.

“So where could this have started?” Terasawa wondered.

“The JSDF Ethics Committee is under the direct jurisdiction of the director of the Honors and Discipline Division,” Hagane remarked. “If it goes higher than that, it would have to be the Ministry of Defense Bureau of Personnel and Education, or else someone able to exert influence on it.”

“‘Someone able to exert influence’ on a Ministry of Defense bureau... But what would their motive be?” Terasawa asked. “Getting Lieutenant Kimitsu court-martialed?”

Hagane leaned in, then looked at Iori next to him.

“The only sort of group who would want to do that would be a private company hoping to poach the lieutenant postresignation. There’s nothing in it for the Ministry of Defense itself. That is, assuming no foreign saboteurs have infiltrated its ranks...”

“That’s quite enough of that,” Terasawa cautioned.

“Plus it’s not like we’re at war with anyone,” Hagane mused, leaning back. “I can’t think of anyone who would want the lieutenant dismissed for political reasons.”

“Meaning...”

“Their aim may not be the lieutenant.”

“And if she isn’t their aim...” Terasawa prodded.

The inquiry was regarding Iori. The only other person at all relevant to the incident was—

“No way...” Hagane whispered.

“There was only one other party involved.”

“The masked man?” Hagane recalled the appearance of the man on the battlefield, waltzing forward as if completely unfazed by the surrounding battle.

“Truth be told, the first time I read the report the lieutenant had written, I thought it was some kind of flight of fancy,” Terasawa mused. “Something conjured up by her dazed mind in the frantic aftermath of the fight.”

“What?!” Iori suddenly interjected.

Hagane merely nodded. He remembered how he’d felt looking over the finished draft of his own report about the mission three and a half years ago in Okinawa, when he’d first met Iori. Thinking objectively, he’d hardly believed what he’d written either.

“Please don’t blame me for doubting you, Lieutenant.” Terasawa smiled. “I mean, it *does* sound completely preposterous. Thankfully, or perhaps not so thankfully given our current predicament, there’s evidence.”

The JSDF members always captured video of their surroundings using body-mounted cameras, and even more cameras were set up at their mobile bases. That was a basic function of the Explorer Support System. So the JSDF team had of course captured footage of the battle with Cimeies—dark and low-quality though it might have been.

“There was even talk about him being some sort of dungeon master.” Hagane recalled how the man had coolly marched forward toward the crevice where

Iori lay as if neither the death mantises nor Cimeies himself were there.

“Dungeon master?” Terasawa asked. “What’s that’s supposed to mean?”

“Hagane, please,” Iori butted in. “Now, Major, obviously I wasn’t out to make any wild claims like that in my report.”

Hagane explained to Terasawa that his speculation wasn’t based on the lieutenant’s assessment, but stemmed from how some of the witnesses at the scene had compared the masked man’s command of the situation to that of a game master in a tabletop role-playing game.

Iori put her hand to her chin.

“Thinking practically, if someone were targeting the masked man, it would probably be to make use of his strength, or his ability to give out free Super Recovery orbs.” Although she had been the one to land the coup de grâce on Cimeies, she knew it was only because the masked man had let her. She had no doubt he could have finished off Cimeies himself.

“Either way, you would probably be their best lead to find out more about him. Most likely, somebody wants to investigate the masked man, so they set up an inquiry with you. At least that’s what I’m reading in these very portentous tea leaves,” Terasawa concluded.

“A pretty roundabout approach if they just want to investigate him.” Iori pouted.

“Maybe not,” Hagane responded with a grave expression. “On the surface, the Ministry of Defense needs a good reason to investigate a private citizen. Plus, we don’t even know if the masked man is Japanese. Yoyogi is open to the public, and there are plenty of foreign visitors in Tokyo. Imagine the kerfuffle if they started investigating someone from another country without probable cause. They’d be blasted for discrimination in a second.”

““On the surface,”” Terasawa repeated with a bitter grin. “Hagane, I wish you’d be careful with wording that implies there’s something ‘beneath the surface’ as well.”

There were enough conspiracy nuts as it was.

““Someone from another country’... So you think he might be a DSF secret weapon too?” Iori asked Hagane.

“DSF?” Terasawa raised an eyebrow toward the lieutenant. “What makes you say that?”

“Ah, I don’t know for sure, but...” Iori remembered Simon’s mysterious shrug when she’d asked his team if they had any clues as to the masked man’s identity. Though it wasn’t unusual for Simon to be a little reticent to engage with Iori.

“I see. But isn’t the masked man registered to Area 12?” Terasawa asked.

“Assuming he’s also the mysterious Rank 1 explorer no one’s been able to identify,” Hagane answered. “But regardless of whether he’s the top explorer, I doubt he was really with the DSF.”

“Your reasoning?”

“The cape he left behind. It was ordinary cloth—no extra protective features. It was nothing more than a costume piece.”

“Hmm...” Terasawa murmured.

“A cutting-edge military unit like the DSF wouldn’t permit one of their members to wear a costume like that on a mission. The pieces don’t line up.”

It was possible the cape was specifically a tool to help distract onlookers as he made his escape, but... Hagane couldn’t shake the feeling that the masked man’s antics didn’t gel with the Americans’ tactics. If anything, what happened seemed more like the kind of stunt a privately employed amateur would pull. Albeit an amateur in possession of mind-shattering, truly out-of-this-world strength.

“I can’t deny the possibility that he’s someone so fabulously gifted he’s able to bend organizational rules, but...” Hagane trailed off. If that were the case, it made the man even *more* suspect. Who would use their rule-bending clout just to cosplay on the job?

“That incredible?” Terasawa asked.

“You’ve seen the footage, right?”

“It was dark, low-quality, and hard to see anything. The initial report did make him out to be pretty fantastic, I admit, but subsequent accounts haven’t all contained the same sense of awe.”

In part, that was likely because JSDF reports called for minimal expressional embellishment. The effort to use objective wording had probably inadvertently resulted in witnesses seeming to downplay the masked man’s accomplishments.

Hagane adjusted his position on the couch, then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Major. He took down monsters our entire unit was struggling merely to keep at bay. He took out death mantises—a single one of which served as the boss monster of Evans Dungeon—as if they were garden-variety goblins. Even now I can’t believe what I saw.”

“But Lieutenant Kimitsu took down the boss monster, Cimeies,” Terasawa noted.

“Because he *let* me,” Iori blurted out.

“Let you?”

“After my foot and arm grew back, he asked me if I wanted to take down Cimeies. I nodded, and he gave me some iron balls, telling me to fire when he gave the sign.”

“Gave the sign?”

““A pillar of fire. When you see it, shoot.””

Terasawa nodded. That must have been the pillar of flame that could be seen rising from the ground near the end of the battle footage.

“Do you still have any of those iron balls?”

“I’m not sure,” Iori responded. “They might still be with the equipment we brought back from the scene.”

“Sorry, but could you check for me?” Terasawa asked.

“Yes, sir.”

The iron balls might represent one more link to the masked man. And unlike

the cape, which could be easily obtained by anyone, iron balls were rather harder to make and available for purchase from fewer sources. They might be the first tiny, metallic breadcrumb of a very enlightening trail. But did that mean...?

“Major Terasawa, are you thinking about investigating him too?” Iori asked.

“Hmm? Ah, no... Not per se. But I was thinking it may help to have a little insurance on our side.”

“Sir?”

Iori cocked her head, unsure of what to make of his wording. However, rather than answer, Terasawa signaled that their meeting was done.

“At any rate,” he said, “don’t worry about the inquiry. Ultimately whoever is behind it will likely have achieved their goal by the time you turn in the relevant materials. I wouldn’t be surprised if proceedings are dropped at that point. Even if a hearing happens, explaining again honestly how you received the orb and your reason for its use should put the whole thing to bed.”

“Understood. Thank you, sir!”

“That’s a relief. Well then, Major Terasawa, sir, thank you for your time!”

Hagane, who had stepped out into the hallway, made a sharp turn back to face his superior through the doorway, put on his winter hat with disciplined movement indicative of his years of military experience, and gave Terasawa a textbook bow.

January 24, 2019 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Good mooorning! Guess who got vacation!” Komugi Rokujo trilled from our entryway.

Someone obviously had energy to spare. If we were going to travel to and from floors lower than the twenty-first, we would need at least four days for the round trip. We planned to return on Sunday, so she had to take Thursday

and Friday off from work.

Lately Rokujo had apparently been so invested in her training and upcoming mission she'd found it hard to focus at work. Naruse had received complaints—just informal so far—from the GIJ.

And now a sudden request for two days of PTO on top of that. She must have torn those days from her boss's hands.

"You're here early" was all I said.

"Yep! I'm ready to go! Recently I haven't even been able to sleep, I'm so excited! Although I have been napping at work."

Napping at work on top of being distracted?! I was beginning to understand the GIJ's complaints all too well.

She tossed herself onto the sofa with the energy of a grade-schooler waiting for the bus to set out on a field trip.

"We have a little time until we depart," Miyoshi said politely. "Should I fix some tea?"

"Yeah!" I responded. "That'd be great."

Miyoshi went to the kitchen, put the kettle on, and started rummaging through my Japanese tea collection.

"Ah, Rokujo," I said to her. "Since we have the time, there's something I want you to look at."

I pretended to reach into my pocket, taking some of the leftover diamonds from Yokohama out of Storage. The diamonds were wrapped in a small bit of the same velvet we used to line the orb cases.

I unwrapped the velvet, and there shone one large blue-tinged diamond and one smaller clear one.

"Whoooa," Rokujo crooned. "Those are really something."

Her expression had changed entirely. In a snap she'd taken out a jeweler's loupe—a magnifying eyepiece used for appraisal—and a pair of tweezers, holding the blue diamond aloft in front of the loupe. As she angled the diamond

this way and that in front of her eyepiece, her brow furrowed in concentration, she seemed like a pro. *Oh, wait. She really is a pro.*

“I can’t determine the exact color without my equipment, but this looks to be exactly between fancy vivid and intense⁽¹¹⁾.”

I had at least some idea why the first drop had been a blue diamond. The embarrassing truth was that I’d been thinking about a certain tokusatsu hero who was supposed to be a spirit residing in one.

“The quality is...VVS2. Carats...around two. I’d grade the cut Excellent, no question. It’s a rather remarkable round brilliant.”

At length, Rokujo pulled herself away from the diamond. She set it down gingerly, then plucked the other one with her tweezers and brought it up to the light.

“This one’s good too. VVS1, color grade...E. About one carat, also Excellent. It looks like it was cut by the same person.”

“You can tell that much?”

“Even with two brilliant round cuts, the idiosyncrasies and preferences of the cutter will come through.”

Recently a category of Triple Excellent for cuts had been established, and the advent of automated diamond cutting had led to near perfect diamonds becoming more commonplace. However, with hand-cut diamonds in that same top category, you could apparently tell what each cutter prioritized via careful comparison of subtle differences.

“This cutter appears to prioritize brilliance, wanting to hold back on dispersion. It creates sort of an aristocratic, European air.”

Brilliance referred to the reflection of white light off the diamond—its sparkle—whereas dispersion, or “fire,” as it was also called, referred to its ability to appear to shine different colors as light refracted through it. Brilliance was preferred in Europe, and fire more strongly sought after in America and elsewhere.

“In general, giving a blue diamond a brilliant round cut is a bit unconventional

by modern standards,” Rokujo explained.

Colored diamond cuts tended to favor shapes that better showed off the hue. A brilliant round cut on a colored diamond alone could be enough to have it moved out of the Excellent grading category.

“I suppose the cutter is an idealist,” she added.

Well, now that you mention it, it was formed off of an idea. I suppose you could call that an *ideal* shape.

But still, all that just from a few minutes with the stones and a loupe. Professional appraisers’ abilities were enough to throw me for a *loupe*.

“So the dungeon drops cut diamonds?” she asked.

“What?” I responded. “You could tell these were dungeon drops?!”

“They looked natural to me. But given that *you* of all people were carrying around a bag of loose diamonds⁽¹²⁾, I could only infer one thing.” She rolled the larger diamond back and forth on top of the velvet with the tweezers as she spoke, grinning.

So the two appear to have the same cutter. I guess the unique cut qualities might provide a way to distinguish dungeon-produced diamonds from natural ones.

As Rokujo was gazing lovingly at the stones, Rosary suddenly swooped down and landed on the table in front of her.

“Wow! Just like spessartine garnet!”

“Spessawhat now?”

“This orange!”

Apparently the color of Rosary’s chest resembled this spesserwhatsit. It was the name of a stone mined in California, which was fitting for an American robin like ol’ Rosy.

“The constituent elements of pyrospite garnets’⁽¹³⁾ end-members are iron, magnesium, and manganese. They mix together to form a solid solution, which determines the color. A greater presence of manganese leads to a vibrant

orange glow, while...”

“Oh. Uh...uh-huh.” I had no idea what she was saying. I’d never even heard of a “pyralspite.”

She kept waving her arms and uttering mysterious, unknowable words like she was casting some sort of arcane spell. I was simply nodding and smiling, while breaking out in a thick sweat.

Thankfully Rosary saved the day by coming and perching on Rokujo’s knees, trilling. *Nice save, Rosary!*

“Oh, it’s so cute! Where did you find it?”

You know it’s not a gemstone, right?

“Where? Um, the du— The dungeon.”

“Wha?”

“It used to be a maid.” Miyoshi came out carrying a tea tray.

“Whaaa?!”

You can’t just go telling people birds used to be maids and expect them to react casually!

“I don’t really get it,” Rokujo responded, “but it’s like Drudwyn?”

“That’s about right.” Miyoshi poured a cup of tea.

Being a product of the dungeons, Rosary never seemed to leave droppings. She could probably even win a fight with the stray cats around here if she wanted. I wouldn’t be surprised if she even shot a laser beam out of her mou— Okay, I’d be a *little* surprised then.

“She’s going to find Kei’s secret treasure,” Miyoshi teased.

“What secret treasure?” I asked.

Just because Rosary (probably) embodied Cimeies’s abilities to unearth hidden objects didn’t mean I was going to give her anything to find. What was “secret treasure” even supposed to mean? I wasn’t some teenager hiding dirty magazines.

“By the way, Kei,” Miyoshi said, “did you hear? Saito’s in a jam.”

“Again?”

Miyoshi handed me a tablet displaying an article headlined “Archery Federation Extends Special Invitation to Ryoko Saito for Olympic Training Program.”

“The Olympics? What’s she gotten herself into this time?”

“Look at the links for further reading.”

“Further reading?”

The site page continued into a list of related articles. Scrolling through, I saw something that made my heart skip a beat.

A headline that read “All Thanks to Her Coach? Ryoko Saito Speaks!”

“Wh— What the hell is thiiiiis?!”

Just then the doorbell rang. Mishiro had come over.

“Sorry!” Saito didn’t actually sound the least bit sorry over the phone.

“Give me a freaking break here, Saito,” I complained.

“Look, I didn’t have any choice.” Apparently the director of her film had wanted to get pickup footage of archery scenes at the tournament at Hikarigaoka the other day, leading to her being asked to do a round of seventy-meter shots. “You gave me a compound bow, but the staff brought me a barebow, and I’d never used one before. I had to say something.”

I gave you the bow, but you’re the one who decided to make a public spectacle out of it.

“And that’s when you set some kind of crazy record?”

That would have been the incident that led to her being called “Artemis.” She’d apparently dropped my name—er, an allusion to her “coach,” in the context of archery this time—the same day.

“I didn’t expect it to go like that! Give me a break! It was a stationary target! There might have been a little wind to account for, but it was nothing compared to a dungeon wolf or goblin. What was I supposed to do? It’s not that I’m even

that special. Haru could set the same score. No doubt.”

“*Definitely* don’t say that in front of the sports press.”

“I knooooow! But...argh...” Her voice trailed off.

“‘Argh’ what?” I asked. “That sounds portentous.”

“I miiight have let slip during the tournament that there were other dungeon explorers who could do at least this much.”

“Aaargh!”

“Hey, it’s the truth! Haru’s even better than I am!”

That’d be because of her off-the-charts DEX. Even Saito probably had twice the DEX of the current world archery champion already. Even if she wasn’t quite up to Joshua Rich’s level, she definitely out-DEX’d Simon.

How were non-dungeon-diving competitors ever supposed to keep up?

“That’s all well and good,” I responded, “but did you have to attribute it to your coach?”

“What was I supposed to say?” she retorted. “That I was chosen as an Olympic candidate without a day of archery training in my life? How’s *that* going to look?”

If she were just an archery hobbyist alongside her acting career, she might have gotten away without mentioning anything, but performing at an Olympic level... *Yeah, not great.*

Not only would her fans not accept that explanation, the general public wouldn’t either.

“Maybe I can just say I’ve been putting in time at some kind of archery range on my days off,” Saito muttered.

“That flimsy lie’s going to get blown in three seconds. I don’t feel like the world of archery is exactly big enough for that one to slip through.”

I wasn’t sure how many archers there were in Japan, but there were certainly few enough *archery ranges* for anyone with the legwork and the gumption to figure out Saito hadn’t made the rounds. It was best to think of niche sporting

grounds as small towns.

“Well, everyone knows I’m training with some sort of coach already. I haven’t lied or anything.”

Except that all I’ve actually taught you is slime killing.

“Anyway,” she huffed, “the ‘coach’ line isn’t even the real problem, if you’re digging for something to be worried about.”

“It’s not?!”

What am I in for next?

“People are going to discover I hadn’t gone dungeon diving until last October and had never touched a bow before that.”

D-Card acquisition wasn’t recorded, but WDA license registration was, and Saito hadn’t gotten hers until the day we’d met at the intro seminar last fall. All anyone would have to do was ask some of her old classmates to find out she hadn’t practiced archery before. It’d be hard to claim she had just been hiding it the whole time.

To make matters even worse, in a country like modern-day Japan, where archery was practiced almost solely for sport rather than hunting, nearly every archer would apparently be registered to some sort of local association or league. Her lack of a record would stand out.

In other words, someone with even the least bit of deductive prowess could discern she had no history with the sport until late last year and had shot up to Olympic-prospective level in three months.

“Do you think they’re going to attribute my meteoric rise to anything other than whatever dungeon diving I’ve done?”

“Uh...” *Not really.*

“Look, I’ll at least feed them the story that it was part of the precursor boot camp we made up for the press conference. I’ll say I was training on wolves or something.”

“So what are you going to do? Am I talking to a future Olympian?”

“Not by choice, but my agency’s eager to put me in...”

“Hmm...”

Pressure was probably coming from all sides. She was a rising silver screen star, which would have been great press for the Archery Federation, and being an Olympic competitor would be an even bigger boost to her national profile. No way would an agency want to pass up a golden ticket like that.

“Is that going to work out with your movie schedule, commercial filming, and dungeon-exploration show? Isn’t your plate a little full?”

“‘Plate a little full’? Someone’s skeptical of this superlative starlet’s steadfast schedule stewardship.” She paused. “Although this is all panning out a little differently from what I was expecting.”

She’d been aiming to be the actress of the hour, but hadn’t really been planning on that including so many activities outside of films.

“I’m not sure I love the prospect of being pigeonholed as ‘the dungeon actress’...” I could hear her voice drop.

“Yeah...”

She’d wanted to be known, but not with an asterisk attached.

“Now, I still don’t have any official archery records, since the lunch-hour rounds the other day were off the books, so they want me to do a competitor-selection event in March, and if I make it through that, I’d go to Colombia.”

“Colombia?”

“Final qualifier tournament at Medellín. There’s a global qualification and quota system.”

“Uh, I hate to ask again, but is that *really* going to be okay with the rest of your work?”

“The movie shoot will be finished by then, and everyone’s scrambling to make the rest work somehow. Ugh, I feel so guilty!”

“And if you just say you won’t compete?”

“Everyone’s going to think I have my nose way too high in the air! Like, who

turns down a chance at the Olympics? Ugh, dealing with other people's expectations is so hard."

"But your heart's not really in it," I pointed out.

"I mean, my qualifying isn't decided yet, but if I do get in, I'll be taking a spot on the team from someone who's spent years striving for it. But..." She sighed. "If I'm told I have to do it, I'm going to come at it to win."

"This is kind of like a musician writing an autobiography on a whim and picking up a literary award," I mused.

"Exactly. This isn't what I wanted to be known for. It feels like everything's gone off the rails. I don't want to be an Olympic competitor, or typecast as a dungeon-based stunt actress."

You saw it all the time. Pro baseball players who switched into entertainment would still be hounded during guest spots to pantomime throwing pitches. That had to be hard in its own way—at least, that's how it seemed to me.

"Look, I really don't want to land a role on a show, get called in just to fire off a few arrows in some studio backlot, then get sent home with a paycheck. That isn't what I signed on for. Ugh, maybe I *will* fire off some shit shots intentionally."

Almost everything about Saito screamed that she was made to be a starlet, but she had to watch her speaking style...

"So, Coach!"

"Hmm?"

"I was thinking...as a prize for doing so well and getting scouted for the Olympics, I was wondering...if maybe you could get me a recurve bow?"

"Seriously?"

"I'll put a D-Powers logo on it."

Ordinarily a bowyer would provide that sort of detailing, but... *Ah*. Maybe this was her indirect way of saying thank you.

Even so, I couldn't help but snicker at that last comment.

“Saito, the Olympics are for *amateurs*. Not sponsored pros.”

“Huh? You mean you can’t have uniforms with sponsor logos on them?”

“No way! Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which they added last year! Remember the news? No expressing political views *or* advertising. There are even strict rules about how many manufacturer logos can be on equipment and how big the text can be.”

Even though the Olympics were only held once every four years, the charter seemed to be updated every year. How much time did the International Olympic Committee have on their hands?

“But it’s not like you’re my official sponsor.”

“About the only marks you can have on you are national symbols and the Olympic logo.”

“What a pain in the ass!”

“But look, I can get you the present. We’re in this *bow-t* together.”

“Greeeat. But really, Coach, you’re the best! I’ll stop by with Haru as soon as she’s back next month!”

“Mitsurugi’s already flown out?”

“Duh, Fashion Week in New York, remember?”

“But it doesn’t start until February 7th. It’s only late January.”

“It isn’t just Fashion Week. There’s a bunch of prep and practice to do.”

“Huh. I guess that makes sense. By the way, I’ll be in Yoyogi for around the next four days, so I might be hard to reach.”

“Okay. Be careful, Coach. Or, I guess I don’t really need to say that to *you*. Okay, I’ll be waiting for the bow!”

“One bow shall come.”

“Ciao!”

As I moved the phone away from my ear, I noticed Mishiro leaning forward on the couch. She’d apparently been listening with great interest.

“You know someone participating in Fashion Week?”

Whoa, has she been, like, a closet fashionista this whole time?

“I think you’ve already met her, haven’t you?” I asked.

“Mishiro’s only been with us since the trial boot camp earlier this month. We haven’t seen Mitsurugi since New Year’s,” Miyoshi explained.

Right. Not since right after we summoned the Manor with slime kills...

“Mitsurugi?” Mishiro asked. “Who’s that?” Her eyes were gleaming with anticipation.

What happened to that no-nonsense lady who was risking her life to protect her brother in the dungeon? Where’d she go?

“She’s Kei’s top girlfriend candidate,” Miyoshi answered.

“Whaaaaat?!” Mishiro squealed.

“Now hold on, that isn’t—”

“And his second-highest candidate is, get this, the only daughter of some Indian plutocrat. Beautiful as a Bollywood actress!”

“No way! Eeee!”

“Uh...”

“What’s so special about Yoshimura? Ah, I mean, I know he’s *super* nice and all,” Mishiro said, catching herself.

Almost a nice save. Almost.

Miyoshi giggled.

How am I supposed to respond to any of this?

“Now his *third* highest candidate,” Miyoshi continued, “is—for real—this up-and-coming actress named Saito. Oh, or maybe it’s Naruse from the JDA.”

“Enough.” I brought a patented karate chop down on Miyoshi’s head.

“Ouch!”

“Wait. A ‘Saito’ connected to D-Powers...” Gears seemed to be churning in

Mishiro's head. "You mean Ryoko Saito?!"

"You know her?"

"Of course! She's blowing up online right now. We stan."

Uh-oh. I had a feeling that "blowing up online" had something to do with the contents of that last call.

"Wait, are you telling me that on the phone just now was...?" Mishiro pointed at me.

"Ryoko Saito, in the flesh. Er, on the phone."

"Get out of here!" she screamed. "Yoshimura, you're something else. From what I saw the other week you're even pals with Simon Gershwin."

"Uh, riding on people's coattails doesn't make someone 'something else,'" I protested.

Miyoshi fanned out some imaginary fabric behind her.

Wait, who's riding whose coattails here?

But come to think of it, Miyoshi was yet another famous associate at this point. Even if the nickname "Wiseman" didn't quite line up with the person.

"Ah, anyway, this whole business with Saito definitely explains one thing," Miyoshi declared.

"What?" I asked.

Without answering, she passed me a tablet with some kind of info table on the screen.

"What is this?"

"Our boot camp applicant data. Not including some of the DSF members Simon's requested special slots for."

The list was filled with people who, according to the application data, had just acquired WDA cards the other day.

"Huh?" I uttered. "It's all beginners."

"Probably pro athletes or people hoping to become one. There are a few

names I recognize.”

“A lot of women,” I commented, scrolling down the list.

You’d expect applicants’ names to match the gender breakdown for explorers as a whole, which leaned male.

“Probably people seeing Saito’s and Mitsurugi’s results and wanting to get the same. Watch out for honey traps, Kei.”

“What would anyone have to gain from trapping me? Anyway, I’m a little concerned about having all these newbies. Dungeons are dangerous, after all...”

Though I guess I wasn’t in any position to lecture others about heading into dungeons unprepared.

“I’ve never felt like I’ve been in danger since joining you,” Mishiro pointed out.

Well, that’s fair.

“If anything, your training routine is actually so much more tame than my previous exploring experiences that it can be a little boring.”

“I guess that’s a problem in its own right,” I reflected.

“Maybe. But still, better boredom-inducing than life-threatening,” Mishiro responded.

No arguments here.

“Speaking of danger, why don’t we do one last bit of prep before heading out, to help improve our odds that much more if we encounter any unexpected issues.”

“Last bit of prep?” Mishiro echoed.

I didn’t answer directly. Instead, I posed another question.

“First, could you both tell me what kind of style you’d like to aim for?” I asked Mishiro and Rokujo.

“Style?”

I told her it was a safety precaution, to ensure she stayed out of danger.

Miyoshi cocked her head.

“So, like, an exploration or combat style. Rokujo, you want to go to floors lower than the twenty-first, right?”

“Of course!”

“So, about that,” Mishiro interrupted. “Is this serious? I mean, I know that’s the ultimate goal, but right now...? Isn’t that a little reckless? I mean, Komugi, you’ve only been training for a week.” The single-digit floors were one thing, but sub-twenty-first ones were out of the question for amateurs who had only been diving a short time, Mishiro politely explained.

That *was* true. *Ordinarily*. At any rate, it was good to see Mishiro was taking things seriously. That said...

“Checked your D-Card recently?” I asked.

“Huh? Uh, well, no. The last time was probably when I used it to form a party with Komugi, but...”

With that, she pulled out her D-Card—

And froze.

“Mishiro?” I asked. Nonresponsive.

“Rank 1,359?! I was only a little over 360,000!”

Rokujo took out her card as well, beaming.

“I’m Rank 1,772. Is that good?”

“Wh-Wh-Whaat?!” Mishiro stammered, reacting to Rokujo’s card. “But you said you’d just gotten your D-Card the other week at boot camp!”

“See, our program’s pretty exceptional.”

“It can’t be *this* exceptional!”

“Now,” I said, ignoring her consternation, “about that danger. I’ve heard the top private teams in Area 12 are all in the Rank 1,000 to 2,000 range.”

“Well, there’s that mysterious Phantom character in the mix too, but ignoring him,” Mishiro said, “yeah.”

“If Shibu T and Kagero can make it to the twentieth floor and lower, a couple of other explorers ranked in the top two thousand—like you and Rokujo—should be able to do the same.”

“This hardly feels real...” She kept staring at her D-Card.

Of course it wouldn't feel real yet. Only a portion of the stat points she'd accumulated had been distributed. With a bit of time, half of them would be processed into stats, but in even less time, we could make sure *all* those points were applied to her stats.

“During the trip, I'm planning to get Rokujo a weapon to use—from the tenth floor.”

“A weapon for me?” Rokujo asked.

“Right. Now, I say weapon, but you don't seem like much of a fighter yourself, so I figured some pals would be better.”

Even if we could get her to floors below the twenty-first, our plan depended on Rokujo actually being able to defeat enemies there to trigger mineral drops. She had to be able to attack monsters herself.

“Pals? You mean like Drudwyn?”

“Exactly like Drudwyn. You a dog person?”

“I love 'em! Yay!”

Mishiro looked uneasy. “Wait a minute. You mean *that* kind of dog? You can get your hands on their orbs that easily?!”

“Well, not exactly ‘easily,’” I demurred.

“R-Right,” she replied, seeming satisfied. “It couldn't actually be easy. Phew.” She let out a sigh of relief, content that some laws of logic still seemed to apply. For now.

“Now, anyway, that's the plan, so Mishiro, I'd like you to tell me what kind of style you'd like.”

She paused for a moment, seeming to finally deem the question worthy of consideration.

“Any answer okay?”

“I’m just asking how you’d ultimately like to develop. The sky’s the limit.”

“Well, right now I mainly use a bow, but I have to be careful with my arrow count, so I’ve been wishing I could switch over to some kind of magic that allows me to attack with solid objects.”

“Magic to attack with solid objects? You mean like hurtling rocks or something?”

“Something like that. I don’t feel like I can fully trust something insubstantial like fire or water.”

I understood the feeling. With water magic, if we happened upon a monster resistant to it, it would splash off like so much cool mist. There was something more dependable about hurtling rocks or shards of ice. And in terms of what we had on hand, there was still an Earth Magic in Storage.

“Plus, when I’m exploring with Komugi, I’ll probably be the vanguard, right?”

“I was actually thinking we should add a proper vanguard in the future, but for right now, you’ll have Rokujo’s dogs out in front. The two of you can follow behind. I don’t like the idea of forcing you into a frontline position if your skills aren’t suited for it.”

She thought silently for another moment. “Then I guess I’d like to be an all-rounder, with the option to use either arrows or magic.”

“It’d be pretty cool if you could work out a style that fused the two of them together, huh?”

“Yeah!” She suddenly lit up, then tamped herself down. “Of course, that sounds like a ridiculous anime protagonist’s power suite.”

Our Earth Magic orb had no attached numeral, which meant its skills were malleable and adaptable. If she put her mind to it, she could probably create earthen arrows, or something like that. Though which would be stronger between that and simply firing a normal arrow from a bow with her stats would remain to be seen.

“And I just let my dogs do the work and keep myself out of the fray?” Rokujo

asked.

“Uh... Uh, yeah,” I responded.

Rokujo was like a super passive Miyoshi. Miyoshi had gone for a min-max approach, but it seemed to be serving her well so far, so I figured a similar build would work.

“Okay! Now, drink this!” I placed two paper cups of...something...on the table in front of them. Teastruction, courtesy of Miyoshi.

“Is— Isn’t this the stuff that almost killed everyone the other week?” Mishiro asked nervously.

She hadn’t had the pleasure herself yet, but she’d seen everyone’s pained reactions after downing a cup of the stuff at the preopening boot camp.

“Again...?” Rokujo’s shoulders sagged. She extended her hand toward the cup. “Eri.” She turned to Mishiro. “Hold your nose and down this in one gulp. Trust me.” With that advice, the venerable veteran of detestable drinks pinched her nostrils shut with one hand, tipped back the tea, and...

WHAM.

Just like before, she was laid out flat on the sofa.

“By ‘down this,’ did she mean ‘down for the count’?” Mishiro asked.

“We haven’t had anyone die on us yet.” I looked at Miyoshi. “Right?”

“Hmm.” Miyoshi responded. “I don’t think so.”

“How reassuring.” Tears in her eyes, Mishiro followed the Rokujo method and downed the whole drink in one go.

“Gweh! Bwech! Gewheh! This...this...isn’t fit...for...huaawnnns... Gwech. Ghoff.”

She was hunched over on the sofa, but at least remained conscious. *What a champ.* She looked like a boxing movie protagonist who had just gone fifteen rounds in the ring.

Holding back a grin, I sat down and took a quick pass through their stats, distributing all their SP.

Name: Eri Mishiro

HP: 33.20

MP: 86.00

STR: [-] 14 [+]

VIT: [-] 12 [+]

INT: [-] 48 [+]

AGI: [-] 24 [+]

DEX: [-] 34 [+]

LUC: [-] 12 [+]

Name: Komugi Rokujo

HP: 27.20

MP: 90.40

STR: [-] 10 [+]

VIT: [-] 10 [+]

INT: [-] 52 [+]

AGI: [-] 32 [+]

DEX: [-] 20 [+]

LUC: [-] 41 [+]

Now it would feel real.

Minnetonka, Minnesota, United States of America

The Gargill corporate headquarters, nestled next to the Minnehaha Creek by Gray’s Bay, more closely resembled a three-tiered brick-red pyramid than an ordinary office complex. It was Saturday, but one Donald McClain, CEO of

Gargill, past middle age but still on the young side for his status, sat in an upper-floor office. He was adorned in a Hickey Freeman jacket—blue shirt, no necktie—and running his hands through his cream-brown hair, a thick crease forming in his brow.

“Terry. Have you read this report?”

“I gave it a once-over when it hit my desk,” Terry, who had brought in the report, answered flatly. He was looking trim in a perfectly tailored Ede & Ravenscroft suit.

Donald glanced up. There was no reason to be wearing such an ostentatious outfit in a backwater location like this. But then, fashion was one expression of the self. As long as Terry did his work, Donald didn’t care whether he was wearing a three-piece suit or a ratty T-shirt and jeans.

“Verified?” Donald asked.

“It’s passed peer review⁽¹⁴⁾ at the WDA patent office.”

In other words, verified.

Donald looked at the paper. The title “The Respawning of Intra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops and the Status Change of Outra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops” adorned its top page. Bound by one corner staple, it ran several pages, documenting the mechanisms by which crops could be made to respawn in the dungeon. He tossed the packet onto his desk.

“So what does this mean?” he asked.

“In a word, danger,” Terry responded resolutely. His expression remained inscrutable. *“I don’t think we can dismiss this as just another player in the global food market game. However...”*

“What?”

“Thankfully our strengths aren’t just in seeds, or even primarily in seeds. Our strength lies in controlling grain logistics.” Terry stared at the report on the table. *“Say they do get respawning fields. Grain elevators, silos, freighters and freight cars—the need for these things isn’t simply going to disappear. Think about it, Donald. There are only a hundred-some known dungeons in the world.*

Now you tell me, can they meet the entire world's agricultural needs? This is going to be a market shake-up, but it's just another market shake-up. If this revolutionizes the seed market, we just need to make sure we're the ones bringing dungeon seeds to the world, in addition to continuing our services for traditional agriculture."

Granted, some of their investments—such as climate-and-harvest-yield measurement systems—might take a hit. In addition, one of the company's strengths had been its meteorological prediction systems, for which there would be no need in the dungeons. Even so, they could weather this storm relatively unscathed.

"For seed companies though..." Terry tutted. *"This might just be their worst nightmare."*

This system thumbed its nose at both the very need for F1 hybrids or triploid genetics and the intellectual property right laws designed to protect them. Soon anyone, anywhere, would be able to endlessly farm the best sample set of crops—*infinitely*—just by obtaining a handful of starter seeds.

After the initial flurry of purchases to get dungeon farms started, what was left of the seed market would be the realm of niche hobbyists. And any new seeds developed would only need to be sold once before endless reproduction began. To top it off, the genetic advantages the companies had toiled so hard for, such as pest and pesticide resistances, would soon become nonfactors in the seeds' new environment.

Sure, companies could try to legally block the use of their seeds in dungeon fields, but once the cat was out of the bag? They couldn't stop dungeon-based agricultural endeavors. The entire seed industry was at risk. Last year Bayer, after its buyout of Monsanto, and Dupont, a Japanese company which had established subsidiary Corteva Agriscience, made between them nearly 1.4 billion dollars in sales. Now they stood to lose all that in an instant.

"Even if it seemed like a meaningful gesture, and I'm not sure it would at this point, you can't produce dungeonizing-resistant seeds," Terry pointed out. *"Or at least I don't imagine you could."*

"Probably not, huh?" Donald agreed.

Since the process of dungeonizing wasn't yet fully understood—it was a science so fledgling it was practically a seed itself—there was no prospect of using genetic engineering to prevent it. Even hypothetical legal protections against dungeonizing could only extend to certain, very specific seeds. The damage to the industry was done.

Now no matter how hard it was to cultivate the crop—no matter how temperamental its growing conditions—a dungeon farmer would only have to succeed in bringing it to maturity once to achieve endless, perfect harvests.

Hold on. Was that *really* going to exert so little influence on Gargill?

Donald leaned against his high-backed chair and folded his hands in his lap, twiddling his thumbs nervously.

"Terry." He looked up. *"I hate to say it, but we're not going to make it out of this as unscathed as you're thinking."*

Terry raised his brow.

"Take US corn yields. About 174 bushels per acre—1.092 kilograms per square meter." He leaned forward, tearing a sheet from his notepad, beginning to jot down calculations. *"An average combine harvester will move at a speed of around 1.4 meters per second. If the ones used in this system run at the same speeds, with a track width of two meters, one automated harvester's annual yield would be..."*—his pen ran frantically along the notepad sheet—*"88,300 tonnes."*

"World wheat production is, what? Around 1.1 billion tonnes..." Terry observed.

"They'd reach that number with just 12,500 of these Ukemochi units worldwide." Donald tapped his pen against the paper. *"Under their new system, there'd be no need to purchase new seed each year, no need to invest in the development of new equipment, not even much need for labor."*

Costs would go down, profits up—good news for everyone except those invested in the status quo. Donald held up the report, pointing to the outline of the patent-applicant's endless-farming system.

"All you have to do is purchase this equipment and put it in a dungeon."

Donald tossed his pen across the table then held out his hands, open-palmed. *“Who’s going to keep working with traditional farming methods after this? The whole system’s going to get blown up.”*

Terry merely listened, expression growing more concerned.

“I’ll tell you what,” Donald continued, *“we might just be looking at the end of agriculture as we know it. You said this couldn’t feed the whole world, but honestly, it could.”*

“Then maybe we wrap up traditional agricultural operations and pivot toward this.”

They might cease to see any returns from their current primary elevators, sea routes, and harbors—it was impossible to predict the changes that awaited them. Even their larger terminal elevators might simply become unused, empty relics.

Even if Gargill attempted to pivot toward supporting the new dungeon system, scale was a problem. Their largest elevators were built to store and process *annual* harvests. But the dungeon system would produce *constant* harvests. Some new system—one designed to handle this constant deluge of grain—would be required, and the first early bird to that worm wouldn’t necessarily be Gargill. The market really had been blown wide open.

“Plus we’re an unlisted company,” Donald lamented. *“Investors could be champing at the bit to purchase stock for the first start-up to get in on this field. We’re going to struggle to rally the same financial support as quickly.”*

Terry finally looked worried.

“But we have to be careful. We don’t want to be the next Cook...”

Cook Industries had been one of the major players in the grain market until its downfall in 1978. Grain companies were involved in just about everything in the agriculture industry except for farming itself. They bought grains and distributed them—they had only to make sure that the products they moved were worth the cost of doing so. Were the contents of a company’s individual deals with farmers to become public, it would tie their hands in future negotiations. For that reason, most grain companies chose to remain private.

Cook had been an exception, choosing to go public. However, the main reason it had gone under was—

“It tried to squeeze in on oil companies, right? It wasn’t just that they went public,” Donald protested.

Grain companies remaining private was, if anything, now an antiquated rule. The field had narrowed considerably in past decades, such that now only four major players remained: Gargill, Bunge, Dreyfus, and ADM.

Though ADM owned the most silos, it made a negligible portion of its income directly from agricultural trade. It was, if anything, a manufacturing company. Though for many years it alone had been public, Bunge had followed suit in 2001, and rumors surrounding Dreyfus opening up public stock⁽¹⁵⁾ had swirled ever since.

“At any rate,” Donald went on, *“demand is going to be there for companies who can work with this system. Just one installation could produce upward of ninety thousand tonnes per year. No need to acquire land, no need to damage rainforests, no need to deal with environmental advocacy groups. Just one equipment purchase. True sustainability. The system leaves nothing to ask for.”*

And that was without getting into its unlimited, round-the-clock yields. The word “sustainable” hardly seemed to do it justice.

There were even separate rumors circulating that would only sweeten this system’s taste—rumblings that dungeon-produced foodstuffs could improve people’s abilities. If that proved true, the grain produced by the Ukemochi system might be worth even more than their current estimations.

“We might be talking about individual farms that can meet international demand. That’s no joke. That’s what we’re staring down.”

Support initiatives for setting up large farms in developing nations would probably dry up too.

“But developing nations would still require financial assistance to get one of these systems in place,” Terry pointed out. *“We could funnel funds into the WFP, UNDP, world banks⁽¹⁶⁾. Get them set up with traditional practices and systems we can support... Perhaps slow the global spread of dungeon farming.”*

The organizations Terry listed had historically received a bulk of their funds from the United States. Perhaps Gargill *could* use such institutions to slow down the advent of the new system. However...

"The problem will be the FAO," Donald said, referring to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization.

"The FAO? All they do now is hold little forums every once in a while."

Donald furrowed his brows. Those younger than he tended to underestimate the FAO. Certainly, it was a shell of its former self, a body whose possible dissolution regularly came up for discussion. Yet that didn't mean it didn't hold power.

It remained one of the founding organizations from the first era of international cooperation, and still possessed sway. In addition, many of its senior figures had reason to harbor resentments toward American-based companies. It was largely due to America that the FAO had seen its powers curtailed, and it was exactly that FAO which might be able to impede the plan they were now discussing.

The FAO had originally overseen promotion of global initiatives related to food production agriculture and efforts to combat global hunger. It made quite the debut, dispatching numerous experts from each member state to help with agricultural projects in developing nations. However, despite a promise of impartiality, there was a natural tendency to dedicate allocation of resources to said developing states, which didn't sit well with advanced ones. Of course any international body promising formal equality in allocation of joint resources would experience friction—the kind that might hinder its own goals. Such was the case for the FAO. Especially in cases of democracies, the one-sided flow of resources out of the country toward developing ones became a point of contention in elections—all the more so during times of domestic recession. Good intentions had a way of folding in the face of local business closures and rising unemployment rates. Yet with no means to push back, all national politicians could do in such times was hang their heads in shame in front of a frustrated public.

After long harboring such frustrations, it was America's political forces which

had first succeeded in eroding the powers of the FAO, leveraging the Bretton Woods system signed into effect in 1944, which tied global currencies to the dollar.

For food assistance, America helped found the WFP, or World Food Programme, with the FAO. The WFP underwent structural changes in 1992 that left it largely independent. Development assistance had been subsumed by the IDA—the International Development Association—founded in 1966⁽¹⁷⁾ and rapidly expanded to direct a host of global development initiatives. Finally, a new agency within the UN—the United Nations Development Programme, or UNDP—was formed to direct most of the organization’s internal development projects. Long-standing director-general of the FAO Edouard Victor Saouma⁽¹⁸⁾ would later call the WFC—that is, the World Food Council—a militarized project against the FAO.

While these new institutions hadn’t destroyed the FAO, they had severely weakened it.

Donald shook his head.

“We may get along on the surface, but there’s plenty of discord there.”

In particular, Ambrose Magus on the current FAO Committee of Agriculture was trouble. He seemed to see himself as some kind of saintlike figure duty bound to deliver on the FAO’s mission statement of “fiat panis.”⁽¹⁹⁾ What better way to deliver on the idea of “let there be bread” than with this newly discovered dungeon system?

“But the current FAO has no say over development assistant programs,” Terry pointed out, *“which the proposed system would fall under.”*

“If only all we had to deal with was the FAO.”

Food assistance and development assistance in developing nations had become quite the tangled web. A number of groups now had their hands in that cookie jar. There was the WFP, operating largely independently from the FAO, the IBRD and IDA under the World Bank Group, and the IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), founded as an outcome of the World Food Conference in 1977.

The IFAD originally had the goal of redistributing profits from oil-rich nations. Unlike America-led Bretton Woods institutions, the IFAD split both general assembly and executive board voting rights evenly between the three categories of advanced countries, oil-producing countries, and developing countries, without a weighted voting system. The current president of the IFAD was a former prime minister of Togo who had come up through the UNDP.

“The problem is that the current president is from Togo,” Donald explained.

The West African nation of Togo was one of the poorest states in the world, with a GDP of less than one thousand US dollars per person. The nation was dependent on foreign aid, but the EU had repeatedly opened and discontinued various aid projects. Looking at the occupations of its population, Togo was a farming nation, but production of main domestic crops had stagnated, and it had seen substantial drop-off in revenue from its main exports of cacao and coffee. Cotton production had grown, but had yet to prove itself more than a temporary boom. Togo was also a major exporter of phosphates, but this area too had seen diminishing financial returns. However, the capital of Lomé was a robustly equipped port city, with the potential to be a crucial commercial transit point for its neighbors.

It shared a common currency with its neighbors Benin and Burkina Faso via the West African Economic and Monetary Union—the *Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine*, or UEMOA. The Sahara Desert was host to a number of dungeons, including Burkina Faso’s Darkoye Dungeon. Though the region lacked railway infrastructure, it had valuable exports to offer thanks to said dungeon, and that would be all the more true if the new dungeon agricultural system took off. Under the proposed system, Togo’s stood to become very profitable indeed.

“We can exert some political and financial leverage on other advanced nations, but developing ones?” Donald threw up his hands again. *“Don’t expect them to give up their first potential gravy train. Regarding the IFAD, any moves to ramrod traditional projects and block the new system would depend on the votes of oil-producing nations.”* [\(20\)](#) *But...*

The writing was on the wall. No matter how much the current FAO president

claimed that while he might have been African, his perspective was global⁽²¹⁾, humans were humans. A former Togo prime minister leading the IFAD would find it hard to turn down such a potent balm for his nation's financial woes.

And said president could then exert pressure over the votes of oil-producing states, which already tended to be unfavorable to American initiatives. The cause was the early 2010s shale oil boom. Oil and natural gases extracted via fracking had become cornerstones of the American economy, and upped America's oil production year by year. The price of crude oil—which had gradually increased to as much as one hundred dollars per barrel over the course of 2011 to 2014—plunged in 2015, as OPEC decided to maintain production in the face of a growing surplus, with the aim of flooding the market and drowning out competing US shale oil. More than 177 shale oil companies did indeed go under, but that did nothing to impede American shale oil production, and by 2017 the United States had become the world's largest oil producer.

Crude oil had gone back up to roughly seventy dollars per barrel last year, but investors still feared that another brazen move by OPEC to crowd out shale oil might disrupt the market, and that had come back to hurt natural crude-oil producers. Their animosity was still pointed toward America. Donald found it unlikely that Gargill would find any willing collaborators among those nations.

To make matters worse, oil-producing countries tended to do little large-scale grain production, making them unlikely recipients of resources dedicated to shoring up natural farming initiatives. Saudi Arabia had given up its wheat production in the latter aughts. Its underground water reserves had given out. If anything, they stood to benefit from the advent of the dungeon system, which would grant them greater domestic food security.

"Forget pushes for traditional agriculture. If the FAO waves the flag and the IFAD starts investing funds in the new system..." Donald frowned.

There was no need to continue. The system would soon be adopted worldwide, and that would be the end of not only seed companies, but also all those tied to supporting the current agricultural system.

"Just food for thought," Donald muttered, *"but what would happen if the*

current patent applicants...dropped dead?"

"Sir, you're not suggesting..." Terry responded.

"Only musing."

"From my understanding, the patent would follow normal intellectual-property inheritance laws, but no heir has been appointed."

Dungeon patents fell under the legal jurisdiction of the dungeon associations, and required an heir to be on file with the World Dungeon Association. Should none be specified, the relevant national dungeon association would first be required to conduct a search for an heir with a justifiable claim. Should none emerge, rights would revert back to that national branch.

"Which means, in this case?" Donald asked.

"The rights would likely fall to the JDA."

"Think greasing the right bureaucrat's palms could make something happen in that case?"

"For the right amount, any organization has its weak points, but..."

"Hrm..."

"This is just hypothetical, right? Shouldn't we be considering more practical solutions?"

"Right," Donald responded. *"Of course."*

Terry was yet naive. Understanding of the darker side of business matters would come with age and experience. So for now, Donald passed this final solution off as a joke.

"If the FAO and IFAD join forces, it will be difficult to enact legal restrictions on the new system."

"Then we just give up?" Terry asked.

"Now don't say that just yet."

Even if the new system's needs differed from those of current business models, there would still be a need for logistics. All that grain had to go somewhere.

“Let’s start looking into dungeons, and see if we can purchase land for elevators.”

Land in dungeons near developing nations should be cheap. Now was the time to pounce.

“A full pivot?” Terry asked.

“It’s the businessman’s burden to try to survive against all odds. But before that—” Donald pointed at Terry. *“The business pivot will be our contingency. Get a campaign brewing.”*

“Campaign?”

“There was all that fuss over GMOs. How do you think the world is going to respond to crops grown in a fucking dungeon?”

The crops could be totally harmless—or maybe even beneficial, if they really granted superhuman attributes. But it would still be possible to stoke fears that dungeon crops had the potential to make their consumer *inhuman*, especially with how unpalatable the term “dungeon crops” sounded.

“Some crackpot will take up the cause, right? There have to be a few half-brained environmentalist stooges who can get their awareness campaign jimmies off while doing our PR for us.”

In the past, certain extremist environmental groups had even gone so far as to try to sabotage research projects. Now that kind of high-profile stunt might actually help them for once. The Department of Agriculture publicized genetic-modification projects, which made them easy targets.

“Better than the rights holders dropping dead, right?” Terry smiled.

“I don’t have to tell you this, but—” Donald began.

“Don’t worry. Our name will never come up.” Terry moved briskly toward the door, gripped the handle, and pulled it open.

“Wait! One more thing,” Donald called.

Terry turned back, standing in the doorway.

“Tell the family stakeholders to get their hands off of agricultural stocks.”

“Discreetly, of course.” Terry winked.

One saw this pattern frequently with family-owned companies. Children with some talent for business grew up coddled, and only truly came into their own after a major business failure. But a failure at this point might not be one they could come back from. No one wanted to be another Cook.

Yoyogi Dungeon

“Yoshimura, isn’t that pack a little heavy?” Mishiro asked with concern.

Certainly the backpack, when nearly filled to its eighty-liter capacity, wouldn’t exactly be light, but at least it distributed its weight in a balanced way. It was made to be easy to carry.

“Don’t worry,” I responded. “This much is fine.”

“You must be stronger than you look.” She raised her eyebrows.

“A little.” I shrugged.

The shameful truth was that the pack was mostly empty—a ruse to conceal our use of Vault and Storage. I’d had Miyoshi fill it with plastic containers. It probably didn’t even weigh four kilograms.

Of course if I put my stats back up to full power, there wouldn’t be much difference between four kilograms and forty, but that weight would increase the kinetic energy proportionately when I swung the pack on and off. Even if I was okay with the weight, that didn’t mean the pack’s straps and main fabric body would hold.

“Let’s book it to the tenth floor right away,” Miyoshi called out from the front of the party, then gave out formation instructions. “I’ll take the lead until the tenth floor. Kei, you bring up the rear. Mishiro, you play Robin Hood from the middle if anything starts sneaking up. Don’t worry about arrow count—let ’em fly.”

“Don’t worry?” she asked. “Why not?”

“We’re *really* well stocked,” Miyoshi replied.

“Got it.” Mishiro nodded.

So we set out with the preliminary party order of Miyoshi, Mishiro, Rokujo, and myself, making a beeline to the tenth floor. It felt more like a simple walk from Point A to Point B than dungeon exploration.

“Huh. This is like a literal walk in the park,” Rokujo commented, taking in the new scenery of floors past the first.

“I mean, our ranged tactics help a lot,” I explained. “As long as no monsters get close, we don’t have much to worry about.”

“This sure is different from my previous trips here,” Mishiro commented warily.

All she was doing was putting an arrow between the eyes of the very occasional monster that would wander up. That was thanks to the Arthurs clearing the way. Monsters that would ordinarily be in our path, like forest wolves, wild boars, and blood boars, were all torn to bits in advance.

“At least you have something to keep you occupied,” Rokujo pouted. “Until we get down to the lower floors, I’m just walking here.”

It really was like dungeon tourism for her, I supposed. But until we got her a means to fight back by grabbing another Darkness (VI) orb, there was nothing for her to do but hang back.

Both Mishiro and Rokujo had AGI stats over twenty, so even at a relaxed pace we were making pretty good speed, averaging around thirty minutes per floor. Granted, the staircases on the single-digit floors tended to be pretty close together, but we still reached the staircase to the tenth in under six hours. Not too shabby, if I did say so myself.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Ninth Floor

“Up ahead!”

We spotted the ninth floor’s JSDF encampment in front of the staircase down to the tenth floor. There’d been one on every floor up to now too, each positioned near a staircase and with radio transceiver equipment visible. During

exploration missions, having an internal dungeon communications network was of the utmost importance. Wireless transceiver outposts at the entrance and exit of each floor would allow for communications relays. With slimes ready to dissolve electrical equipment at a moment's notice, the outposts had to be manned around the clock, requiring constant vigilance.

It would sure help having a permanent outpost on the safe floor. It would free up so many hands—even allowing for easy swap-outs between shifts, with staff semipermanently stationed in barracks.

“Man, we’ll never be able to keep up with real organizations like that,” I mused admiringly.

“They do say there’s power in numbers,” Rokujo observed.

Of course, the Arthurs granted us our own way of maintaining contact within and outside the dungeons, but it wasn’t like we’d found a way to set up internet connections in the dungeons or anything. Part of me wished the JSDF would make their communications array available for public use, but I understood the need to keep JSDF communications separate, as well as the energy cost involved in each transmission.

But once again, with the discovery of the safe zone, they could probably set aside the issue of cost when it came to establishing some sort of permanent and public communications network. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were already thinking over different systems.

“I know it’s already a little late, but why don’t we stop here for lunch,” I suggested.

Miyoshi unpacked an inner bag containing some hefty American-style lunch sets. Her possession of Storage was now on record with the JDA, but we still didn’t want to draw attention to it any more than we had to.

“How is this possible? It’s still warm,” Rokujo commented with surprise.

“We’ve got a bit of magic working inside this pack,” I responded.

“Magic?!”

“Yep,” I extracted the boxes from their pack, which contained a silver inner

lining much like the one you saw in pizza delivery bags. “A little magic known as ‘insulation.’” I fanned the food.

It was actually kind of incredible that we’d marched for a full six hours without eating. Mishiro stuffed her face with some ravigote sauce whitefish sauté. There were countless combinations of vinegars and herbs that could be used for the ravigote sauce. These particular bentos used balsamic and wine vinegars with tomato juice, and just a pinch of extra spices—a kind of modern Italian take.

“These are kind of extravagant for an expedition, but super good,” Mishiro commented happily. “They’re ready-made, right? Where’d you get them?”

“Miyoshi ordered them special from a local bento shop.”

“What? You didn’t need to go through all that for us! Especially not just for a few meals.”

“Don’t worry,” I responded. “It wasn’t just a few.”

The minimum bulk order count had been fifty.

Rokujo dreamily scooped up bite after bite, commenting on how tasty each dish was.

“For coming from a premade place, all these sauces taste so fresh,” Mishiro observed. “Usually they kind of have a tinny, canned flavor.”

“You know your stuff. You’re kind of a foodie too, huh?” Miyoshi commented with a smile. She cut into her hamburger steak with a fork, and popped a bite into her mouth. “The truth is this bento place is run by a former bistro owner. The sauces are the chef’s own work.”

“Huh? They’re all fantastic. But why close up a restaurant to open a bento place?”

“They probably didn’t have the sauce.”

“B-But they *specialized* in sauces,” Mishiro protested.

“Not *that* kind of sauce. Individuality. Making sauces takes a lot of work, but they’re also the kind of thing that generally comes out the same as long as they’re made according to recipe.” Miyoshi plunged her fork into her

Neapolitan-style fusilli. “Take demi-glace. It fell out of favor specifically because, when made correctly, the result is so unbendingly uniform. At least according to Escoffier. It’s a bit like *shio kombu*—salted kelp.”

“Salted kelp?”

“You know, the kind you use as a topping on *ochazuke* rice?”

“I know, but...”

“Add it to pickled vegetables, or fried rice, or *ochazuke* or anything else, and sure, you can make anything taste better, but it also makes things taste the *same*. Salted kelp tastes like...salted kelp. And so does anything it’s used on. It’s a little like that Hiroshi Mori mystery.”

Hiroshi Mori had published *The Perfect Insider*—Japanese title, *Everything Becomes F*—in 1996. No connection, in particular, to salted kelp.

“Now you can get just about any kind of fresh ingredients anywhere, thanks to modern logistics,” Miyoshi continued. “The trend is toward drawing out unique natural flavors, not burying them under sauce.”

Ignoring old restaurants that had their own long-standing reputations, when you wanted to impress someone or treat yourself with an extravagant meal, you wouldn’t want to go somewhere where everything was good but tasted the same as the restaurant down the street. You would want to savor the unique flavors of whatever dish you were having.

As an additional drawback, dishes coming out slathered in sauces and garnish didn’t make for very Instagrammable food. Though there were restaurants starting to reverse the trend by selling themselves on just how *un-*grammable their menus were.

“On the other hand,” Miyoshi concluded, “sauces for prepackaged meals? Perfect, and the perfectionist approach in that realm definitely stands out. It’s no wonder they’d have more success selling bentos than running a restaurant.”

She hungrily popped a bite of rosemary chicken into her mouth.

“Fby the wheih, Kei,” she said, chewing, “don’t you think salted kelp would sell more cut down to about two-millimeter strips? You could use it as a general

spice instead of this huge garnish. What do you think? Would it sell?"

"You can just cut it down yourself with a knife."

"Okay, Mr. Culinary Curmudgeon. Have you *tried* cutting through freeze-dried kelp with an ordinary kitchen knife? Good luck. I guess you could stick it in a blender to make powder..."

Miyoshi was a foodie, but not much of a purist, I'd found. If there were a way to get a use out of an ingredient, she'd find it no matter how the ingredient needed to be altered. Perhaps she was a foodie for modern Japan, in which it was nearly impossible to avoid artificial flavor-enhancers entirely.

"Well, thank you very much for the food," Rokujo announced happily. She set down her cup, then came over and whispered something to Miyoshi.

"Kei," Miyoshi shot me a glance, gesturing sideways with her eyes. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Oh, right," I responded, picking up on her vibe.

I walked a little ways away to an area out of sight of our main camp, set up a Loo, and left out some powder along with a disposable powder case. Even though powder did its job, most people still felt uncomfortable simply...leaving their business around. Having some kind of container, basically a portable toilet, set the user at ease.

That was where the powder case came in. Functioning as a kind of disposable toilet, they were sold in packs by the half dozen. All you had to do was close them up, leave them in an out-of-the-way location, and wait for the dungeon to do its job.

"Just put powder in the case before you do your business," I explained.

"Thanks for the prep," Miyoshi replied. "Kei, if you wouldn't mind keeping lookout a little ways away. We don't want any colonial worms creeping up after all."

I figured the Arthurs alone would do the job, but I didn't say that out loud. I understood this wasn't just about keeping lookout. This was about ensuring no male foot trod upon this holy ground while the ladies took their private time.

“I’m literally begging you, please stop saying things that sound like ominous foreshadowing,” I pleaded.

“I’ll call you back over when we’re done. Do you need to use it first?”

“I’m good,” I answered, waving behind me as I walked away from the camp.

Cavall and Aethlem stayed by the loo, watching me warily as I left.

Riiight, I got it. The thing that most needs looking out for in this situation isn’t monsters—it’s me.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Floor

“What’s up with this place? It smells.”

That was Rokujo’s assessment as she surveyed our surroundings partway down the staircase to the tenth floor. She had detected the charming fragrance of fast-rotting flesh and sun-bleached bones. Eau de Zombie.

We’d been shocked by the olfactory assault on our first trip to the floor too. Who would have thought the zombies would actually smell like decomposing corpses. When you thought about how they just dispersed into clumps of black light when killed, their smell when “alive” was kind of remarkable. The dungeons didn’t have to go *that* far with the sensory immersion. Who was it for?

“Is the plan for them both to use their orbs here?” Miyoshi asked.

“That’s the plan. Well, not right here, but on this floor at least.”

We passed an encampment of JSDF personnel partway down the staircase, just like the encampments we’d seen by the entrances and exits to floors up till now. The difference was that here they were stationed *on* the staircase, rather than near it. The assimilation drug would protect them from undead monsters during the day, but at night there’d be no choice but to retreat to higher ground anyway, leading to their midway camp placement.

Having the troops around was great for safety, sure, but it made summoning hellhounds discreetly a bit more of a task. We aimed to take advantage of the relative privacy on the tenth floor resulting from the absence of JSDF outposts.

“We have to summon them somewhere,” I explained. “We’ve reached the tenth floor earlier than I expected. We can use the opportunity to summon the puppers, then try to head down to the eighteenth floor to make camp.”

“Right,” Miyoshi agreed. “There are a lot of people down at the eighteenth floor right now, so it’ll be a safer place to camp out.”

We poured on some assimilation drug and headed farther down the staircase to the eleventh floor. Once we were out of sight of the JSDF contingent, we veered off the beaten path.

“How about here?” Miyoshi suggested after a bit of walking.

“Seems good. The Arthurs and I will keep an eye out for any undead while you help them use the orbs.”

Even though we’d used the assimilation drug, we weren’t sure how the undead would react when we used the orbs. It would be prudent to keep a lookout, just in case.

“Right. Okay then. Don’t let your guard down and accidentally let any boneheads through.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I reached into my backpack, for show, and pulled two orb cases out of Storage, handing them to Miyoshi. Miyoshi handed them to Rokujo and Mishiro.

“Here, I’ve got something for you! This one is Rokujo’s...and this one is for Mishiro!”

“Th-This couldn’t be...” Mishiro took the case trepidatiously, then locked eyes with Miyoshi. “It isn’t, is it? A real, live orb?”

“Well, I don’t know about ‘live,’ but... It’s yours! You wanted to make earthen arrows, right?”

“You were *serious*?” Mishiro almost looked like she could cry. “You were seriously serious?!”

But she was at least twice as surprised when she opened the case and got a look at the orb count.

“Whaaat?!” She looked up. “Where did you get this? When?!”

The orb count would have placed the acquisition time not long before she’d showed up at our office this morning. Naturally, we had to be careful not to have an orb count too low, which would indicate we’d somehow gotten it after we’d met up.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “Just use it.”

“Don’t worry about it? But...” She stared at the orb again. “This is impossible, right?”

Ignoring Mishiro’s understandable protests, Miyoshi pulled Rokujo aside and began lecturing her on the use of the orb. Rokujo apparently didn’t know enough about dungeon mechanics to be as surprised as Mishiro was.

“Okay, listen, when you use it, you have to hold up the orb and shout, ‘I reject my humanity!’ all right? It’s *very* important.”

What is Miyoshi doing...?

“Ah, Mishiro, you too!” she called out.

“Whaaat?!”

Looking completely put-out, the two of them nevertheless followed Miyoshi’s instructions, striking the requisite pose. Just then—

Some blips suddenly appeared on Life Detection. Explorers, moving their way through the tenth floor.

“H-Hold on!” I shouted. But it was too late.

“I reject my humanity!” the two of them cried in unison. Then, just like always, the orbs evaporated into balls of light, which were absorbed into their bodies.

The passing explorers must have heard the shouts, because they immediately peeled off the main path and started making a beeline our way. True to form for the kinds of explorers who would casually cross the tenth floor, they moved at rapid speed.

“Hey, everything all right? Any trouble?”

Mishiro spun around to face the group of explorers, who had already arrived at our location.

“Wh—?! Wait, you could hear that?”

“Um?”

“Eh heh heh heh, it’s nothing. Nothing! No trouble here.”

Mishiro’s response only seemed to make the other team more suspicious. Argh, even if it didn’t seem like there was anyone else around, I should have warned them.

“If nothing’s the matter that’s fine, but you let us know if anything’s...*bothering* you.” The explorer who seemed to be the leader of the other group shot me a pointed look.

R-Right. One guy hanging out with three women in the middle of a dungeon. I could only imagine how that looked. But I was only the luggage-carrier!

“Thank you,” Mishiro responded. “But everything’s fine, really. No trouble.”

“That so?” The apparent leader of the other team scanned our party one more time, then motioned with his head to the others to keep moving toward the next staircase. Occasionally they shot glances back our way to make sure nothing else was going on.

I let my shoulders slump as soon as they were out of sight.

“Phew. That was super embarrassing...”

Despite all the commotion, none of the undead around us had so much as turned an eye socket our way. The assimilation drug really was impressive.

“Can I summon the dogs now?” Rokujo asked innocently, as if nothing had just happened.

“Miiight be best to hold off for a bit.” I waited until the other explorers’ blips had fully disappeared from Life Detection. Once they had, I nodded to Miyoshi.

“Okay! Now, the most important thing is envisioning the kind of dog you want to summon. The second most important thing is the summoning pose.”

Uh, is the latter really that important? This seems like unreliable advice.

Meanwhile, Mishiro was off on her own, mumbling, “Earth Arrow! Earth Arrow!” over and over again. I couldn’t help but think it might make more sense to start off with known techniques like Stone Bullet and get the basics down first, but who was I to judge? At least she was motivated.

“Have you thought up some names?” Miyoshi asked Rokujo.

“Of course!”

Apparently she’d been thinking them over while walking.

“Okay,” Miyoshi responded. “Then why don’t we go ahead and try summoning the first pup?”

“Oh-kay!” Rokujo shouted enthusiastically.

She did exactly as she’d been told and struck a dramatic pose. Though it was a little different from the one Miyoshi had used.

“I’m going for Rembrandt. *The Ascension of Christ*,” she explained.

She raised her arms up, staring at the sky. She paused for a moment, seeming to concentrate, then shouted.

“Summon! Anubis!”

Hold on. Anubis? Like the Egyptian god of the underworld...that guy with the head of a jackal and the body of a...man?!

The sigil spread out in front of Rokujo, about twice as big as the ones that had formed for Miyoshi before.

“H-Hold on! That size. Don’t tell me it’s actually going to—!”

Before I could even finish my sentence, up from the sigil rose...

...thankfully, just one black-coated dog.

“Phew. Give me a heart attack, will you? For a second I thought you might actually summon something a little out of our control.”

The dog, with a stature slightly smaller than Cavall’s, had straight-standing ears, and a thin, whiplike tail. Its shorthair coat shone glossy in the light.

“Kei, you worry too much. It’s a hellhound-summoning spell, remember?”

Miyoshi chided.

“R-Right. Well, you were able to make Glas and co what they are, so I figured, ‘Never doubt the power of imagination.’”

All she’d thought at the time was that she wanted some pup-sized versions of Cavall and the others. That thought alone had actually produced two pup-sized summons. Who was to say the same line of thinking couldn’t produce ones with humanlike bodies? Miyoshi had even explained to me afterward that the products of the spell were pretty customizable, based on what the user was envisioning at the time.

“How rude. Do not proceed to lump me in with ordinary hellrunts.”

Huh? Am I hearing things?

“Miyoshi, did you hear something just now?”

“Nope. I definitely didn’t just hear some raspy, straw-like voice with unusual intonation telling us not to lump it in with other hellhounds. Eh heh heh heh,” Miyoshi laughed nervously.

Unfortunately, we heard another voice laughing back, with the same hoarse qualities as the one we’d just heard.

Rokujo walked forward, one cautious step at a time, toward the monster she had summoned. She called its name.

“Anubis!”

“So, you are our master. Not the most reliable looking lord. A shame. However, we shall grant you the privilege of scratching us under our maw.”

“It taaaaaalks?!” Mishiro, Miyoshi, and I all screamed in unison.

This was probably (no, definitely) the first talking dog *in the world*. And it seemed plenty intelligent too. Forget a can—this opened up a whole bucket of worms. We usually talked in terms of human rights—but was it going to have dog rights? Could it vote?

“Well, that caught me a little off guard,” Miyoshi remarked casually. “But I guess he is like some kind of statue right out of Tutankhamun’s tomb. It’s fitting. He’s pretty cool, I guess.”

Just “a little” off guard?!

Then again, Cavall and the others seemed to perfectly understand our speech, so how much more of a stretch was this? Though they’d never given any indication they could verbally respond up till now. Probably because Miyoshi hadn’t envisioned them as talking during the summoning process. They were *dogs* after all. The thought of them speaking human languages had probably never crossed her mind. Her pups only let out little yelping barks, just like normal canines.

“A laudable observation,” Anubis said, addressing Miyoshi. “Very well, I grant you the privilege to pet me under my jaw.”

He extended his snout toward Miyoshi. She rubbed him under his lower jaw for a bit, after which he seemed satisfied.

“What is all this about granting privilege?” I asked. “You just want to get petted, don’t you?”

“Stupid male. I do *not* grant you the privilege to pet me. You are disqualified.”

Disqualified? From what?!

“Anubis!” Rokujo called. “Here boy!”

“Oh! Magic crystals, are those not? Our master seems to be a woman of some taste.”

Anubis trotted over and greedily lapped up the crystals Rokujo had placed at her feet.

Miyoshi had passed her a small bundle of them earlier, and told her that she could help tame the summons by placing some out as a treat.

“Hm. A rather...dry, marrowy taste,” Anubis grumbled between bites. “Middling flavor.”

“Whoa, you can tell that?” I asked. “Those are skeleton magic crystals.”

“Of course. It is a trifle for a gourmand such as myself to discern from what creature any crystals were produced.”

“Gourmand” as in “discerning,” or “gourmand” as in “wants to eat anything

and everything?" Either way, based on his reaction to Miyoshi's minor compliment earlier, I felt like I had his number.

"Your role is to protect your master there." I pointed to Rokujo. "Kind of like being a knight."

"Hoh. A knight, eh? It has a rather nice ring to it. In any case, protection of the master is an essential duty of the summon."

"It is?"

"The stupid male is even dumber than he looks. So long as the summoner is alive, we summons shall never disappear. However, should the summoner die, we join them in eternal slumber."

Ah, so you can resummon summoned monsters if they die, then! However, there might have been some other penalty for a summoned creature's death, so I figured it was still best to not experiment.

Rokujo petted Anubis here and there along his head and neck. "Good boy, Anubis. Look out for me, 'kay?"

"Hrnph. There are few things walking these dungeons that I cannot defeat. Be at ease, my lady. Keh keh keh keh."

Anubis let out a sound that resembled someone rubbing dried wheat against a chalkboard. Was that...a laugh? How did dogs' vocal cords work when producing human speech, anyway? Maybe it was best not to know.

"Okay, Komugi. How about summoning a second? Have you thought of another name?" Miyoshi asked.

"Of course!"

Rokujo once again assumed her Rembrandt pose, arms toward the heavens, took a deep breath, and shouted.

"Summon! Garm!"

"Another mythological name?!" I yelled back.

Garm was the guard dog of the underworld in Norse mythology. His position was basically identical to Cerberus's in Grecian lore, but he only had one head.

Thankfully. I wasn't sure how we'd handle local pet registration if he came out with three.

The sigil this time wasn't as big as the one for Anubis, but it was still fairly large. Maybe that was because Rokujo was summoning with higher stats than Miyoshi'd had for her first batch. Then again, Miyoshi would have had higher stats than Rokujo currently did when she summoned the two pups, and their sigils were both small, so I supposed you really *couldn't* overestimate the power of imagination.

This time the dog that emerged from the sigil had a streak of red hair down his belly, rather than being jet black. Otherwise, he looked pretty similar to Cavall and company.

"That's supposed to represent the dried blood of the dead, huh?" Miyoshi commented.

"Uh, probably?" I responded. "Think we're in for another talker this time?"

"Please," Anubis rasped. "Not all hellhounds are as gifted as I."

Anubis strode up confidently to the newly summoned Garm.

"Hrnph. I suppose I may consider you my younger brother. Very well. I shall permit you a play bite." He extended his neck. "Go on."

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Garm may be freshly summoned, but he's no small pup!

Garm seemed concerned. He glanced at Rokujo, then stepped cautiously up to Anubis, put his jaws around the back of Anubis's neck, and bit.

"Nrrraaagh! W-Wait! Wait! You're breaking it! Breaking iiiit!"

Puppies apparently needed to be taught by example how to do a proper play bite. But Garm was supposed to have bitten the war god Tyr to death at Ragnarok. Only a fool would extend their own neck for his jaws.

Garm, having been spooked by Anubis's cries, released the latter.

"Wh-What insolence is this toward your elder sibling? I will show you what a play bite looks like. Observe the proper power."

Anubis lunged at Garm, jaws open, but Garm nimbly ducked out of the way.

“Hey, Anubis. You might want to throw in the towel.”

“Stupid male. Be silent. This is an important part of our upbringing.”

Hearing that, Garm, seeming even more spooked, darted over to Rokujo and hid behind her. Or, it would have been hiding, were he actually concealed at all.

“Nooow I believe they’re the same species as Cavall and the others,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Miyoshi asked.

“Every time we ask them to do something troublesome or seem like we’re going to get mad, they wind up darting behind you and looking up with cutesy eyes.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Miyoshi looked down at her own feet, around which Glas was trotting. Cavall and Aethlem were busy keeping watch at the perimeter for any approaching undead, but Glas was on Miyoshi-protection duty, per usual. He looked up and shook his head, as if to protest my accusations.

“Well, whatever,” Miyoshi said. “You’re cute, so I don’t mind!”

She picked up the pup and cradled him in her arms. Glas looked relieved. Though shortly afterward, he turned his face my way and let out a shrill bark as if to say, “Mind your own business, bum!”

For some reason he always seemed to have some sort of beef with me. The other hounds and I got along fine.

Meanwhile, Anubis and Garm seemed to be hashing something out, the two of them running rapidly in circles around Rokujo and barking at each other. It seemed like any minute now they’d churn themselves into butter.

“Makes you want some beurre noir sauce on some pork chops,” Miyoshi commented.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Or some sautéed stingray with beurre noisette.”

“Stingrays are usually sold in summer. You’re still a little early.”

Watching the dogs run and Mishiro doggedly try to activate Earth Magic while

we carried out our inane conversation, secure in both our use of the assimilation drug and the Arthurs' protection zone, it was hard to believe we were actually this far down in the dungeon.

"Is this really the tenth floor?" I muttered to myself.

Unfortunately, the two running hounds didn't turn into butter, but eventually tuckered themselves out, and Rokujo prepared to summon the third. Apparently its name was going to be Lailaps, named after a dog from Grecian myth destined to never fail to catch what it hunted.

"Destined" to never fail—not "skilled enough" to never fail. "Destined." Somehow that concept made me uneasy. And for good reason. The story went that it set its sights on a fox similarly "destined" to never be caught. In response to these two clashing destinies, the gods turned both to stone.

Must be nice being a god, I figured. No matter what paradox or hypocrisy you were responsible for, you could just zap it to stone. Yikes.

Watching Rokujo play with her three summoned hounds, Miyoshi turned to me.

"Looks like an ancient mythology theme."

"Good thing there still aren't too many hellhound summoners, or everyone would run out of mythological dog names."

"Ah!"

"What?" I asked.

"I was just thinking! Maybe we could turn water into wine by summoning one named Failinis!"

"Focus, please."

Failinis was a dog belonging to Lugh Lámfada, or Lugh of the Long Arms, of the Tuatha Dé Danann—gods in old Irish mythology. Failinis was said to possess the power to turn any water which touched its coat to wine.

With Miyoshi's current INT, she had the leeway to summon another hound if she wanted. I was hoping she was just joking about this. But just in case...

“Do you think that wine from a hellhound would actually taste good?” I asked.

“Uh, I don’t know. The myth comes from an era before they knew about any of the science behind fermentation. But it was highly sought after by deities.”

“You know, there are all those mythological stories about eating some kind of godly or forbidden fruit and being forever prohibited from returning to the mortal world...”

“Uh, right. And with the dungeons being based on Earth cultures... Yep, let’s give that one up.” She shook her head.

“I think that’s for the best.”

Rokujo was preparing for her last summon.

“Summon! Cú!”

Cú? Was there some kind of mythical dog by that name?

“Miyoshi, you know any Cús?”

“The only dog-related figure I can think of is Cú Chulainn, a demigod from Irish mythology.”

“Isn’t he human?”

According to legend, Chulainn had killed Culann’s guard dog as a boy, then offered to take the slain hound’s place. Thus he became known as the “Hound of Culann” (or Cú Chulainn). Incidentally, the famous mythological spear Gáe Bolg was his.

“That’s all I can think of.” Miyoshi shrugged. “Maybe there’s some central Asian or African legend I don’t know.”

The summoned hound, Cú, was altogether different from the ones we’d seen up to now. His coat was less jet-black, more muddy. His size was about that of a normal German shepherd. For all intents and purposes, he looked indistinguishable from an ordinary large dog.

“That’s just a black Lab, right?” Miyoshi asked.

“A what?”

“A black Labrador retriever. Look at its droopy ears, thick limbs, short coat,

and thick, curled tail. I mean, that's a textbook specimen."

The newly summoned Cú ran right up to Rokujo, who was crouched in front of him, and nuzzled her with his snout.



Rokujo in turn stared down at Cú, seeming deeply moved.

“Komugi,” Miyoshi called, “who is ‘Cú’?”

“Cú was the name of a black Lab my family had a long time ago.”

“What? You had a large dog like that in Japan?”

“Yep. A looong time ago.”

She stood up, brushed off her knees, and began telling us about the original Cú.

“When I was little, a British friend gave my father a pup from a new litter. When the friend asked my father if he could take in a puppy, he asked him if he could take in a ‘cú.’ My father figured that was the pup’s name, and accepted. Later, that friend visited our home and was shocked to hear us call the dog’s name.”

After a bit of conversation, the British friend revealed that “cú” was simply the Irish word meaning “dog” or “hound.” The same “cú” as in “Cú Chulainn”—the Hound of Culann.

The British friend, who had grown up in Campbelltown, Scotland, had simply inadvertently used the Gaelic word when referring to the pup with Mr. Rokujo.

“I guess if you came to check in on a puppy you’d given to a family years earlier and they were just calling it ‘Dog,’ you’d be pretty surprised too,” Rokujo figured.

“To think there was someone else out there with your naming sense, Kei,” Miyoshi chided.

“Nah,” I responded. “This was just a misunderstanding. I’d actually call a dog ‘Dog’ on purpose.”

Everyone had had a good laugh after the English friend explained the situation, but the dog already responded to “Cú.” The name stuck. It was best to let, ahem, sleeping dogs lie.

“Basically no one in Japan would know what ‘Cú’ meant anyway,” Rokujo explained.

“There are plenty of dogs in Japan named things like Pes, or Perro, or Cão, or Go anyway,” Miyoshi offered, plopping a hand onto Anubis.

“Do all those mean ‘dog’?” Mishiro asked.

Rokujo cocked her head. “Erm, let’s see. ‘Pes’ is Czech, ‘Perro’ is Spanish, ‘Cão’ is Portuguese, I think, and, um, what was ‘Go’?”

“I should have expected no less from someone who grew up around gem and fossil nuts with global connections,” Miyoshi responded. “Incidentally, ‘Go’ is Chinese.”

Other occasional candidates for Japanese dog names included “Chienne,” from the French word for dog, and “Cane,” from Italian.

“Cú died while I was away at university. I never really got to process the fact that he passed.”

She hadn’t been there for his death, nor seen the body. It made sense that Cú would have been on her mind as a template once she heard she’d be summoning hellhounds.

“I didn’t expect him to come out as such a perfect likeness though,” Rokujo said, looking down at Cú, a complicated expression on her face.

It had been summoned based on her imagination, so of course it would come out looking exactly like how she’d remembered the original Cú.

The thought hadn’t struck me before, but there might end up being a high demand for Darkness Magic (VI) by bereaved dog owners.

“It’s well and good that you based him on an old pet, but be careful not to only lavish him with attention, or your other familiars will get jealous,” Miyoshi warned.

“Really?”

“The Arthurs definitely let us know right away if we aren’t treating them equally,” Miyoshi responded.

That might have been true, but their attention-seeking antics were also how we first learned about insane skills like their ability to swap positions and transfer objects through shadows, so it wasn’t all bad.

"I beg your pardon," Anubis hissed. "We are *not* simple familiars."

Garm and Lailaps nodded behind Anubis.

"Hey guys, don't worry. I get how you feel." I smacked Anubis on the back of the neck.

"Stupid male. Do not presume to touch me lightly."

"Oh, right. Can we ask you not to talk while other humans are around?" I asked.

"Why?" he rasped.

"Uh, it's a little hard to explain, but um...on Earth, dogs don't usually, you know, speak."

"I am *not* an Earth dog," he responded.

"That's true, but... Just think it over. It's what your master wants."

Anubis turned to Rokujo. She nodded.

"Very well..." Anubis grumbled.

Mishiro and Rokujo walked in front of us in a two-woman unit with Lailaps and Garm on vanguard, Cú on rear, and Anubis as a scout. We walked cautiously toward the staircase to the eleventh floor. Even though we'd used the assimilation drug, the undead started to attack when we were only partway through.

"Considering they're all the same species, I'm kind of surprised at how differently all the new hellhounds use their skills," Miyoshi commented.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I thought they'd operate more or less the same way."

Lailaps and Garm swiped and gnashed, same as the Arthurs, but Anubis stuck almost exclusively to magic-based attacks, as if the very concept of physical labor were beneath him. *Hey, I can identify.*

Anubis's weapon of choice in the service of his lord wasn't the kind of stabbing "shadow lance" I was most familiar with from the Arthurs, but rather a kind of black, bandage-like wrapping that would spring up and envelop his

enemies. “Shadow bind” might have been the most descriptive name. Once enveloped, the monster inside seemed to instantly melt away.

“Anubis was lord of the underworld. I guess it’s like he’s turning them into mummies and sending their souls on,” Miyoshi mused.

“Hrrn. The female understands. I grant her the privilege to scratch me behind my ears.”

“Later.”

Anubis, who had already thrust out his head toward Miyoshi, backed away. She gave him a sheepish smile.

I’d handed Rokujo an open backpack, and now she walked with it strapped to the front of her chest, picking up drop items whenever they fell around her and packing them inside.

Her spoils were about what you’d expect for someone who was, from her LUC stat, possibly the naturally luckiest human alive. Items appeared at a jaw-dropping rate. I told her to be absolutely sure to pick up any magic crystals that dropped and keep them on hand as rewards for her new pack.

Mishiro had, after many trials and tribulations, succeeded in using Earth Magic to conjure arrows of stone, and launched them here and there at the undead as we moved. However, her creation speed was still slow, so the move was only good while she was protected by others.

“It’s 0.2 per shot,” I whispered to Miyoshi.

“Her MP consumption?” Miyoshi asked.

I nodded. “She recovers around 48 MP per hour. That lets her get off 240 shots without outpacing recovery.”

“About four per minute...” Miyoshi mused.

“Well, it’s not like she’ll be firing that fast all the time, so she should be fine. Plus, her new skill will help keep our arrow costs down.”

I’d been pretty surprised the other day when going to buy dungeon-use arrows. The last ones I’d gotten had been part of a set with their bows, so I hadn’t realized how expensive the arrows ran on their own. High-end ones ran

as high as five thousand yen per arrow. There were ones running as low as five hundred yen too, but you got what you paid for. No matter how I thought about it, it seemed like you'd be eating a serious loss as an archery-reliant explorer until you were good enough to go to the lower floors. No wonder it was such an unpopular weapon.

"Can't complain about her attacks' efficacy though," I commented, having seen how easily Mishiro's shots shattered the heads of encroaching zombies and skeletons.

Then again, Saito had been able to pop them all with single shots too, so maybe firing normal arrows with high stats would have been just as good.

"They're handling themselves a lot more impressively than we did our first time here, huh?" Miyoshi observed.

"Stats really can make all the difference," I agreed.

To be honest, our first time this far down, Miyoshi's stats in particular had been seriously lackluster. I thought back to our days of carrying titanium frying pans to fend off slime attacks. Amazingly, everything had worked out.

Rokujo picked up Mishiro's drop items as well, placing them into the pack. Come to think of it, Mishiro was a contracted explorer, but Rokujo... How exactly did their contracts work now?

"By the way, Miyoshi, what's the situation with their contracts right now?"

"Mishiro, as you know, is a contracted member of D-Powers, so she gets a salary and bonus through us, but technically Komugi is still just a boot camp trainee. I had them sign on for this expedition jointly as Maitreya."

"Maitreya? Like the future bodhisattva? What's up with that pretentious world-savior name?"

Whether humanity would even be around 5.67 billion years [\(22\)](#) from now was suspect in the first place, I thought to myself.

"I told them to come up with a party name, and that's what they settled on. 'Mishiro' plus 'Rokujo'—'Miroku,' the traditional Japanese name for Maitreya." Miyoshi chuckled at the pun.

I see. So it was a bit of wordplay. But then again, “Maitreya” apparently meant “friendship” in Sanskrit. Watching the two of them march forward together in formation to the eleventh floor, I had a feeling there was no name more appropriate.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eleventh Floor

Our problems began on the staircase down to the eleventh level of the dungeon. The staircase was filled with about twice as many JSDF personnel as usual—maybe more. The undead on the tenth floor sought out any living beings, forcing the JSDF outpost that would normally have been deployed at the top of the stairs downward. At the same time, the lesser salamandoras disguising themselves as rocks made permanent encampments on the eleventh floor a bad idea. Instead, the group that would normally have been stationed at the stairs’ eleventh floor terminus had been forced upward and also congregated on the stairs.

That meant there was no avoiding them, and that they were hanging around with excess personnel and plenty of free time—free time, apparently, to comment on our lack of sufficient gear.

Mishiro looked the part of an explorer, but Miyoshi, Rokujo and I had foolishly gone in with beginner-level gear proudly on display. We really caught an earful from the JSDF folks. It wound up being a huge waste of time.

“Ugh, I totally forgot how much the beginner gear stands out when diving on lower floors,” I lamented when we’d finally slipped away.

That was probably why the other explorers on the tenth floor had been so skeptical of us as well.

“Well, your gear ordinarily wouldn’t make it past the fourth floor, after all.” Mishiro let out a little laugh.

“What difference does it make?” I asked. “With our strength, if we take one attack at this level it doesn’t matter if we’re wearing paper or steel—we’re goners.”

“Now that’s a little fatalistic...” Mishiro responded, exasperated.

Anyway, having heard enough from the staircase crew and not wanting to be stopped again, I feigned pulling the capes we'd used on previous ventures out of my backpack. We'd wear these the rest of the way, concealing our questionable choice of protective gear. I handed two identical copies over to the Maitreya duo as well.

They were going to be hot as hell on the magma-filled eleventh floor, but at least we wouldn't stand out in a bad way anymore. I hoped.

The formation Maitreya had used on the tenth floor held up without incident until the seventeenth. Along the way, I got just enough kills to set my count to 99, then focused on leaving the rest up to Mishiro and Rokujo and dedicating myself to being the party's pack mule. Every once in a while I'd urge the team to stop and rehydrate, and pass out water bottles.

"Komugi's drop rate is insane. It's almost as high as yours," Miyoshi commented admiringly while looking over data on a tablet.

Apparently she, too, had decided to give up on doing anything other than letting the Arthurs get passive kills and monitoring our two disciples.

And so we arrived at the staircase down to the eighteenth floor. Rokujo recalled her dogs.

"Usturas, form up!"

"Usturas?"

I understood where the group name "Arthurs" had come from, since their names had all been taken from the hounds of King Arthur's court, but "Ustura"?

"I've decided to make that their group name. Other than Cú, all their names are taken from myths. I thought about using the English word 'myths,' but..."

The pronunciation, with its "th" sound, was hard for native Japanese speakers. It ran the risk of coming out like "miss," which was also used as shorthand for "mistake."

So then did "Ustura" have something to do with mythology?

"It sounds cool," I said, "but what does it mean?"

"It comes from Arabic. It means mythos, or fables, or legends. That type of

word.”

“Arabic? That’s pretty specific,” I replied.

“Kei, don’t you know Arabic has the fifth highest native-speaker population in the world after Chinese, English, Hindi, and Spanish? Around twice as many native speakers as Japanese.”

“Really?”

“It’s the original language of the Quran, after all. But there are so many variations, it’s hard to keep track of them all.”

The four Usturas all seemed to have learned how to use “Hiding Shadow” without incident, diving into the darkness by Rokujo’s feet. They’d had some trouble at first, and we’d seen the Arthurs trying to communicate something to them, with the Usturas gradually getting it.

Anubis had been the first to succeed. He’d puffed up his chest as if to say, “Naturally I mastered it first.” Apparently he sucked as a teacher, however, and left the rest up to the Arthurs after a brief and unsuccessful attempt to impart his wisdom to his brethren.

“If he were human, he’d probably be like, ‘Uh, you just dive in. Just do it,’” I’d remarked with amusement to Miyoshi.

He’d popped his head back out of the shadows.

“I feel as though I’ve been dissed by a useless, stupid male.” He narrowed his eyes.

“M-Me? No way. I was just saying it’s hard to communicate natural talent to those who don’t have it themselves.”

“Hooh. You are smarter than you look. Stay on the path to enlightenment, stupid male, and I may just grant you a right yet.”

Looking satisfied, he slunk back into the darkness.

“Whew.”

“Nicely handled,” Miyoshi commented, snickering.

Apparently they were still aware of their surroundings while lurking in the

shadows. With Anubis being able to relay information in human language on top of that, these dogs would make the perfect spies...if anyone wanted to do something like that.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor

Arriving at the eighteenth floor for the first time, Mishiro and Rokujo were struck by the sight of the empty, stone-strewn wasteland before them and the drop-off into the cloud layer below the clifftop we'd emerged on top of. Having been here before, however, Miyoshi and I were more struck by the floor's changes.

"Miyoshi, when did this become an Everest base camp?" I asked.

Near the staircase in front of Batian Peak was a pole proudly adorned with all sorts of colorful prayer flags—the kind you'd actually see in the Himalayas. There was probably one colorful, dangling square for each party who had been through here.

The prayer flags, a symbol from Tibetan Buddhism, came in five colors. Apparently they'd been adapted from even earlier, local animistic religions.

"Each color represents one of the traditional elements in Buddhism," Miyoshi informed me. "Pretty perfect for a place with element-based magic like the dungeons."

"Don't tell me they're planning on building an altar here and doing Puja or something," I said.

Puja was a ceremony conducted by Lama monks at Everest to pray for good luck for climbers.

"Dunno. Want to try banging a drum and scattering wheat seed and see if it helps?" Miyoshi responded, referencing the ritual.

"I'm afraid I'm not enough of an expert to carry out that spell effectively. Anyway, how is all this still standing? What about slime attacks?"

"The pole and string could be dungeon-made, so that would take care of that. The stacked-stones, Glen Lumberjack principle. But the flags are definitely

brought in from outside.”

I watched the multicolored flags flapping in the wind. Were they just always in someone’s field of vision? What happened at night?

Seeing our looks of confusion, Rokujo wandered over and looked up at the flags herself.

“They have sutras written on them. Every time the wind flaps the prayers, it means they’ve been read,” she explained.

“Whoa. Thanks for telling us.”

“They’re called mani flags. ‘Mani’ can also mean ‘jewel,’ so they’re perfect for a spot where everyone’s hoping to get Mining.”

“Huh.”

The person who had first set up the pole had probably just been a mountain-climbing enthusiast and hadn’t thought anything of it. But from multiple perspectives, they really couldn’t have picked a better symbol for this place.

Thinking that over, I set about looking for a place to set up our tent. Ultimately I settled on a spot behind a boulder about as long and wide as I was tall, a little way outside of the main base camp.

“I don’t want to be too near a cliffside in case of falling rocks, and we have the Arthurs on guard duty, so a place a little ways removed will be fine. Better even, since we don’t want them spotted.”

I took out the tents “from my backpack” and started clearing small rocks out of the way to make room for the groundsheet. I spread out the sheet and opened up the first tent on top of it.

Since the temperature didn’t fluctuate much on any one dungeon floor, dungeon-use tents were built to prioritize breathability over heat retention. They used a lot more mesh than surface camping tents, and prioritized use of nonflammable fabrics.

The flysheet and inner liner were already attached, so all we had to do was set up the main frame with two rods. The setup was just as easy as the Yoyogi Dungeon Shop attendant had said it would be. This was supposed to be the

easy model after all.

But then I realized...

“The stakes! We can’t get them into the ground!”

Raw, exposed stone surrounded us, and that was ignoring that it would also be indestructible as part of the dungeon’s structure.

“Not to worry. You can just load an ordinary convenience-store bag up with rocks. Basically anything weighted will do; simply plop one on each of the four corners,” the ever-experienced Mishiro informed us.

Phew. It paid to have someone along who knew what they were doing.

There were hardly any spots where stakes could actually be stuck into anything inside dungeons, so apparently keeping tents down with weighted objects in each corner did the job.

“You just bind a bunch of stones or whatever you can find together. There aren’t any sudden gales in dungeons, so there’s little risk of the tent suddenly being blown away. The weights don’t even have to be that heavy.”

Mishiro showed us how to bind groups of stones using a sheet of netting and a simple Evans knot, which automatically tightened when tugged. That made it ideal for bundling and transporting oddly shaped stones.

“We’re sure racking up a lot of experience, huh, Kei? And I don’t mean SP.”

“Sure enough,” I responded, “there’s still a lot you can’t learn except by trying it.”

I got the second tent set up, then passed the girls back the personal luggage they’d handed me—probably mostly things like towels and underwear—and told them to rest up until dinner. It had been a little over eleven hours since we’d started out. It was nothing on Team Simon’s nine hours, but getting down the eighteenth floor in that time was still impressive. Especially since it was their first dive this far down, Mishiro and Rokujo must have been exhausted.

“Okay, but is there anything we can help with?” Mishiro asked.

“Nope. Take it easy. You’ve got to be wiped. I’ll get a bath ready too.”

I took out a collapsible wading pool and filled it with hot water using Water Magic. I mentally set the water to come out at forty-six degrees Celsius.

“What? You can make hot water with Water Magic?”

“Thanks to having used a numberless orb. Ordinarily you don’t really think about temperature when generating water, but if you set your mind to it, it’s pretty flexible.”

“Wow. That’s quite a trick to have up your sleeve.”

True, but it had taken quite a bit of practice. And I’d discovered consciously aiming for lower or higher temperatures could actually use up more MP.

“Anyway, I’ll leave the bath here.”

“Thanks!”

I also went ahead and also set up a Loo, with a powder case inside. The Arthurs and Usturas could stand guard.

Miyoshi was next to the tent setting up a traditional Japanese charcoal stove. She’d instructed the Arthurs to keep watch around her, laying out some magic crystals for them to nibble on.

“With the new pups, our magic crystal consumption rate has gone up by around fifty percent,” I observed.

“We’ll just have to deal with it. I can start making runs to the tenth floor to pick up more myself.”

“No, I know we’ve gotten relatively used to it, but it’s still the tenth floor. I’ll go with you. There’s more to worry about there than just monsters.”

Other explorers, mostly.

“Got it. Thanks.” Miyoshi looked up. “By the way, what were you thinking for dinner?”

It was already getting dark. Something we could make quickly and easily would be best.

“Usually an all guys’ campout would do some simple grilling or make curry, right?”

“You’ve actually put some thought into this! How unexpected.”

“We can haul out the curry we brought later and say it was a ready-made package. Let’s grill up some fresh ingredients while we can still do so without calling attention to Vault.”

I took out an iron plate roughly fifty centimeters in diameter to use as a grill. Truth be told, it was actually a shield, but no one had to know that. We’d just have to deal with it being a *little* unwieldy.

“But Kei, won’t the smell attract monsters?”

“You know, I’ve thought about that, and I have a hunch we’ll be fine.”

I set the shield on top of Miyoshi’s portable oven setup. It hung over the edge a bit, but that was perfect, since I wanted both a grilling and warming zone. I lit a fire under it.

“Smell is one of the most fundamental senses,” I explained, “but what is it *for*, actually? I’d say probably finding sustenance and mating, right?”

“You mean for identifying edible food sources and as a receptor for pheromones?”

“Yep. And dungeon monsters, from what we’ve seen, don’t have a need for either of those. It’s probably not a major sense they’re equipped with.”

They didn’t need to eat *or* mate—so maybe they didn’t need to smell.

“I see.”

“They’ve got no reason to rely on smell as a sense. Even the Arthurs don’t ever really seem to be sniffing out other monsters. They appear to rely on some kind of sixth sense.” Actually, monsters in general seemed to lock onto targets with some sort of sixth sense rather than sight or hearing. “As long as we aren’t right in a monster nest and the Arthurs can keep taking out any curious critters at a distance, we’re probably totally fine, whether we’re cooking or not.”

“I hope you’re right. But if we get a pack of monsters up in here due to your grilling, don’t come crying to me.”

“Well, it’s not all baseless assumption. We already have a case study that supports my hypothesis.”

“Huh?”

“The Turnspit. It’s never once been attacked.”

“Ah!”

The Turnspit, the meat-skewer stand up on the eighth floor, was theoretically surrounded by orcs and forest wolves, but it pumped out roast-meat fragrances all day and had never once drawn monsters to it. At least not as far as I’d heard. If it’d had even one incident, it probably wouldn’t still be in business at all.

So I felt pretty confident in my assessment that monsters weren’t attracted by smells.

“Well, I don’t mind an experiment that doubles as preparing tasty food for once,” Miyoshi proclaimed happily. “I guess we can see what happens tonight. By the way, do you want to add some yakisoba?”

“Absolutely. Sauce?”

“Otafuku brand please. And let’s go with some extra thick noodles.”

“Okay, but the Maruchan sauce is hard to pass up... Don’t knock it, especially if we add sliced pork.”

“But Maruchan doesn’t taste like much on its own.”

“That’s why you need the pork to bring out its true potential.”

I poured on a bit of oil and, after grilling a few vegetables and hunks of meat, got ready for the yakisoba, taking out a pack each of soba noodles, pork, and cabbage.

“Whoa. Smells great!” Rokujo, having finished her bath, wandered over. “Can the hellhounds eat this too?”

“The Arthurs seem to like human food, but it’s just a treat, not something they need,” Miyoshi responded. “As long as they have D-Factors, they don’t particularly need to—”

Before she could finish speaking, Glas popped out of the shadows and shook his head back and forth.

“Ah, as you can see, they do sometimes ask for it like this, though. Just stick to

giving it to them as a reward and it should be okay.”

“Huh. So they don’t eat dog food or anything?”

“Ours never have, at least. They seem to have a sense of taste similar to that of humans. I don’t think the concept of different stomach enzymes or anything even applies.”

“Weird.”

“Extremely. We’ve never seen them produce any waste either. We’re pretty sure everything they eat gets completely broken down and converted.”

“So then do you think the Usturas can eat human food too?”

“Probably. Why not try it with a sandwich?”

Miyoshi stuck out a hand toward me, palm up. I reached into my backpack and produced a ham sandwich we’d prepared earlier.

“Your order, ma’am.” I gave her a beleaguered look as I passed it over. “Anything else I can get you?”

Miyoshi passed the sandwich to Rokujo, who summoned forth Anubis.

“Anubis!”

“Is it time for supper? I’ll tell you this now, but creatures as refined as we have no need to fill our bellies with such trifles from the human wor—”

Rokujo thrust the ham sandwich in front of Anubis’s snout.

“W-Well! The master’s food smells quite delectable! This is a surprise!”

Glas nodded eagerly from behind Rokujo, signaling to Anubis.

“You can each eat one, and then I want you to stand guard with the Arthurs,” Rokujo explained.

“Very well. We shall carry out your command. Cú, you stay by the tents.”

“Bwow!”

“Garm, Lailaps, with me.”

“Gruff!”

“Raff!”

“You just need to watch the perimeters. And don’t let anyone see you. They may mistake you for monsters and attack.”

“Such savages in this world.” If it were possible to somehow shrug one’s shoulders with four legs, I was pretty sure Anubis had just done it.

“One more thing,” I added sternly, staring down Anubis. “Don’t wander off and climb any mountains.”

“You mean...that mountain?” he asked knowingly, gesturing with his eyes toward Batian Peak.

“Yeah. You get it?” I asked.

“Not even I dare tread there. I seek glory, not death.”

So Ngai does *respawn*. Come to think of it, my kill count was at ninety-nine... No. Not this time. Not worth it.

“So even you know your own limits,” I responded to Anubis.

“Only a fool overestimates his own strength. And fools don’t live long.”

“You said it.”

The hounds gobbled up their sandwiches one after the other and the three going to the perimeter assumed their posts. Mishiro wandered up as well, finally setting down the bow she’d been carrying down all day.

“Whew, I’m starving.”

“Then let’s eat. It’s just a simple cookout. That okay?”

“Are you kidding? There’s basically never a chance to eat freshly cooked food like this in a dungeon.”

“Really?”

“Yep. It’s all ready-made curry packets and stuff like dehydrated rice.”

There were canned food options, but they usually weren’t chosen due to the weight. Things that could be carried in pouches were easier to take along. After that, just add heat or hot water, which you could produce by mixing powdered

heating agents into cool water, and voilà. A number of companies were currently in fierce competition producing dungeon rations along those lines.

“Originally it was all military rations, so you can imagine the taste wasn’t a priority, but gradually they’ve been producing less pungent varieties aimed explicitly at explorers.”

“Huh.”

From military rations to explorer rations, eh?

“But the tastier kind costs ya,” Mishiro added.

I’ll bet.

Still, the kinds of explorers who could make it far enough into a dungeon to even need to camp out like this could probably afford the premium.

We gathered around the makeshift grill and dug in.

“Hey, man. Check out that group over there. They’re grilling! What do they think this is, a campsite?”

Hayashida, the leader of Shibu T, had noticed a group a bit removed from the main base camp on his way back from the day’s hunt.

“Sure smells good,” responded Azuma, sniffing the air.

The tantalizing fragrance of grilled meat had wafted their way.

“Aren’t they worried that it’ll attract monsters though?” Hayashida asked.

“It’s worked out okay for the Turnspit so far. I’m guessing it’s probably fine.” Azuma looked down sadly at his own military-ration rice, which he was in the process of preparing. “They keep makin’ better versions of this stuff, but it still doesn’t match real food.”

Otate poured heating agent into his survival pot and stuck an instant meal packet in. It was nice to be able to have warm food in the dungeon at all, but it sure took time to get ready. “They a group we’ve seen before?” he asked dispassionately.

Kiyan looked out at the group, interest piqued. “They don’t seem like military

types, and I've never seen them before. Maybe they're regulars at a different dungeon."

"Coming down to the eighteenth floor as Yoyogi first-timers, they'd have to be."

"There're some cuties in the group. Maybe I'll go introduce myself, as a representative of Yoyogi's top team. Get to know 'em a little."

Kiyan set off toward the other camp without bothering to prepare his own meal.

"Hold it. This may be a campsite, but this is still the eighteenth floor. Don't go wandering off making trouble." Dennis, always more levelheaded than he might have appeared at first glance, called out to Kiyan, stopping his teammate in his tracks.

"I know. I'm not going to do anything crazy. Just a little welcome."

"I wish I knew where that baseless confidence of yours comes from, Kiyan," Azuma butted in.

"Good looks, of course," Kiyan responded.

"Don't get too full of yourself."

Watching Kiyan depart camp, Hayashida got up. "Damn it." He clicked his tongue in frustration, taking off after his subordinate.

"Hayashida's really wearing that weight of responsibility, huh?"

"He needs to, to lead a bunch of numbnuts like us."

Azuma and Otate looked at one another, shrugging wearily, and watched their two team members take off.

"Ah, give me a fucking break." Figuring someone needed to look after both their fearless leader and their resident playboy, Dennis got up while bombarding the Shibu T campsite with a string of mumbled expletives.

"Hei, hrouble." Miyoshi, mouth stuffed with mushrooms, gestured over my shoulder with her eyes.

I turned around to see two...no, three men heading toward our camp.

“Tell the Arthurs and Usturas not to do anything stupid,” I urged.

Rokujo nodded, mouth full of grilled beef.

“Hey cuties! Where’d you come from?” the man in front, all muscle, asked.

Huh? Was he trying to pick up women? On the eighteenth floor of a dungeon?

“Uh, from the seventeenth floor?” I pointed upward with my index finger.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

Who is this guy?

“What’s a dweeb like you doing with all these ladies anyway?” For someone who didn’t want to talk to me, he sure was asking me a lot of questions.

“What’re you, some kind of harem king?”

Rokujo almost spit out her food.

“Something funny? What’s shaking? What’s your name?”

Mr. Muscles moved over to Rokujo. Behind him, someone who didn’t look fully Japanese slapped his hand over his face, seeming exasperated.

“My name’s Kiyan. Heard of Shibu T? I’m their vanguard.” The muscular man pointed to himself.

He extended a hand toward Rokujo’s shoulder, standing behind her. The second he did so, it felt as though an electric shock rippled through the camp. He held his hand aloft.

The non-Japanese-looking guy locked eyes with his other companion, a guy with features like the lead singer in a boy band. They both narrowed their eyes, seeming to sense they should be on guard.

“This is bad,” Miyoshi hissed.

It had taken loads of training to get the Arthurs to not instantly lash out at anyone who got close to Miyoshi. We hadn’t had time to housebreak the Usturas.

“What do you want me to do?” I hissed back. “Say, ‘Knock it off or you’re dead’?”

“Ugh, that’ll just sound like you’re looking for a fight.”

“Right?”

“I mean, he’s Shibu T’s vanguard. His VIT’s probably high enough to not die in one or two bites.”

Probably?!

The boy-band-looking guy seemed to have heard us. He cocked an eyebrow in our directions. Mr. Muscles continued flirting obliviously. Mishiro was looking around frantically, not sure whether she should butt in.

“Hey, Kiyan!”

Thankfully Mr. Boy Band broke the silence. He seemed to get the sense his friend wasn’t wanted here.

“What? I’m just deepening bonds between explorers over here. Come on, sugar, what’s your name?”

He plopped himself down next to Rokujo, and that’s when a black tendril erupted from the ground near his feet and wrapped itself around him, spiraling up to his face.

Uh-oh. I’d told Anubis not to *speak* in front of any other humans...but I hadn’t told him not to *kill* them!

“Hey! Let him live!”

Call it force of will or haki or whatever you want, but my shout seemed to have physically stopped the black tendrils. They ceased climbing just below Kiyan’s nose.

“He tried to lay a hand on my master,” Anubis rasped from the darkness behind me. “As his penance, I shall take his life.”

Perhaps that was common sense among familiars. I figured I should try leveling with him from his perspective. *Let’s see...* The Arthurs had started to use nonlethal threat disposal methods like shadow pit and shadow bind on request from Miyoshi. It seemed best to take the master-first tack.

“The human world doesn’t work like that. You’re going to cause a lot of

trouble for your master if you kill him.”

“Then it is a troublesome and foolish world. But...bah, very well. I shall release this worm.”

The black bandages dispersed. Kiyan promptly toppled over.

There didn't appear to be any external injuries, but I wasn't sure about the state of his internal organs. After all, those same black bandages had entirely dissolved skeletons and zombies.

Clicking my tongue, I reached into Vault for a potion, tipping the vial back into Kiyan's mouth.

A faint blue light enveloped his body for just an instant, then dispersed. The potion was doing its job. He'd probably be okay.

“What was that just now?” Mr. Boy Band, in shock, seemed to have been snapped back to his senses by the potion's glow.

“A healing potion,” I responded.

“Not that! I mean whatever attacked Kiyan! Th-Those black tentacle things!”

“I was just wondering what all the commotion was about myself. What kind of shindig's going down?” a voice called out in English.

I turned around to see a man approaching from the shadows from behind Mr. Boy Band. He could only be described via comparison to a particular animal: a grizzly bear. Our new arrival had tree-trunk legs and an overall frame to match, standing around two meters tall. His face also reminded me of Joaquin Phoenix in *You Were Never Really Here*. Speaking of Joaquin Phoenix, he had also voiced Kenai in *Brother Bear* [\(23\)](#), so...if the shoe fits...

“And who the hell are you?!” Mr. Boy Band demanded.

His not-quite-Japanese-looking friend let out a small gasp.

“What is it, Dennis?” Boy Band asked. “You know this guy?”

“How do you *not* know him?!”

Huh? Was this guy...famous? I didn't know who he was either. But given that he'd purposefully come over here expecting there was some sort of fight, he

was probably pretty tough.

“Miyoshi, any idea?” I asked.

“Duh. He’s world-famous. So he’s in Yoyogi too...” She looked up at Brother Bear.

“Hold on,” he responded in English. *“Miyoshi? As in, Azusa?”*

Miyoshi nodded, then forcefully extended her right hand.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Malson. But how do you know who I am?”

Brother Bear—er, Malson, apparently—vigorously shook Miyoshi’s hand.

“Come on. Would anyone from abroad taking the trouble to visit Yoyogi not know who you are? You’re a living legend!”

I had to fight back a laugh, hearing that last bit. Even then, I snickered.

“Who’s the guy?”

“Oh, sorry. This rude fellow is Keigo Yoshimura. He’s my party member.”

“The Yoshimura?”

“Huh?” Miyoshi asked. *“You know Kei too?”*

“Despite appearances, I actually take jobs for the US government from time to time. I’ve heard a little from Simon. Mostly to the effect of ‘don’t underestimate him.’” He added that last bit with an awkward wink.

What was Simon saying about me?!

“I’m Yoshimura. I don’t know about underestimating. I’m just an ordinary Rank G.” I extended my hand, which Malson shook with a smile.

“Name’s Lansom Malson. Call me Lance. But a Rank G all the way down here on the eighteenth floor? Now that’s probably exactly what Simon meant.”

“Kei.” Miyoshi flagged my attention. *“That’s King Salmon.”*

“What?!” Mr. Boy Band and I shouted in unison.

Wait, why are you surprised too?!

“He with you too?” Salmon asked, tossing his gaze to Mr. Boy Band.

"Uh, actually, we just met him."

"Hmm."

The idol-looking guy seemed to sense he was now the topic of conversation. He pointed to himself.

"What are you guys talking about?"

"He asked who you are."

"Oh! And?"

"We told him we just met you, and that we don't know who you are."

"What?! You mean you don't recognize me?"

Wait, was he someone famous too? He had come here with a member of Shibu T. Was he also part of their team?

"By the by, Azusa, you have any party members other than Yoshimura?" Lance asked.

"Just Yoshimura at present. Why?"

"Then it must be him. There were rumors about a Japanese 'sorcerer' flying around European high society."

"What?!" I shouted.

Come to think of it, Asha had mentioned something like that when she'd come to visit at the end of last year.

"Kei!" Miyoshi turned to me. *"You know, they say if you maintain your virginity until your thirties, you become a— Oof!"*

One karate chop to the head cut that comment short.

"What did you do with Mr. Jain's daughter? The story sounds crazy, but after it got around, a bunch of big shots who withdrew from society due to injuries, or even just age, started tripping over each other to get the first crack at making contact with the magical mystery man in Japan."

"Whaaat?!"

"Can you blame them? Ahmed Jain's daughter was never supposed to recover

from her injuries, but then she showed up good as new. There's no way to hide that something happened. Mr. Jain is staying quiet, only saying he met a 'sorcerer' in Japan, but that cryptic explanation has only helped fuel rumors."

"But how'd you know it was us?" I asked.

"I didn't, but I was hoping you'd say something like that."

"Damn!"

Smiling, Lance explained that it was widely known that Ahmed's trip to Japan, after which his daughter had shown up fully recovered, had coincided with his purchase of one Super Recovery orb at a certain party's auction. It didn't take much to put that together with his comments about a "sorcerer" in Japan.

"But her accident happened long before the dungeons first appeared. Mr. Jain had been petitioning just about every military on the planet to escort her to a dungeon to get a D-Card to use skills. Basically everyone in professional diving had heard about it."

Right. Asha's dad was definitely the type to try to bend the rules and just directly ask whatever higher-up he could. Word would get around.

"Everyone figured she'd probably used the Super Recovery orb from the auction, but no one had any proof until now. It's a relief to finally know the whole story."

From Simon to Lance, you couldn't let down your guard around top-level explorers even for a second.

"Um, we'd really appreciate your keeping that under wraps," I uttered.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of creating any animosity with Azusa's party. That said..." He paused for a second, then leaned in. *"Keep this between us, but Mr. Jain asked me to help get his daughter a D-Card too. That's actually how I learned about him."*

Right. After being turned down by militaries, Ahmed would have tried to directly ply private explorers, grasping at straws.

"But she was missing both arms and one leg, and had been in a wheelchair for years. There was no way she was going to kill a monster on her own—at least

that's what I and everyone else who turned him down figured." His face grew serious. *"So tell me. What did you guys do?"*

We couldn't exactly tell him we'd used a drinking straw and a boot. *"Trade secret,"* I offered.

Lance leaned back.

"Figured you'd say that."

He apologized for grilling us. Just then, Mishiro called out to us.

"Yoshimura. The food's burning!"

"Ah, sorry! We were in the middle of dinner," I explained. *"If you're free, why don't you join us?"*

"Ah!" His face lit up. *"Ah, yeah. That'd be great."* He excused himself to go back to his camp for a second and grab a pack of beer.

Alcohol in a dungeon?

"We have Dolly loaded up with beer," Miyoshi pointed out when I expressed my surprise out loud.

"Yeah, but packing it while traveling on foot? Doesn't that seem like a waste?"

"You got a look at his build, right? Plus, almost everyone here on the eighteenth floor is on someone's payroll. He probably has a dedicated transporter," she responded, watching Lance walk away from our camp.

"I was surprised enough when Shibu T popped up over here, but then King Salmon dropped by too! I can hardly keep up." Mishiro looked up. *"Cooking actually helps me relax. Mind if I tend the food for a bit?"*

"Is that okay? Please!" I added some more yakisoba to the grill, then turned back to Miyoshi. *"But hey, why the moniker King Salmon? 'Grizzly Gus' seems more fitting."*

"That'd be appropriate, considering he's from Vancouver. Though in terms of location, salmon also works," Miyoshi responded. *"But apparently the origin is his name: Lansom Malson. When he first started garnering a reputation, people*

noted that both his first and last names were anagrams of the fish, so it stuck. For a while he went by stuff like Double Salmon, Mr. Salmon, etc.”

“Huh. Okay, that’s pretty funny.”

“Afterward, when he started rising through double and even single digits in the world rankings, he became King Salmon, given his name and birthplace.”

“Huh. So *that’s* it!” Mr. Boy Band exclaimed. Apparently he’d been listening this whole time.

Erm...who exactly was he?

“Ah, sorry! My name’s Kosei Hayashida,” he hastily explained. “I’m Shibu T’s leader.”

Naruse had mentioned that there were two famous explorers most of the Dungeon Management staff at the JDA headquarters in Ichigaya were sure to remember having encountered during their dungeon reception days. One of them was Tenko. And judging from their similar vibes...I suspected the other one was this guy.

“I’m Yoshimura. Um... Don’t take this the wrong way, but why are you still here?”

“Ouch. But come on, give me a break. One of the most famous explorers in the world just showed up. I can’t go back at a time like this!”

“Can you follow the conversation in English?”

“No, but don’t worry. I’ve got a secret weapon.”

Hayashida walked over to the slightly non-Japanese-looking man who had been there since earlier and put him in a headlock.

“I’m Dennis Takaoka,” the headlocked teammate managed to say. “Half Lithuanian. If you don’t mind, we’d like to stick around for a bit.”

Dennis served as Shibu T’s scout. His mother had been Lithuanian, and had met his father at an overseas start-up. She now worked at the start-up’s Japanese branch. The Baltic states had become an IT mecca recently. But wait, judging from his age...

“Your parents must have met right after the Soviet Union collapsed!”

I didn’t know how old he was, but it was at least over twenty. That would have placed his parents’ meeting within a decade of the collapse of the USSR.

“That’s true. My father found it, uh, romantic to visit countries that had just achieved freedom.”

“You sure he wasn’t just chasing Baltic beauties?”

“Well there were plenty of single women looking to chat up potential foreign partners, for sure, but...it’s actually not all that romantic, trust me. But I guess to an outsider... It’s like when you go to a really trendy spot even in Japan, the people there somehow look better too.”

“So anyway, this guy’s our language specialist.”

“But English isn’t the main language in any of the Baltic states, is it?”

“Each country has its own language, but basically all young Lithuanians speak English,” Dennis explained.

According to Dennis, the number of English-learners in the Baltic states had picked up drastically, while Russian-learners had declined. In fact, the drop-off was causing problems in northern Estonia, where there were a high number of native Russian speakers. Fewer young folks studying Russian had led to communication issues between the older and younger segments of the populace. Every country had its unique social issues, I supposed.

“Back in the Soviet Union days, German was another lingua franca, so there are also lots of older citizens who speak German as a second language rather than English,” he added. “It’s a bit of a mess.”

Mishiro came over with a pile of yakisoba on a plate.

“Noodles’re ready. Dig in,” she said, addressing the group.

“R-Really? Us too?” Hayashida checked cautiously.

Food was a commodity in the dungeons, especially on lower floors. Even a bunch of rambunctious playboys like Shibu T weren’t going to take any without double-checking.

“Consider it a loan.” I smiled.

“One we’ll pay back with interest. Whew. We’d just about had it with military rations.”

“The guys back at camp aren’t going to be happy about this,” Dennis noted. The two took the additional plates Mishiro proffered, wolfing down the grilled noodles.

“Hey, sorry for keeping you waiting!” Lance showed back up holding two six-packs of beer. *“The night is long my friends. Enjoy!”* He grabbed a 350-milliliter can and popped the pull tab.

I-Is this really the eighteenth floor of a dungeon? It was a big, mysterious world.

I introduced Mishiro and Rokujo to Lance, noting they were two of our contracted explorers, and he regaled us with tales of intrigue from his own dungeon escapades. Of course I sensed his stories were a little punched up, but with his long history, he had plenty to share.

“But you said you worked with the US government sometimes. Vancouver’s in Canada, isn’t it?”

“I’m actually from a place called the Point. I’m an American citizen.”

The Point? My expression must have betrayed just how confused I was, because he launched right into an explanation.

“Point Roberts is a bit of land overlooked back when Britain and America were settling an old border dispute.”

As each country expanded its territory, it was inevitable they would cross paths at some point. America proposed using the forty-ninth parallel as a dividing line. However, Vancouver Island had been of great importance to Britain, and so they initially rejected the plan, as it would have resulted in dividing the island. Later, however, the British agreed to a compromise plan to use the forty-ninth parallel as the border so long as they could have the entirety of Vancouver Island. However, neither side had accounted for the tip of a

certain Canadian peninsula extending southward over the parallel into US territory. That area became Point Roberts—otherwise known as “the Point”—which was located just south of Delta, British Columbia.

“Other than that bit of trivia, it’s not a very significant spot.” Lance smiled. *“In fact, there’s practically nothing there. The elementary school only goes up to the third grade. After that, you have to be bussed to another town in the States.”* He’d probably crossed international borders just about the most of any person alive, he joked. To go to school, he would first cross the border heading north to get into Canada, then snake back down to cross the border into Washington state—with two more crossings going home, that meant a total of four border crossings for an average school day. Since his family didn’t pay Canadian taxes, he wasn’t entitled to use of public services like schools.

“I heard you built a hospital in your home town. That would be the Point, huh?” Miyoshi remarked. Lance looked surprised.

“Yeah. Figured it was the least I could do,” he responded.

The Point hadn’t had its own hospital when he was growing up. It was his hometown, after all. He chuckled. I couldn’t tell if the red in his face was due to embarrassment or the beer.

“Still, I knew there were a lot of top explorers around, but I didn’t realize King Salmon had landed in Japan too. Are you after Mining?” Dennis asked.

I was curious about that as well.

“Correct. I can’t give any details, but I’m under a short-term contract to find Mining.”

Very few top explorers would agree to term-based employment contracts. That was in part because in most cases they could make more selling off their own loot from exploration, but it was also partly because those who rose to the top ranks of private explorers tended to be freedom-loving types, and those with the money to employ them tended to be busybody snobs—an oil-and-water situation.

“I was thinking about coming to Yoyogi anyway, so it seemed like a good chance.”

“Why Yoyogi?” I asked. There were plenty of famous dungeons in America, especially along the west coast. There was no reason to come to a dungeon in a far-off Asian island nation.

“Because there’ve been a lot of interesting occurrences here lately. And because it’s completely public. What top explorer worth their salt wouldn’t want to be here right now?”

“Does that mean there are other top private explorers here too?”

We knew most nations with powerful militaries had sent government-backed teams. Probably more than a few of them were over in the base camp area as we spoke. Taking a stroll by the encampment, you could probably hear conversations in just about every language on earth.

“Private? Let’s see. I ran into Ella recently. She said she was on a government contract.”

“Ella?”

“Ella Alcott. The Witch of Campbell,” Miyoshi explained.

“What was that about Ella?” Hayashida asked Dennis.

“He said the Witch of Campbell is here in Yoyogi.”

“Seriously?! Azuma is gonna love this.”

Was one of their party members a fan? We were more than twenty meters away from base camp, so telepathy wouldn’t reach. Their teammate would have to wait to get the news.

“Originally she was the ‘Witch of Campbelltown,’ but the name shrank over time,” Lance told us with a smile.

“Campbelltown? Like where the family friend who gave Cú to Rokujo’s dad came from?”

“That’s Campbelltown in the United Kingdom. This is Campbelltown in Australia,” Miyoshi informed me.

“How confusing.”

It was like how there was an additional Hiroshima and Date City in Hokkaido.

"You can thank a certain devoted husband and governor-general for how many Campbelltowns there are in Australia." Lance washed down a mouthful of sliced beef with some beer. Apparently this former governor-general had felt compelled to name a number of municipalities using his wife's maiden name, Campbell.

"No connection to a certain historical maid manga, to preempt your next question," Miyoshi informed me in Japanese.

"What kind of nerd do you take me for?"

At any rate, the net result was that there were more than a few Campbelltowns down under.

"She's from Campbelltown in Adelaide Hills Council. Still lives there, actually," Lance noted.

I wasn't sure what she looked like, so it was possible we'd seen her already, I said.

I'd know it was her if I saw someone sparkling like a firecracker in the middle of a monster fight, Lance informed me.

Huh?

"Anyway, Yoyogi sure is interesting. I'd like to check out your boot camp at some point too. I imagine Ella feels the same."

"We'd be honored," Miyoshi responded, blushing.

Knowing what the actual contents of the course entailed, it was hard not to feel a little embarrassed when serious explorers expressed interest in it.

When Dennis interpreted that last bit for Hayashida, the latter let out a gasp.

"Wait wait wait. Are you guys with *D-Powers*?!"

He was only figuring that out now? Then again, Dennis hadn't been nearby when we'd been discussing Asha and the orb auctions.

"Uh...yeah," I answered.

"Then I gotta ask. Just how effective is that boot camp of yours?"

"'Results may vary' is about all I can say."

“What is that supposed to mean? You sound like a TV drug commercial disclaimer.”

Okay, but I really can't make any promises.

“Well, why don't we apply and try it out for ourselves? Dennis? D-Dennis?”

Dennis only responded with a snore. Apparently he'd dozed off.

“Ah, damn it! Why'd he have to go through two drinks already?”

It seemed like Dennis was an extremely light drinker. His two cans had laid him right out.

“What am I supposed to do with my interpreter passing out mid-conversation? Ah, well. I guess I'll head out at this point. Sorry about earlier. I'll pay you back for the grub. Promise.”

“Take care tomorrow,” I offered as he left.

“You guys too.”

With that, Hayashida slung Dennis over his shoulder and took off. I'd almost forgotten, with his appearance and mannerisms, but we were still dealing with someone ranked in the lower triple digits. Picking up Dennis as if he weighed no more than a bag of leaves made his strength evident.

After they'd left, Lance's expression suddenly grew more serious.

“Actually, there's something I'd like to ask you guys too.”

“What is it? We don't have long careers as explorers, so I'm not sure how much we can say.”

“What dropped Otherworldly Language Comprehension?”

Miyoshi and I were completely caught off guard. All we could do was stare at one another.

“Sorry, but we'll have to ask you to check that with the JDA. We're not really at liberty to say.”

Information like that wasn't always made public. Private explorers had their own knowledge and spoils to protect, and certain pieces of information were often bound up in contracts for job requests. As a top-end explorer, Lance

understood that as well. He didn't press—just reclined and nodded.

“But man, I have to say, I feel like I’ve been losing to you guys time and time again recently.” He held up his pointer finger. *“There’s the thing with the Jains, and then with Otherworldly Language Comprehension, and then you auctioned off a Mining orb.”* He drained the last drops from his current can of beer, swallowing with an audible gulp. *“You could say just about all the top explorers have been outdone by Azusa here alone the last few months. Some people are kind of fed up with it, to be honest. Oh, but don’t worry, not the really top-tier ones. There aren’t too many jealous types this far up in the rankings.”*

He crushed the empty beer can and tossed it into a garbage bag, then stood up.

“Either way,” he continued, *“it’s partly your successes that have gotten everyone so interested in Yoyogi. Everyone wants to know what you’ve found here, and how. Anyway, I better be getting back to camp.”*

“We’ll see you off.”

Even being a top-end explorer, it didn't seem wise to let someone who had been drinking wander off alone on the eighteenth floor. We got up as well.

After walking for a bit, Lance suddenly turned around.

“Right, there was one other thing I wanted to ask you.” He took a folded piece of cloth out of his pocket. *“Azusa, I’ve heard you have Appraisal. I don’t know how much your services cost, but there’s an item I’d like you to look at.”*

Miyoshi carefully unfolded its cloth, revealing what looked like an iron ring—a dull, silvery color without any ornamentation.

“Deadly Ring...” she uttered, not even having touched the item. Lance’s face lit up with surprise.

“So Appraisal is real! Right. When I got this item about a year ago, I remember seeing the name ‘Deadly Ring’ displayed. Based on that, I’ve been afraid to try it myself, or have anyone else test it for me.”

“Understood.” She took out a notepad and pen, and started scribbling something down.

Deadly Ring

Damage +10%

(User SP/target SP)% chance to kill on hit

VIT -3

Those who do not neglect self-improvement shall earn the key to opening a bottomless hole.

The cursed ones shall be carried into eternal darkness on a ferry sewn of hides.

“The bottom two sentences are flavor text. Appraisal displays most information in the native language of the user, so I wrote those in Japanese. From our experience, they’re just a little extra atmosphere. Do you want those done too?”

“Would you mind translating them?”

Miyoshi translated the flavor text.

“That bit about the cursed ones... Think that costs obols?”

The ferry of stitched beast hides likely referred to the ferry of Charon, ferryman of the rivers Styx and Acheron in Greek mythology. He would transport dead souls into the underworld in exchange for Greek coins called obols.

“Though in this case it’s not really obols, but a bit of VIT,” Miyoshi explained. “In exchange, your damage output goes up by ten percent.”

“What is this ‘SP’?” Lance asked.

“We call them status points. A lot like the experience points you find in games.”

“I see. So against an opponent with equal SP, I’d have a one percent chance to get a one-hit kill.”

“Seems that way. Pretty spectacular!”

Even if you were facing certain death in a battle, you'd have a one percent chance of pulling out a Hail Mary. Only a lunatic would go rely on those odds, but it was good insurance.

"Thanks," he responded. "What do I owe you?"

"We're not officially offering appraisal services right now. We'd never keep up with requests."

"Makes sense."

"But if there's a chance an item could turn out deadly, like this one, we'll take it on pro bono. Civic duty."

"Noblesse oblige?"

"We'll take an IOU." Miyoshi beamed.

"Why do I have a feeling this IOU isn't going to be cheap?" Lance playfully rolled his eyes.

"Will you be staying in Yoyogi for a while?" I asked.

"I'll probably hang around for a bit after my contract finishes. We'll likely be seeing each other again, so I'll just say, 'Happy hunting' for now."

"To you too."

We exchanged another round of firm handshakes.

"Be sure to come by our office for a chat if you have a chance," Miyoshi offered.

"Ah, yeah! I got the location from Simon. I'll be sure to stop by if I can," he agreed.

With that, he walked the rest of the short distance to his campsite. He'd be there in no time, given his elephantine strides.

"Top explorers are all pretty interesting guys," I mused.

"Never mind 'interesting,' Kei! That ring! That was crazy!"

"Was it?"

"Thank about it. SP is basically just shorthand for total stat points, right?"

That was true. It didn't seem likely monsters would have any undistributed SP, which probably meant the number used for the ratio included the total distributed points.

"So if someone with a crazy high SP total like you uses it..." Miyoshi began.

I looked up. If someone with my SP amount used it, they might have been able to instakill just about every monster.

"I see..." But the guaranteed one-hit kill would only trigger with the maximum SP difference. Anything below that, and random chance would kick in. Plus... "It's not like I'm going to be a hundred times over most monsters, you know."

Maybe that would be true with early floor goblins, but I could take them out with an ordinary punch anyway. When it came to stronger opponents... If my SP were twice as high as the monster's, I would still only have a two percent chance. Not enough to stake my life on.

"But if you used your super AGI to just go full *oraoraoraora* on it...!" She mimed a punching flurry. "You could get in fifty blows, couldn't you?"

"Uh..." That still didn't promise a one hundred percent success rate, and that was assuming I had double the target's stats. "Where would I even get a copy of that ring in the first place? Even if I were humoring your idea, this whole conversation is *mudamudamuda*."

"Ah, true," she responded dejectedly. At the same time, she cast a pointed glance up to the top of Batian Peak, where she seemed to expect a reasonable candidate to lurk.

That night, when everyone else was asleep—or so I thought—I got up to take a stroll.

"Off to a midnight tryst?"

"Miyoshi! You're up too?"

"It's only a little past eleven. All I've done today was walk, so I thought I'd get a bit more done." She sat up and brightened a small LED lantern, with a blanket draped over the top so as not to spread too much light.

“I mean, since I used the Earth Magic and Night Vision orbs recently, I figured I’d take the opportunity to restock.” My kill count was at 99.

“Speaking of that, what do you think happens to Ngai at night? Does he get replaced with Olapa?”

“There’s no way I’m going there to check.”

“Tch.”

Um, you know I can hear you grumbling about how if we had the Throne of Olapa, we’d have a complete set. At any rate, Olapa’s throne would probably be silver, and not even worth that much.

“This deep in the dungeon, I don’t think anyone will be actively tailing you, but there are still plenty of people on night watch duty at the base camp,” Miyoshi cautioned. “Just be careful to keep a low profile.”

“I will. Don’t worry. I’ll have Drudwyn scout ahead to watch for anyone coming. Plus, I haven’t really gotten to use Night Vision much yet, so this is a perfect opportunity. Also, we’re heading down past the twenty-first floor tomorrow. I’ll come right back.”

I’d employed Night Vision while we were shrouded in darkness on the thirty-first floor, but hadn’t gotten much use from it since. It’s not like I had had many opportunities, or much desire, to go diving in total darkness.

“Right, speaking of tomorrow,” I added before setting out, “I was thinking maybe we should use these as a bit of extra insurance.” I pulled out two Magic Resistance (1) orbs.

“This’d be my ninth orb. How many do you think you can use?”

The question had bothered us for a while, and not even Appraisal’s wisdom had resolved it. Was there some sort of penalty for running over a maximum number of skills?

“Dunno. This’ll be the tenth total for me, but ninth in terms of different skills. You think the D-Card will scroll?”

The D-Card’s skill list section, displayed on the front of the card—similar to how the party-member list was displayed on the back—only seemed to have

room for eight entries, arranged vertically on top of one another. We'd been curious about what would happen with the acquisition of a ninth skill. Incidentally, my card displayed Life Detection, which I'd used two copies of, with a "2" appended to the end.

"We're in trouble if it automatically deletes the top skill or something," Miyoshi pointed out.

Tell me about it.

The skill in my top slot was Vault, and Miyoshi's was Storage. I didn't think they would just disappear without warning, but if they did, we'd be up the creek without a paddle—er, down in the dungeon without supplies. We might lose everything stored inside.

"Just in case, we'd be better off losing Storage than Vault. I'll try it first." Miyoshi extracted a PC and other devices with sensitive data stored on them and set them by the side of the tent.

Losing Storage would hurt too, but we could obtain a new copy once every two months, so it wouldn't be irreversible.

"Okay," I agreed. "Vault does have orbs we've agreed to store in it and all."

"That's one reason I'd rather not risk giving up Vault, but the other is that it has the food."

"So *that* was your main concern..."

Miyoshi grinned, then held up a copy of Magic Resistance (1). "I'm giving up my humanity...I guess!"

"You said it."

As usual, the orb dispersed into light, which permeated Miyoshi's body. When the light had disappeared, she craned her neck around, checking here and there. "Okay, well, my head didn't explode or anything."

"Thank goodness. I'd be wanted for manslaughter if it did." I was the one who'd encouraged her to use the orb, after all. "So?"

Miyoshi turned around, faced the devices she'd taken out of Storage, and stretched out one hand. The devices instantly vanished.

“Looks like I haven’t lost Storage.”

Checking her D-Card, we found the skill section looked the same as before. Magic Resistance (1) wasn’t listed.

“Huh?” I muttered, taking the card. The list didn’t scroll vertically when swiped. “Maybe it has some sort of limit like the party member display, only going up to eight... Wait...”

There was an element displayed on hers not present on my D-Card skill section. In the bottom corner sat two small dots, side by side, with the first dot slightly larger. “Could this be...?”

I tried swiping to the left with my thumb. The list shifted to display a second page. Now the left dot was slightly larger. “Magic Resistance (1)” adorned the top of the section, with the first eight skills having vanished.

“A horizontal page swipe...” Miyoshi concluded.

“Hey, if we could arrange the order the skills are displayed in, we could hide our most valuable ones.” I was starting to get excited at the possibilities.

“But you’ll still see those page-swipe indicator dots, so people will know you have at least nine skills.”

“We can use a card sleeve or something to cover the dots.” I set the D-Card down and held my own copy of Magic Resistance (1) aloft, rejecting my humanity. “If I just leave mine scrolled to the second page, I can even pretend that Magic Resistance (1) is my only skill,” I commented when I was done.

“Nice!” Miyoshi agreed. “Maybe I should try that too.”

“Everyone knows you have Appraisal though.”

“Exactly! I can leave it scrolled and then be like, ‘Sorry, you’ve got the wrong person!’ if people recognize me.”

“No matter how much they protest?”

She nodded.

“No matter how much.”

I had concerns that her approach would just add more problems, but okay.

After that, we talked about tomorrow's plans. We were planning to have Rokujo use Mining, but I was thinking it might be good to have her use a Physical Resistance too, being worried about her lack of VIT. After that...

"Kei."

"Yeah?"

"Were you planning to do your nocturnal orb hunting as the Phantom?"

Ah... There was the possibility my taking out a monster at night might draw some attention. *A disguise would be prudent.* But...

"Won't it be kind of suspicious if the Phantom shows up the same night we come down to the eighteenth floor?"

"Oh, yeah. And especially if he also doesn't show up again after we leave."

"How about I go as Keigo Yoshimura, but stay ready to switch into the Phantom costume at a moment's notice if someone's coming?"

"If you're going to switch into it when someone's coming and no one sees you otherwise, there's no difference between that and having it on the whole time, right?"

"Ah. That's true," I conceded.

I might as well stay in the outfit I planned to don if someone spotted me.

"Suit yourself either way, but if you're Phantoming, know that I've got three spares."

"You're already making copies?!"

We'd talked about doing production runs of the costume, but that was just the day before the crisis at Yokohama, on the seventeenth. She already had three?!

"The costume isn't exactly sportswear, and I figured each one would get dirty and torn pretty quickly. It doesn't hurt to have extras on hand."

"I suppose."

It wasn't like I could take them to the cleaners or hang them up to dry outside after doing laundry at home. Not with all those shady people surveilling our

house from the apartment building behind us.

I accepted one of the spares, then raised my right knee off the ground to stand up. “I won’t be long. Just to double-check, are you okay with my taking Drudwyn?”

“We have Anubis and the others, so if anything we’re over-doggo’d. Plus, you’ll need one to summon a shadow pit in case you have to *au revoir*.” Miyoshi snickered.

“Ugh. I’m really going to have to think of a better character.”

“What kind of character do you want?”

“A silent one, if I can. I trip over myself everytime I try to speak.”

“Really? You seemed pretty into it when you had to swoop in for Saito and Iori.”

“Really?”

Come to think of it, I had been having fun in those moments, getting swept up in the theatrics. Maybe the Phantom was a form of stress relief. Then again, what stress? I’d been living the easy life ever since leaving our last company, hadn’t I?

No, wait. We’d had our lives targeted during the hunt for Otherworldly Language Comprehension, and even our less deadly adventures—like having to find a way to get Asha her D-Card and our current mission with Rokujo—had been plenty difficult in their own ways. Then there had been the whole crisis at Yokohama. That had all been in the past four months. I had nothing *but* stress!

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” I answered. “Just reflecting on the cruel whims of fate.”

“Only now? Anyway, for the Phantom, the strong silent type definitely hits the mark, but a character who can’t crack a single joke...”

“Might be a little hard for me to pull off.”

“I’ll go do some character research at the Takarazuka Opera,” Miyoshi said, referring to the all-female Tokyo theater troupe known for their French

Revolution themed costumes and androgynous male characters.

“There?! Eeeere?!”

The world around me suddenly went dark. I’d been pulled into Drudwyn’s shadow pit, having accidentally indicated I wanted to go in the direction I’d been looking, closer to Batian Peak. After a moment, the darkness around me was suddenly tinged with light again, and I found myself under a starlit sky.

“Stars even though we’re in the middle of a dungeon. Kind of weird...” I mumbled to myself.

It was a starry night to make van Gogh proud. Suddenly I was curious. Maybe I could figure out if the dungeon was referencing a real-world location by noting their positions and the current time. On a whim, I took out my phone and snapped a photo of the sky for later reference.

I walked forward toward the peak through the dark. Night Vision didn’t provide extra personal illumination—just a dim awareness of shapes in total darkness. Colors were washed out, and depth perception was lacking, but it was better than traveling blind. Since the outlines of objects from using of Night Vision overlapped with your normal vision, it was quite an odd experience using it in anything other than pitch darkness.

I continued to walk, silent and wraithlike, beneath the stars, certain no one was tracking my movements, until I arrived at a cavern at the base of the mountain. Miyoshi and I had been here before—the chamber where we’d been ambushed by genomos. I’d chosen the location for two reasons. First, because I simply didn’t know anywhere else on the floor where I was guaranteed to be able to farm orbs, and second, because it was part of the floor’s restricted area, which would keep observers away. Indeed, Life Detection wasn’t picking up anyone nearby.

I was actually pretty sure the mountain caverns being part of the restricted area was an oversight, due to the initial exploration maps submitted to the JDA being two-dimensional. The caverns sat directly below the peak, where the true risk lurked.

The temple inside the caverns stood solemn and unchanged, just as it had when we’d last visited. Luminous moss covering the walls bathed the rough

stone and carved ornamentation in a soft blue fluorescence. I checked the time, took a deep breath, and stepped into the space directly in front of the altar built into the far wall. The beating of an orchestra timpani rumbled through my brain, accompanied by a choir—*díes íræ, díes ílla*—singing Verdi’s “Messa da Requiem” full blast.

Just as my mental choir was getting to the part about the world dissolving into ashes according to the prophecy of David and the Sybil, throngs of genomos started pouring out from the temple walls, shooting down bits of rubble like falling arrows with a move I could only see fit to call “stone rain.”

However, as long as I stayed nimble, they weren’t much of a threat. Last time they’d caught us off guard and surrounded us. This time I was ready.

Plus, I had Sirius Nova for a scorched-genomos bargain sale. The roaring fire took out the entire wave in an instant—as if they simply melted away. There was nothing like area-of-effect magic for dealing with trash mobs.

Sirius Nova’s one weakness was that I’d lose track of my kill count, but as long as I was farming a single monster, that was hardly a drawback. All I had to do was keep burning, occasionally selecting an orb in the Mei King screen that would pop up.

My first two orb selections were Mining, followed by an Earth Magic, followed by Night Vision as one of the next two.

The thing was, the more I fired off Sirius Nova, the more I felt myself getting caught up in its power—as if the power were surging through me.

I noticed maniacal laughter reverberating off the temple walls. It took a second longer to notice that the laughter was mine.

Was I...in trouble? There was a sober part of me sounding alarm bells in my head, but I still couldn’t stop laughing at the feeling of total power, of release.

What I didn’t know was that there were cracks in the cavern walls extending to the mountain exterior. I wasn’t thinking at all how the bursts of light from my attacks or my maddened cackles would be perceived by those outside.

“What’s that?”

It started with one comment from one of the explorers on night watch, pointing to Batian Peak. The flickering light pouring out through cracks in the surface at odd intervals was bright enough to drown out the stars above. It was as if something trapped in the mountain was unleashing its wrath.

“Get everyone up now! If we wait until something goes down, it might already be too late!”

Each country in the base camp formed provisional scout units. Heroes all, they headed out toward Batian Peak ready to face potential death.

The first to the foot of the mountain was one Alain “Rubbernecker” Baugé. He stopped near its base and looked up. There was occasional rumbling, as if the mountain itself were angry, accompanied by that burst of blue light and the scent of ozone, like you’d smell following a lightning strike.

“Do you hear something?” Alain asked.

“What?”

The other French scouts behind him strained to listen.

Between thunderous explosions, it almost sounded as if—

“Is someone...laughing?”

“No way...”

But there was no denying it. Someone was laughing—no, cackling madly—inside the mountain.

The JSDF unit caught up to the French group in front.

“Did something happen?”

The man at the back of the French team only raised his index finger to his lips, then cupped his hand around his left ear, urging them to listen.

“What the heck?” Now the two Japanese scouts heard the laughing as well.

“Hold on, something under Batian Peak. Do you think that’s...?”

“Yeah. We’re right on the border of the restricted area.”

“Y-You mean the one that got forbidden after the first team to explore it said no one should come here again?”

They gazed up, eyes wide with worry. Alain stepped back to speak to them.

“Do you know something about this?”

“There was a report from the first Japanese team to explore here. They encountered something and suffered heavy casualties, and the mountain’s been restricted ever since.”

“Ah.” Alain remembered seeing information about a restricted area in the JDA materials he’d received. *“So that’s where we are. Then whatever is inside is probably what was responsible...”*

He turned back toward the mountain, from which unhinged laughter continued to emanate. There was something alive in there, no doubt about it.

One didn’t need a JDA pamphlet to inform them of the danger. They only had to trust their own senses, seeing the light and hearing the laughter and thundering.

The German and American teams were the next to arrive.

“What’s that voice?”

“Dunno.”

“Nothing good, that’s for sure,” Alain responded cryptically to the new teams.

The front German scout stared up at the dark outline of the mountain, set against the starry sky. *“So what do we do?”*

“Are you asking if we should check it out?” No sooner had Alain asked than the mountain again roared as if threatening to split the whole earth. Bright blue light emanated from the cracks in its surface, looking like neon veins. *“No, mon ami, I’m no fool. I’ll be sitting this one out. I only go places I’m sure I can come back from alive.”* He shook his head.

No one spoke up to openly agree, but none of them continued forward either. Private explorers managed their own risks. If they didn’t want to go into a dangerous area, no one could force them to. On-duty military personnel didn’t have that option. Everyone present was thanking God they didn’t have

superiors crazy enough to demand they go forward without proper situational assessment or supplies.

“How do we report this?” one of the Americans asked as the rumbling and maniacal laughter continued.

“We report what we observed.” His teammate shrugged. *“Nothing more, nothing less.”*

Every cathartic release is followed by a moment of somber clarity.

“Hm?” I was suddenly aware of several presences on Life Detection not too far from the entrance to the cavern, just outside of the normal Life Detection range. “I wonder what’s going on. Yikes! I better wrap up.”

I fired off one last Sirius Nova, then retreated a bit farther back toward the entrance, using a floor cushion as a shield as I picked off the final few genomos with Water Lances, evening my kill count back to zero. Having racked up a ridiculous number of orbs, it was time to call it a night.

Walking to the entrance, I noticed the blips outside start to move. I could have Drudwyn carry me all the way back, but it was pretty far to camp. It was dark enough that I could probably remain unseen.

I walked out of the cavern, then leaped in a single bound up to the top of a nearby boulder, taking care to stay out of Life Detection range as I darted back toward camp.

I caught blips from monsters here and there, but they were scarce enough near the base camp that I could easily avoid them as well. When I was fairly close to our campsite, I had Drudwyn shadow-pit me directly back into my tent. That way I could avoid the possibility of someone at the base camp seeing me return.

I took off the Phantom costume, climbed into bed, and didn’t open my eyes till dawn.

“Hold on. It’s quiet.”

At the American scout's observation, everyone turned reflexively to look back up at the mountain. The laughter had indeed stopped, as had the mysterious lights and rumbling. There was nothing but the gentle sound of wind rustling blades of grass.

Alain had continued to survey the area, focusing his Life Detection on the area near the mountain. He noticed one blip, for just a second, far enough away that only the famed "Rubbernecker" Baugé—a double-user of Life Detection—could have caught it.

And, just for a moment, blotting out the starlight on top of a nearby boulder, Alain saw a silhouette. He hastily raised his night-vision goggles to his eyes.

"That can't be..." Alain had seen that silhouette somewhere before. Its distinct clothing gave it away. He couldn't imagine there were too many crazies running around deep in dungeons wearing pinched-crown hats. *"The Phantom!"*

Alain hadn't forgotten their encounter the other week, nor how his phantasmal quarry had emerged and disappeared without a trace, as if to mock the Rubbernecker's skills.

According to voice analysis of the recording he'd passed to Lieutenant Colonel Boulanger, there was a ninety percent probability the man they had encountered was Simon Gershwin of the American DSF. Although they weren't sure how Simon had appeared and disappeared without detection, the current hypothesis was that the US military might have secret technology up its sleeve. That would also mean the masked man Alain and the others had encountered wasn't the Phantom—the world's mysterious first-ranked explorer—as Simon was listed separately on the dungeon-controlled World Ranking List.

Alain, who had witnessed the mysterious figure in person, remained doubtful that it could be Simon. He didn't have proof, but he did have experience and a gut feeling. That gut feeling told him that while he could maybe tangle with Simon, he didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of laying a finger on the costumed man they'd seen.

"Did you just say, 'the Phantom'?" a nearby man with a German accent asked. Having noticed where Alain was looking, the man had apparently glimpsed the same silhouette. *"Was that him? Do you know him?"*

There was no way a mysterious humanoid silhouette fleeing the site of the strange phenomena they'd just witnessed had nothing to do with the situation. Given the timing—the cessation of the lights and rumbling immediately followed by the appearance of the departing silhouette—it was even possible he had just defeated some sort of boss inside the mountain, then run away.

“Ah... No, it's just...”

Alain looked back at the boulder. The silhouette had vanished—seemingly evaporated, like on the tenth floor. There were no readings on Life Detection. Whoever it was had just slipped past an entire congregation of the world's best scouts.

“You saw the Phantom?” a JSDF member interjected. *“As in the unknown top-ranked explorer?”*

“N-Not necessarily. I just met someone I thought might be him once, on Yoyogi's tenth floor.” Alain explained that he'd seen a man in a strange costume on the tenth floor some weeks back, being careful to gloss over what exactly he'd been doing there. *“And I saw a silhouette over there just now that looked like someone wearing the same costume.”*

The scouts were bombarded by questions upon their return to base camp, few of which they were able to answer in a satisfying way.

“Unfortunately we weren't able to get near whatever was happening. It was in the restricted area. We weren't sure we could make it back alive. But it almost seemed like there was some sort of...”

Pressed for an explanation, a certain scout scrambled for the words that would send waves through the base camp.

“...like there was some kind of devil in there.”

January 25, 2019 (Friday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighteenth Floor

Miyoshi was already awake and starting to gather our luggage.

“Morgnin’...” I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

“You really caused a stir last night,” Miyoshi replied with a tone of exasperation and amusement.

“Wazzat?”

“Everybody at the base camp is talking about some sort of ‘mountain devil.’”

“Mountain devil?”

Seeing the metaphorical question mark above my head, Miyoshi filled me in, the blood draining from my face as she talked. *How was I supposed to know light would be visible through the cracks?!*

“Seriously?!”

“Naturally everyone’s trying to figure out what to do.”

“Let me guess—they’re drawing straws for devil-exorcising duty?” I gave Miyoshi the world’s weakest smile.

It would be hard to keep genomo-farming with peace of mind knowing some sort of boss-monster devil was nearby. But if any of them actually tried to tame it...

I shook my head.

“We told Team Simon not to go near the peak, but we can’t be responsible for everyone.”

“People could die, you know.”

Not just “could.” Judging from Team Simon’s stats, and knowing they still wouldn’t stack up, there probably wasn’t anyone at the base camp who could survive a clash with Ngai unless they had the world’s highest LUC stat. And even then... Most would literally never know what had hit them.

“It’s already a restricted area. What can we do that the JSDF and JDA can’t?”

“Sure, but...”

I got it, but we weren’t superheroes. Our plates were full enough dealing with the tasks at hand.

“I understand, but I don’t think I have it in me to risk my life or the lives of those I care about just to help a group of strangers.”

“Your recent actions indicate otherwise.” Miyoshi grinned, seeming to remember events of late.

“Oh, come on.”

“Setting that aside...” Miyoshi finished rolling up her bedding. “What was the haul?”

“Three more Minings, just in case, and one each of Earth Magic, Night Vision, and Dexterity.”

“Wow! A full set of genomo orbs. How many did you wind up taking out?”

“Since I adjusted my count back to zero at the end...exactly 501? I wish they offered more exciting orbs...”

“More than five hundred?! That’s crazy!”

“‘Crazy’ might be right. I’m not sure it’s good to use that much power.”

“How do you mean?”

I explained the intoxicating feeling that had come over me in the mountain.

“So, what? It felt like it was physically impossible to resist giving in to the power you were using?”

“Yeah,” I responded. “More or less.”

Miyoshi had packed her bedding into a tidy cylinder. She plopped herself down on top of it, the bedding lying sideways on the ground, as if it were a tumbled log.

“I don’t think anyone can totally resist the sway of newfound power. Whether that’s physical strength or influence.”

“That’s true, but this felt almost...” I searched for the next word. “Almost chemical. Like a physical need to keep firing off the attack.”

“Like a drug?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to think about what would happen if I got addicted to it.”

“You’re too introverted to go full supervillain. You’ll probably be okay.”

“I wish I were so confident...”

Humans ran on chemical impulses. It wasn’t always possible to beat errant ones through force of will.

“Plus, if you get out of control, I’ll be there to pelt ya in the back of the head with one of these babies.” Miyoshi produced an eight-centimeter iron ball in her palm, clutched it, and thrust it toward my face.

I recoiled, then smiled.

“Thanks. I mean, I’d probably die, but... That might not be a bad idea. I’ll be counting on you.”

“Leave the Kei-beaning to me.”

I was feeling better already.

“So are the others ready?”

“They’re up. What do you want to do about breakfast?”

“Let’s just get out some premade sandwiches. It’s day two of the dive, so we’ll have to be more careful about using fresh ingredients where anyone can see.”

“Let’s plate them in the tent, then,” Miyoshi suggested.

I poured some oil over last night’s grill and put some sandwiches and fruit on top.

“Should we act like we made some fresh coffee too?” I inquired.

“That much we can actually do. Some hot water if you please.”

“Okay. In that case do it outside.”

I brought the grill top—or rather, the metal shield—with the sandwiches out of the tent and set it grilling. It was still a little before seven, but lots of teams had already departed from the nearby base camp, so it was quieter than I’d expected. Of course, a few had stayed behind to mind the camp or maintain eyesight on the prayer flags. It might have seemed silly to waste personnel on keeping watch over flags, but society operated on symbols.

“Morning!” Mishiro and Rokujo called together.

“We’re ready,” Mishiro added. They’d already taken down their tent, and their sleeping mats were rolled up by Mishiro’s feet.

“Thanks. But first, grub. Dig in.”

Mishiro eyed the improvised platter resting atop a nearby rock and placed her hands on her hips.

“Do you two *ever* rough it?”

“Yummy!” Rokujo grabbed a fork and started cutting off pieces of the sandwiches, shoving them into her mouth with bites of fruit.

I was perfectly comfortable roughing it. Miyoshi on the other hand...

Speaking of, she’d finished packing up the tent and came over to deliver the components, which I feigned putting into our packs. In exchange, I handed her a 1.5-liter kettle filled with boiling water, and shortly freshly brewed coffee wafted its siren song scent my way.

“Pretty pampered party here,” a voice called out behind me.

“Hayashida?”

Shibu T’s Hayashida, decked out in full protective gear designed for the lower floors, loomed over me. Seeing his outfit made me aware of just how out of place we were in our beginner equipment.

“The whole base camp’s buzzin’, and you’re over here playing summer camp.”

“So what’s everyone planning to do about the mountain devil?”

“You’ve heard about it and you’re still kicking back and relaxing?!”

“We’re leaving the floor pretty soon.”

“You aren’t going to hunt for Mining?”

“We’ll leave that up to the pros.”

Hayashida scrunched his brow. So what *had* we come here for then, he must have been wondering.

“So...can we help you?” I asked.

“Uh, no. I just...after the commotion last night, I thought I’d come over. You know, make sure you guys were all right.”

“Worried about us? I’m flattered, but we’re fine. Thanks.”

“Ah, uh, yeah. If—if that’s the case, great. Just checking in.”

Hayashida looked slightly embarrassed. Some of his teammates called him back over.

“Hayashida!”

“Hold your horses! Coming!” he shouted over his shoulder, then turned back toward me. “I don’t know where you guys are going, but be careful.”

“You too,” I responded. “Careful not to get crushed by that mountain devil.”

“Big words for someone running off.” He turned around and waved behind him with one hand, not even looking back.

Miyoshi came over and passed me a coffee cup with both hands.

“He might be a better person than we gave him credit for,” Miyoshi commented.

“Yeah, though kind of a playboy,” I responded.

Nevertheless, he was one of the top members of Shibu T. We’d probably run into him again. I took a swig of coffee, following him with my eyes as he gallivanted off back to his camp.

We set out toward the staircase down to the nineteenth floor and then came across a man standing alone at the edge of the base camp, staring with a nervous expression at Batian Peak.

“What’s up with that guy?” I asked.

“That’s probably...Dmitrij,” Miyoshi responded.

“Dmitrij? Why do I feel like I’ve heard that name before...”

“Really, Kei, you are unbelievable.” Miyoshi rolled her eyes, then leaned in close and whispered, “Dmitrij Nelnikov. Russian explorer, the second highest-

ranked in the world.”

“Him?! We probably shouldn’t get mixed up with him. Isn’t he called ‘the Seeker’ or something like that? He’s probably thinking about going after Ngai right now.”

“Seems likely, with that rumor about the ‘mountain devil’ and all.”

“You’ve got Appraisal. You’re the Wiseman. Maybe go warn him off. Tell him only death awaits him or something cryptic like that.”

Mishiro popped up from behind and inserted herself into the conversation.

“Isn’t that just going to encourage him?”

Ah, yeah. Given what we’ve heard of his disposition...

“But if we don’t do something, he’s going to go over there. We warned Team Simon off. I’m not going to be able to sleep at night knowing we just let someone die. Come on, Miyoshi. I don’t have the name recognition here!”

Miyoshi wasn’t wearing her Wiseman makeup, but this would probably be her first and last meeting with Dmitrij. It’d be fine if he saw her normal face. Probably.

“Okay.” She sighed. “Just remember what I told you earlier about your actions not matching your words.”

I had to eat that one.

Miyoshi approached Dmitrij, calling out to him with the tone of a friendly greeting between explorers—“*Gospodin Nelnikov*”—using slightly formal, stuffy Russian. Dmitrij didn’t turn around. Next she spoke in English.

“I, the Wiseman, come in warning. If you go there, you will die.”

Dmitrij turned around, still expressionless, scanning Miyoshi’s eyes.

“You don’t have high enough stats. You’ll be dead before you realize what’s happened. The devil that lurks there is entirely out of your league.”

Uh, this actually did sound like she was trying to rile him up. His face remained expressionless—a rippleless pool of water.

Hold on, don’t tell me he just doesn’t understand English!

"Have you been there?" he asked.

Thank goodness.

Miyoshi didn't answer—just shrugged her shoulders enigmatically.

"I've warned you. That's all. I just don't want to see you throw your life away."

Dmitrij didn't take his eyes off Miyoshi as we walked to the staircase down to the next floor.



Yoyogi Dungeon, Nineteenth Floor

“Wow! That was just like a movie.” Mishiro was all ajitter as we headed down the stairs. “Plus Dmitrij was, how should I say it, a little more reserved than Simon, but just as good-looking, and you know...”

I’d gotten this sense before, when we’d first met up again and she’d run into Simon at the boot camp, but was Mishiro kind of...fickle? Plus, the way she was talking, it probably wouldn’t be long before she started telling us all about her Dmitrij-Simon fanfic. *Note to self: Never let her meet Asha or Miyoshi’s friends.*

“Whoa!” Partway down the stairs, Rokujo let out a gasp. The nineteenth floor was blanketed white with snow—a sharp contrast to the rugged, barren mountains which had made up the floor above.

“So, ‘the cold earth slept below,’” Miyoshi intoned.

Shelley?!

And sleeping nothing. It was morning, and here we were getting ready to shiver to the bone.

We slipped past the JSDF encampment and started along the main route.

Some zigzagging later...

Rokujo cocked her head.

“This route’s a bit winding, isn’t it?”

It seemed like it should have been a straight shot to the next staircase—the floor was just one big snowfield, so it looked like we should have been able to go anywhere. However, there was a reason for our winding. The nineteenth and twentieth floors were divided into areas where it snowed and areas where it didn’t, but the depth of the snow in each area was set.

“If you make a straight shot, there’s an area where the snow gets 2.8 meters deep,” Miyoshi explained.

“We wouldn’t be able to get through those parts without snowshoes,” I further explained.

There were techniques for walking atop snow without sinking in that didn't require snowshoes or other equipment, but they only got you so far.

"That's not it, Kei. It's 2.8 meters of *powder*. That'd be dangerous even with snowshoes."

Miyoshi confirmed our next waypoint. The path to the stairs down to the twentieth floor involved following certain trail markers to stay in areas with shallow snow. Well, I say trail markers, but they were really just mounds of snow.

"It sure seems like the markers would get buried under more snow though," Miyoshi added with concern.

We knew they wouldn't be, of course, but coming down here and seeing the environment in person, it was hard to remain calm.

Since the depth of the snow in any given region apparently never changed, the falling snow was just for show—an entirely cosmetic effect. Even though it landed on and stuck to our heads and shoulders. How did that work? Who was it for?

"The dungeons work in mysterious ways," Miyoshi commented while checking the map. "But the snowfall is one of its weirder conventions"

"Weird or not," I responded, "let's just stay on the path."

Snowshoes and other cold-weather gear were cumbersome, which discouraged most parties from wanting to bring them, especially for only two floors this far down. That meant there were still many areas off the main route not properly explored and documented. It was best not to take any chances. Deeper areas promised not only tough going, but also the risk of falling in. Though no one had ever observed anything resembling man-made traps in the dungeons, that didn't mean there weren't "natural" hazards that could have been just as dangerous.

Rokujo pointed to some small mounds of snow rising from the ground in a small clearing in the trees up ahead.

"What are those?"

“Monsters,” Mishiro, who had apparently done preparatory research, answered.

These mounds were different from the ones used as waypoints, which had flat sides, like small pyramids. In contrast, these new mounds appeared perfectly round.

“Monsters?” Rokujo asked. “Those?”

“Snow almirajes. When not provoked, they lurk under the snow like that. But get close, and...”

Garm was poking his nose around one of the mounds, sniffing its edges. Suddenly something that looked like a rabbit, about eighteen centimeters in length, but with a single horn like a unicorn’s on its head, jumped forth.

“That happens,” Mishiro concluded.

“Bwowl!”

Garm nimbly dodged the incoming leporine’s horn, sweeping around and grabbing the almiraj by the scruff of its neck instead.

Yeah, the Usturas are definitely stronger than the average hellhound.

About the only monsters that appeared along the main route through the snow floors were snow almirajes. Thankfully we didn’t have to worry about running into the yetis—humanoid monsters also known as abominable snowmen—as long as we stayed outside of the areas with heavy snowfall. They apparently preferred those areas because the snow in the air obscured visibility and made ambushes easier.

And so we passed without incident through the snowy floors.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twentieth Floor

“All right, mighty Maitreya maidens,” I called shortly before the staircase to the twenty-first floor.

If we went any farther, we’d encounter the JSDF encampment, and that didn’t serve us, given what we were about to do.

“Yoshimura?” Mishiro asked, confused.

“Starting on the next floor, your real mission begins.”

“Wasn’t the mission to have us practice using our new skills and have Rokujo check out some Mining drops?”

“Initially, yes. The situation has changed.”

“It has?”

I poured some warm drinks out of a vial that looked like it was used for magic potions and passed them around the team. As they sipped them, warming themselves, I explained my theory about how Mining drops depended on the user’s thought process on first activation.

“Really?” Rokujo asked, shivering a bit.

“Right now that’s our best hypothesis. See, the way it works is—”

“Yahoo! Then it’s like an all-you-can-think-of mineral buffet!” she shouted, not waiting for me to finish. She started bouncing up and down on the snow with Cú like two rabbits. Or two snow almirajes.

“I... I mean, yeah, but that gives us the important job of setting the drops on each— Hey, are you listening?!”

“Kei, do you get the sense we might have chosen the wrong person for the mission?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah, but the way she gets excited reminds me of a certain someone.” I shot Miyoshi a look.

“Whaaat?!”

While Rokujo and Cú continued twirling through the snow, I feigned removing two cases from my backpack. Mishiro’s face went white—or, even whiter, given the temperature.

“Yep,” I responded to the question that hadn’t been asked. “For each of you.”

“Wh-What do you...?”

“These are what you need to make mineral drops happen.”

“M-Mining orbs? But when did you... Ah!” Upon touching the orb that I’d passed to her and confirming its orb count, Mishiro let out a shout. “What is this count?!”

From the orb count, it would have had to have just dropped moments prior. A freshly collected skill orb.

“The main role of the mighty Maitreya, at least in the near future, is going to be Mining.”

“Whaaat? So we’re going to be spending all that time exploring lower than the twentieth floor?” Mishiro seemed concerned. Despite having been prepared to cross the tenth floor when I’d first met her, she’d spent her days pre-D-Powers with a party mostly confined to Yoyogi’s single-digit levels. It was only natural to be worried. Conversely, Rokujo, who had never gone past the second, seemed relatively carefree.

“Don’t worry. We know multiple days of camp life can be rough, so we’ve prepared a slightly more comfortable base,” Miyoshi added cryptically.

Right, that. A far cry from the makeshift Dolly, this time we’d prepared the real deal—Igloo 1, our first “DP House.”

I’d pointed out to Miyoshi that the name might not have the *beeeest* connotations in English, but Miyoshi had insisted, and even come up with a backronym to justify it that didn’t strictly refer to our party: “Dungeon Portable House.” I wasn’t sure what it stood for was the problem, though...

The unit was our magnum opus of dungeon-helper equipment, costing 255 million yen per unit. It was currently in Miyoshi’s Storage. We’d been concerned about the weight, but if Storage had a limit on that front, we hadn’t found it yet.

“Yay! I’m getting used to rejecting my humanity!” Rokujo happily shouted, holding Mining aloft.

“I can’t say I feel the same way.” Mishiro held hers up with a slightly nervous look.

Once they’d successfully used their orbs, I opened up two more cases.

“More orbs?!” Mishiro looked ready to faint.

“I know it’s a lot, but even after all your training, we’re still a little worried about your combat durability. Your VIT stats are still pretty average.”

That was where Physical Resistance could even the odds.

“Yoshimura, you don’t actually have a skill that lets you make other skill orbs, do you?” Mishiro squinted at me.

“Come on. If I had a convenient skill like that, I’d use it for something more interesting than Mining and resistance buffs.”

“Maybe it has some kind of limit...”

Rokujo had already taken her orb and was holding it over her head, ignoring Mishiro’s surprisingly on-point mumbling.

And so, newly Mining-ready and with thicker skin than before, we traipsed down to the wetlands of the twenty-first floor.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-First Floor

The twenty-first floor was wetlands, but it wasn’t completely covered in water. The staircase let out onto a steep incline with sparse ground cover and some ferns. We moved away from the JSDF encampment, following a tract of relatively clear ground and avoiding monster encounters.

“The main monsters of the twenty-first floor wetland areas are rhabdophis pythons, water leapers, and witch needles,” Miyoshi announced to the group.

According to Miyoshi, rhabdophis pythons were like giant water snakes, reaching lengths of up to five meters. Water leapers were giant toads, but with winglike fins instead of legs, and sharp tails. More like small dragons with toad faces than proper toads, really.

“So that’s frogs and snakes. What are the witch needles?” I asked.

“Giant dragonflies. About fifty centimeters across.”

“Dragonflies?”

“Razor-sharp wings, and mandibles reportedly strong enough to snap off

human fingers.”

“Gweh!”

Rokujo apparently hadn’t even heard us. Ever since we’d arrived on the floor, she’d been mumbling to herself.

“What do I do? What do I do? Aaargh, what am I supposed to do?! Coronum? But then I want to complete my quartz series too. Maybe a chrysoberyl, or a garnet... Ah, I can’t decide!”

She was walking in circles with her hands clasped to her head.

*That was why we’d been avoiding monsters on this floor. Who would have thought we’d be here, with our goal right before us, and have our main player taken out of commission because she *couldn’t decide what drop to choose?**

“Kei, this is bad,” Miyoshi whispered.

She didn’t have to tell me that. We had Life Detection to catch incoming monsters, but we didn’t know the surrounding terrain. In our quest to avoid encounters, we’d wound up in a dead end with a lot of standing water and only one small path out. And it just so happened that at this particular moment, a monster blip was barreling toward us from down that very escape path. From the size of the reading, it was probably a python.

In front of us were deep waters, behind us the fast-approaching maws of a giant snake. There was no avoiding a fight.

“Uh, Rokujo? If you can hear me, you’d better get ready for that drop.”

“Ah, wait. Wait, wait, wait! Yes! Of course!”

“You decided?”

“Diamonds are pure substances too! Ah, there’s so much to think about! I can’t forget amorphous substances either! There are opals and...”

She hadn’t decided anything! Just added more candidates!

“H-Hey, male. You’d better think of something!” Anubis rasped behind me, sounding unusually perturbed at the prospect of not being able to simply go for the kill.

“I know!”

Figuring we should at least be ready to guard when the blow came, Miyoshi and I both extracted polycarbonate shields from Storage and Vault respectively. Seeing us pull such large shields seemingly out of thin air, Mishiro’s eyes widened, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that.

“Graooh!”

The python’s infrared senses seemed to have caught us. It was barreling through the water, making a beeline toward our group.

“Damn! Master!” Anubis shouted.

Several dark tendrils spiraled up from the ground around him, forming what I supposed would be a final wall of defense.

At least one of the Usturas, however, could no longer hold on. Lailaps leaped forward, closing his jaws around the snake, and—

“Hey! Lailaps!”

—ignoring Anubis’s shouting, bit down, crushing the rhabdophis python’s jaw.

“Uuugh.” We let out a collective groan of frustration. As we did, a gleaming object dropped to the soggy ground by the still-stunned Rokujo’s feet.

“A crystal cluster...” She picked it up and examined it with curiosity, holding it aloft in her palm. “It’s like a big Mag Mell.” She gazed at it with affection.

“Mag Mell?”

“When I was little my father took me to a mineral fair. I got lost and an old man sold me a crystal cluster for five hundred yen. It was the first gemstone I ever got.”

She had apparently named the stone after the island paradise of Celtic mythology.

“It looked like a magical island sitting there in its micromount base,” she explained. “We went everywhere together!”

“Kei, you don’t think that her naturally high LUC might have something to do with...”

“Don’t tell me you’ve started believing in power crystals!”

Even after all we’d been through, I couldn’t accept the notion of luck-influencing power flowing through silicone dioxide clusters.

“Well then, do you think you can explain a concept as vague as ‘luck’ scientifically?”

“Nope.”

But that was because luck depended on perspective. All there was to actual events was happenstance and coincidence. The same event interpreted different ways by different people could be read as the worst luck or the best. Things happened, and people interpreted the results as good or bad luck based on their desired outcomes. That was all.

That was how the world was *supposed* to be, but...

“There is that whole LUC dungeon stat,” I admitted.

The LUC stat affected dungeon drop rates, but I figured it was merely a component of the drop-rate formula specific to dungeons—not something that exerted any sort of influence over daily life. Even if you beat all odds and managed to win a lottery, or got struck by lightning, it would be hard to put it down as anything other than happenstance. There would certainly be no way to pin it on a LUC stat.

Rokujo tucked the crystal she’d picked up into her backpack and gave us an apologetic grimace, shoulders slumping.

“Sorry. Here you were counting on me, and this crystal isn’t worth very much.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, trying to reassure her. If Miyoshi or I had set the drop for the floor, we’d probably just have wound up with more iron. Our latest hypothesis suggested dungeon iron might actually have more value than we initially assumed, but we still couldn’t afford to set *every* floor to it.

The grass rustled behind us. Since the floor’s drops had already been set to crystals, there was no need for the rest of the team to hold back anymore. Miyoshi fired a 2.5-centimeter iron ball at the rustling patch. A leaper leaped

out from the weeds, meeting the iron ball in midair; the strike gouged off a chunk of its flesh. The leaper shrieked, flipping over and falling backward.

Sure enough, the monsters on the twenty-first floor were starting to get more resistant to physical attacks.

As the leaper fell, a carbon-steel-headed arrow flew through the air, piercing it through its center. The frog monster dispersed into black light. I turned around to see Mishiro with bow raised. *Nice follow-through.*

Unlike Saito—who was a natural, to put it nicely, and a rank amateur, to put it bluntly—Mishiro had prior experience as an archer. This far down, you really saw the difference rear its head.

A small sparkling object tumbled to the ground near her feet. She picked it up and looked at it with surprise.

“Is this a crystal too?”

It was smaller than one centimeter across, with an octahedral in shape. Crystals more commonly formed in hexagonal prisms. Rokujo looked at it and gasped.

“What?! Is that a sawable?!”

“Sawable?”

“Rough diamonds in octahedral shapes are called sawables.”

“Diamonds?!?”

Miyoshi and I stole glances at one another. Wasn’t this floor supposed to drop crystals?! But wait. Rokujo had been racking her brain over what to spawn, not deciding until the last second. *Don’t tell me...*

I found an approaching witch needle with Life Detection and tossed a water lance in its direction. The object that dropped by my feet displayed as...

““Rough Gemstone’?!?”

Whenever you touched a dungeon item, its name would display in your vision. So this was why Mishiro had had to ask if what she’d picked up was a crystal. She couldn’t tell from the name. It had just displayed “Rough

Gemstone.”

Noting my flabbergasted expression, Rokujo trotted over, peering with interest at the small stone I was holding.

“Purple-blue pleochroic... Looks brittle... Could be...raw tanzanite?”

Rokujo had been unable to narrow down her choices before the first drop occurred. She only got as far as the broad category of “rough gemstones.” But then—

“Wasn’t only one type of mineral supposed to drop per floor? Is this even allowed?!”

“Allowed, shmowed, it’s happening isn’t it?” Miyoshi responded. “I guess ‘rough gemstone’ counts as a single type of drop.”

“So could we set a floor’s drops to something as vague as ‘metal’?”

“If we had someone who loved all metals as much as Komugi loves gems.”

“Never mind,” I responded immediately. “That’s impossible.”

Besides, even if we could find someone to do it, a mine where you couldn’t guarantee what you’d get wasn’t very valuable as a mine at all. The more possibilities for drops there were, the less consistently profitable farming on the floor would be. After all, you couldn’t guarantee you’d get the drop you wanted, and professional dungeon miners wouldn’t be interested in playing loot-box games.

Rokujo, who had been down in the dumps just a minute ago, was now siccing the Usturas upon one monster after the next, wandering around oblivious to the carnage, merrily picking up each new glittering gem that fell. She turned a rhomboid pink gem around in the air, gazing at it lovingly.

“This floor...is...the best!”

To Rokujo, this must have been heaven.

“Her drop rate’s pretty high. A little over eighty percent from my rough observation.”

“With 50 LUC, she’d have a nearly one hundred percent drop rate.”

“It may take a bit more than that, but that’s the gist.”

Miyoshi’s mineral drop rate was around one in three. Earlier we’d calculated the item drop rate to run on a formula of “BDR + (LUC÷80),” with “BDR” standing for “base drop rate.” We currently understood the BDR value to be around 0.25⁽²⁴⁾.

Rough gemstones weighed more than their cut and polished counterparts, but still far less than metals. Provided you could defeat monsters fast enough, you could make quite a bit of dough now from grinding here on floor twenty-one.

Of course, you couldn’t guarantee you’d get the most valuable drops, and there was a pretty big value variance between the most and least valuable gems.

“It may not be much as a mine, but it should make for an entertaining afternoon,” I decided.

The issue was that few people would even be able to brave their way down to the twenty-first floor of a dungeon just for a fun afternoon. Fewer still would be interested in actually doing so. Even so, it might increase some people’s motivation to make it down this far. It did seem fun after a—

A green gem suddenly dropped by Miyoshi’s feet. The Arthurs were having their fun too.

“Is that an emerald?”

Without any specialized knowledge, I just assumed any green gemstone was an emerald.

Rokujo heard me and came running over to check.

“It’s the same as an emerald in the sense that it gets its green color from chromium and vanadium, but this is tsavorite, a green garnet.”

So there are a lot of different green gems after all.

“Rough emeralds have a bit of a blue hue to them, so you can tell them apart by color alone, but garnets are also singly refractive whereas emeralds are double refractive, so that’s the better test. Also, tsavorite is sparkly. Ah! Check

it out. This one's cute."

"Cute? Does that mean it's worth more?"

"Monetarily, not at all. Non-demantoid⁽²⁵⁾ garnets are pretty easy to get your hands on. But look at the right side."

She handed me a loupe. Clumsily, I brought it up to my eye and took a look at the garnet's right side.

"Garnets tend to have a lot of inclusions. Sometimes they have ones that look like faces. See? Cute!"

Just as she'd said, there on the side of the stone were a set of inclusions that formed an almost face-like pattern. It looked kind of like Miffy the rabbit. According to Rokujo, finding little face-like patterns in natural stones like this was a great source of fun. Afterward, whether to cut the faces out or use them in finished pieces was up to each cutter and designer.

All the diamonds I'd made drop at Yokohama were basically ideal cuts. The metal ingots we'd found had been uniform too. But Rokujo's drops each had their own imperfections. This floor might have turned out just as she'd wanted after all.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Twenty-Second Floor

The twenty-first and twenty-second floors were both wetlands, but the twenty-third floor was a jungle area. Perhaps anticipating that transition, the twenty-second floor was a bit more heavily forested than the one from which we'd just come.

Rokujo continued to show off her skills.

"You can never doubt the power of imagination, huh?" Miyoshi commented, awestruck.

"I'll say," I responded, picking up an ingot that had just dropped.

"Platinum," Miyoshi announced.

We'd received a lecture from Rokujo a bit ago about how silver shone slightly

whiter, as a result of reflectivity, while platinum looked more dull. That said, it was still beyond either of us to distinguish between different metals in the platinum group by appearance alone. Miyoshi's Appraisal was putting in work.

Why couldn't we tell the metals apart? Even the vanadium drop had done us the favor of displaying "vanadium."

Yep, just like "Rough Gemstones" a floor up, Rokujo had managed to set the drop for the floor to "Noble Metals."

Over the course of an hour, we'd gotten drops including: silver, bronze, platinum, palladium, rhodium, ruthenium, and iridium.

Incidentally, despite its efficacy here on the twenty-second floor, Appraisal had been stymied by many of the rough gemstones the floor up. Since they weren't all pure, but rather a mix of different minerals, in the worst cases the only description Appraisal managed to offer was "Stone."

"This is the first time I've ever seen rhodium or ruthenium ingots," Miyoshi commented.

"Though we've seen them in computer hard disks."

Ruthenium was used to make hard disks—specifically hard disk platters—due to its magnetic properties.

"Seems like it must be dungeon policy to not drop gold, huh?" Miyoshi observed.

"Think it's saving all the gold for the fiftieth floor? No cheating to get it early."

"That's my guess."

"I get that, but weren't there supposed to be six metals in the platinum group?"

We'd only seen five drop up until now.

"We're missing osmium," Miyoshi answered. "That one probably isn't dropping due to the Komugi factor."

"What do you mean?"

"It isn't used in jewelry."

“Ah.” Now I got it. “But if this keeps going well, we can probably keep setting up the dungeons with convenient groupings like this.”

“Though that’s only thanks to our particular user.”

Projects depending on the talent of only one person were destined to fall apart. What was needed for consistency would be some sort of manual, allowing anyone to reliably set drops the way Rokujo did.

“What other metals is Japan in need of?” I asked.

“The Japan Oil, Gas, and Metals National Corporation stockpiles vanadium, chromium, manganese, cobalt, nickel, molybdenum, and tungsten,” Miyoshi answered, referring to the independent government organization tasked with securing stable supplies of important minerals and energy resources.

“Those don’t seem easy to conceptualize as a group.”

All of them were in high demand, but that didn’t mean there was an easy shared category. I doubted anyone was enough of a dungeon whisperer to have it accept “metals I need” as a type of drop *and* have the resulting grouping contain all the right metals. Even if there were a person who could pull that off, that wouldn’t be any better than our current system of relying on Rokujo.

“Shoot. No matter how high the demand is, I don’t think that alone will work as a grouping criteria. Our best bet is probably—”

“Lanthanides?”

Also known as rare earth metals.

“How are we supposed to imagine a group of fifteen different elements? What do I picture for lanthanides?”

Lanthanides were, as the name implied, a cluster of elements demonstrating similar properties to lanthanum. Not that it was easy for the average person to imagine lanthanum.

“What is lanthanum used in?” I asked.

“Priuses?”

“The car?”

Many Priuses apparently used nickel-hydride batteries. Lanthanum was used as an anode material in them.

“Okay, but I don’t think imagining a Prius is going to help.”

At least for neodymium I could picture a magnet. Or, no. Actually picturing a magnet would probably just get me iron too.

“Hm.” Miyoshi thought for a moment. “Lanthanides do have the property of electrons being continuously added to the fourth orbital as you move across the elemental sequence...”

Fourth orbital?

“Hold on, Miyoshi.”

“What? Get an idea, Kei?”

“Why don’t we try picturing the elements—like, their mass and atomic numbers?”

“Huh?”

“The important thing in determining drops is clearly communicating the mineral that you want, right?”

“Right...”

“Up until now, Demiurge or whatever seems to have somehow been able to read whatever mineral is closest to our consciousness at the moment we set a drop. But the less clear the image, the more there’s probably something like...static, or interference involved.”

“I...see.”

“So the best way to clearly communicate information is to leave nothing up to ambiguity, but that’s hard, just thinking of minerals in the abstract or by example. In that case, rather than picturing something vague, we should try for something anyone can manage—the most unambiguous way of describing what mineral we want.”

“And you’re saying that’s the mass and atomic number?”

“Yeah. No ambiguity at all.”

Our sole goal was information transfer. This had to be clearer than straining to imagine examples of minerals. Even the Arecibo message [\(26\)](#) that had transmitted information about the human race into space had used atomic numbers to convey information about human DNA. Atomic numbers were probably as close to a universal language as there was.

“Look, we’re never going to just ‘imagine’ lanthanum no matter how hard we try. But we can focus on the concept of an element with fifty-seven protons.”

“I have to admit, it’s a novel idea to suggest that the dungeons could understand atomic numbers and mass... But it’s worth a try, and would definitely be more replicable than just trying to imagine elements, if it works.”

“Right?”

“So maybe if we want all lanthanides, we can just focus on a grouping of ‘elements with fifty-seven to seventy-one protons.’ Can’t hurt to try. Just in case.”

If this worked, we might have just arrived at the dawn of a new area of active communication with the dungeons.

“Um, Yoshimura?”

“Hm?”

As we neared the staircase down to the twenty-third floor, Rokujo turned around to address me. Her backpack, slung across her belly, was nearly full to the brim with stones.

“I was thinking about calling it here, for this trip.”

“Why?”

Just because her backpack’s full?

“I feel like I’m focused too much on jewelry.”

Rokujo’s drops on the twenty-first floor had been “rough gemstones,” followed by “noble metals,” on the twenty-second. That was no guarantee what would happen on the twenty-third, but certainly, the groupings on the first two floors had shown a certain inclination.

“And I’m worried about how the Usturas will do if we go any farther.”

Dense, junglelike forests continued from the twenty-third floor to the twenty-fifth. Due to the species of monsters appearing on them, they’d collectively received the nickname “Yoyogi Jurassic Park.” Think velociraptors and you’d have the gist.

Plus, starting on the twenty-fourth floor, dangerous monsters like trolls began to appear. A small number of lesser trolls, weaker variants of the later monster, wandered the twenty-second floor. The Usturas had already had a tough time with them even attacking in groups of two, due to each lesser troll’s regeneration. It would take even more time to take down stronger variants with more potent regenerative abilities, and if another monster joined the melee while they were preoccupied with the troll, the situation could really get out of hand.

Anubis, that pompous pup, would never admit he was worried, so it was up to us to look out for the Usturas. If Rokujo wanted to withdraw, he’d acquiesce. He cared more about his master’s safety than his pride.

“Understood. Then let’s head back. How was your first time actually getting to use Mining?”

“Like a dream!” Rokujo’s eyes sparkled. “All of those perfect stones, dropping one after another! Heavenly!”

“Then you’re satisfied with your experience with our company’s camp?”

“Of course!”

With that response, Rokujo was officially a boot camp graduate. It had taken more work than I’d expected, but had been pretty fun too.

Sensing that we’d reached an ending, Mishiro leaned in, seeming worried.

“So does that mean this is the end of Maitreya?” she asked. “Is this it?”

“What? Eri, are you leaving?” Rokujo cocked her head.

“No, but I figured you were, Komugi.”

“Me? But I’m not going anywhere,” Rokujo answered as if that were the most obvious thing in the world. “I may be done with boot camp, but I understand

how much went into my development. Probably billions of yen. I can't pay that back right away."

"Um, actually that's—" I started to say, but Miyoshi tugged insistently at my sleeve.

"Plus, exploring with you has been just as fun as my job! Let's go visit those lower floors after deciding what kind of metals would be best."

Well, as long as they were motivated, that was fine. Our boot camp enrollees actually had a contracted obligation to help us out with Yoyogi exploration for a year, but I decided it didn't need mentioning in this case.

"On that note, I'll need to train myself and the Usturas some more. Eri, I understand if you don't want to put in all that extra time, but..."

"I want to! I don't mind in the least!" Mishiro grasped Rokujo's hands. "Ah, this is great! I was really starting to wonder what I was going to do without you."

They looked at each other and grinned. Perfect for a party whose name meant "friendship."

"We'll have to get another explorer contract ready," Miyoshi observed.

"Seems like it," I agreed.

Now the only issue was the base of operations. We couldn't go along with them every time, after all. So I posed a question to Mishiro, who would be making the trip down here again not too far in the future.

"Judging from the pace of this trip, starting from the surface, how far down do you think you could make it in a day?"

"Let's see... Judging from the time it took to get to the eighteenth floor, plus to cross the snowy floors... If we focused solely on travel and didn't stop to fight, we could probably get down to the twenty-first floor by evening."

It took most explorers an overnight stay just to get past the tenth floor. But then, Simon and his team had made it down to the eighteenth floor in nine hours. Comparing Maitreya's current stats to those of Team Simon's when they'd first entered our bootcamp, Mishiro and Rokujo weren't so far off. The

pace she was describing should be possible.

“Then we’ll put our base on the twenty-first floor,” I proclaimed.

“Really? On the twenty-first?” Rokujo asked excitedly. “Then every day off can be a gem-hunting holiday!”

Uh, you’ll probably still need to wait for a three-day weekend...

“Kei, the twenty-first floor is mostly marshland,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Yeah, but there are also lakes and ponds. And those have banks, which means land; there ought to be a good spot along some shoreline that we can use.”

There’d only been preliminary exploration conducted of floors past the twenty-first—the maps were still incomplete. The first team to visit the twenty-first floor had ended up having to turn back after barely exploring it. The JSDF’s later expeditions had focused simply on passing through as quickly as possible to reach even lower floors, in part because they had wanted Team I to test their Water Magic against new foes on the deeper levels. Ordinarily, follow-up teams would have surveyed the twenty-first floor more thoroughly, but before they could do that, we’d dropped our reveal of Mining, which diverted most spare personnel to the eighteenth floor instead. And after that came the crisis at Yokohama, followed by the discovery of the safe zone. Charting the twenty-first floor simply wasn’t a high priority under the circumstances.

So we actually had a pretty good shot at snagging some prime beachside real estate there.

“Uh, h-hold on.” Mishiro spoke up, standing next to Rokujo, who was all grins. “What do you mean ‘base’?”

“A place to stay while you’re exploring.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“Miyoshi.”

“The cat’s out of the bag. Behold. Feast your eyes! For the first time anywhere in Japan...introducing the Igloo 1!”

“Igloo 1?” Mishiro and Rokujo parroted together.

Mishiro furrowed her brows. Rokujo cocked her head. Garm sat in front of them and let out a small, inquisitive bark.

“Ruff?”

Suddenly a roofed, cylindrical silo appeared in front of them a few centimeters off the ground and dropped with a loud thud.

“Wh-Whaaa?”

Mishiro looked ready to faint. Behind her, Glas playfully chased after a dragonfly.



Yoyogi, Twenty-First Floor

We returned to the twenty-first floor, heading toward an uncharted area.

“Wow. It’s like Peak District National Park.” Rokujo tromped along happily a bit ahead of the rest of the group, Cú prancing by her side. She stared up at the canopy of tree branches overhead. “It’s been a long time since I went there.”

Peak District, the first national park established in England, was a few hours from London by car and a popular tourist destination. Her Gem-A (Gemological Association of Great Britain) graduation ceremony had been conducted in London. While in Britain, she’d taken the time to steal away and visit the park.

“Mishiro, how are you holding up?” I asked our contracted explorer. She was lagging behind, grumbling.

“I *thought* it was strange when you pulled shields out of thin air like that. I knew you guys were ridiculous, but this...!” She continued mumbling under her breath.

“Looks like the Igloo was a bit of a shock,” I whispered to Miyoshi as we walked.

Mishiro looked up and glared.

“‘A bit’? Do you two even have any concept of normalcy anymore?”

“Of course. Being normal is really important to us.”

“Being ‘*normal*’ isn’t something ordinary people need to think about!”

Touché.

“Guys!”

Rokujo and Cú had arrived at the top of a nearby hill. By the time we caught up, she was staring down into a basin. The basin was dotted with the last thing we had ever expected to see.

“Oranges?”

A grove of orange trees extended from the bottom of the hill to the edge of a

lake. This place was about a kilometer off the beaten path on the twenty-first floor of Yoyogi, apparently undiscovered until now. Splotches of light filtered through the trees and danced along the fruits' rinds, illuminating them like radiant crystals. The lake itself reflected its verdant surroundings, mirrorlike and tranquil.

"I've never heard about edible fruits growing in a dungeon before." Miyoshi plucked one of the sun-hued orbs from a tree branch. We both eyed the branch warily. Sure enough, the orange didn't instantly respawn. "Doesn't this seem like a good opportunity to gather some initial data for our infinity farm?"

"If only this place were higher up—ideally, somewhere above floor ten."

The twenty-first floor was a *little* far to go just to run experiments.

Miyoshi plucked more fruit, marking each spot she'd plucked from with a Magic Marker or ribbon. The markers themselves wouldn't last, but for now, they'd flag any respawns for us.

She came trundling over with an armful of the oranges. Or, no, more specifically, they actually looked like—

"Setokas?" I asked, naming a Japanese designer hybrid.

"You think so too?"

Miyoshi peeled and cut one, passing me half. Normally I'd have hesitated more before putting a strange dungeon-grown substance in my mouth, but its Appraisal result had declared it an "Orange" and tagged it as "edible."

A balance of tangy citrus and sweetness spread across my tongue. Sure enough...

"A Setoka."

What was a modern Japanese hybrid doing in a fantasy-based dungeon?

The Setoka combined the Murcott tangor and the Kiyomi tangor, the latter of which was itself a relatively new hybrid known on the market as "Encore No. 2." Setokas had initially sold for one hundred yen a pop, but by the following year had risen to three hundred or even slightly over five hundred yen. The fact that

they continued to sell was proof of just how rapturously delicious they were—though maybe it was a bit much to call them the Kobe beef of oranges.

“Smells good.” Miyoshi watched me chew my first bite.

“They say the fragrance comes from the King tangor, which is also part of the Setoka’s parent fruit, Encore No. 2. Though I guess I’ve never had a King tangor, so I wouldn’t know.”

“I’ve never even seen one for sale. Are they any different from Kara mandarins?”

“One of the King tangor’s seed parents is a Satsuma mandarin, so I’d think they’d be a little different, but also similar? But anyway, hey, now it’s open season on Setokas.” I gestured around the grove.

“Looks like it takes them a little time to respawn, but with Arthurs patrolling to keep monsters at bay, you could have a year-round harvest.”

“Let’s just store some for now,” I suggested. “We can run tests on them later.”

Miyoshi made a circle with her arms around her head, signaling “okay,” and extracted some cooking scissors from Storage. She snipped more fruit from lower branches. Looking up, we saw the stems she’d picked from a moment ago were already weighed down by new oranges. It seemed like respawning only took around a minute or so. I popped another bite of Setoka into my mouth.

“It’d be kind of spooky if we gave these to someone who preferred Valencia oranges, and they said they looked like Valencias, huh?”

“What do you mean?” Miyoshi asked.

“I mean they’re probably made up of D-Factors. And the Appraisal name was just ‘Orange.’”

Seeming to catch my drift, Miyoshi stopped mid-snip and turned around, eyebrows pointed upward in concern.

“So I’m saying, what if the dungeons are playing on our own tastes, which it can glean from our memories, to try to encourage us to increase our intake of D-Factors? Kind of a scary thought, is all I’m saying.” Reading your own

memories was frightening after all. What if we wound up with a *Matrix* scenario with the dungeons controlling all our senses?

“Kei, please stop saying things like that just before we try to launch a dungeon-based food initiative.” Miyoshi glared, then turned back to her work. “Besides,” she said, “wouldn’t it fit the dungeon’s MO better to set the orange type based on the first person who picked them?”

“Like the Mining drops?”

“The power of imagination. Maybe even the surroundings and scenery are determined by the first person to come across each new area.”

“So you mean this lake and these trees might have appeared because Rokujo was thinking about Peak District?”

“Yoyogi *does* have a lot of different environments for a dungeon.”

“So?”

“It also has a lot of different explorers.”

That tracked. Except—

“Okay, granted that makes sense for areas like Batian Peak, but who would have come up with the tenth floor?”

The tenth floor was an endlessly sprawling Western-style graveyard. Who was harboring *that* mental image?

“Maybe someone who had just read *Pet Sematary* [\(27\)](#)?”

“Like they were hoping the dungeon could bring back a dead relative?” I asked.

“Unfortunately the dungeon’s floors are too hard to bury anything.”

“Is the tenth floor fully mapped?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because if it isn’t,” I answered, “and there’s a secret Mi’kmaq burial site somewhere...”

“Right. Hopefully the first person to reach the tenth floor wasn’t thinking the

exact same thing we are.”

“You’re not exactly putting me at ease.” Note to self: Next time you’re on the tenth floor, watch out for stray zombie dogs and cats.

We found a good, clear plot of dry land around twenty square meters up near the top of the hill. It came with a breathtaking view of the lake and the orange trees down below.

“Shame the area’s monster-infested. I’d almost want to go swimming.” Mishiro seemed to have recovered from her earlier shock.

“I’m pretty sure you’d just be volunteering yourself to water leapers,” I responded.

“And it’s such a pretty lake. Almost makes you imagine it would have pike or trout or—”

The surface of the water rippled, as if something had just darted in and out.

“Was that something...rising?” Mishiro blinked.

“Rising” was what fish did when they swam to the surface of the water to feed or drink, occasionally jumping out of it. It was almost evening—around the time a normal lake would be attracting insects to its surface. However—

The Arthurs ate for pleasure, but it wasn’t necessary. Other monsters in the dungeon hadn’t been observed to eat food at all. And yet...rising? Had we just imagined a kind of dungeon ecosystem into being?

Were there actually fish-filled lakes and chirping crickets on dungeon floors the world over, and we simply didn’t know?

I turned to Rokujo. “What were you thinking about as you crested that hill?”

“Me? Well, that this place looked kind of like Hope Valley in Peak District, or a Scottish loch. That also brought to mind Vitaly Bianki’s children’s books on sea creatures...”

I looked at Miyoshi.

“Thoughts?”

Ordinary explorers wouldn’t be thinking about natural wildlife or scenery.

They'd be focused on what kinds of monsters might appear. Anything else wouldn't cross their mind until safety was secured. The kinds of thoughts on Rokujo's mind were a luxury reserved for those traveling with a paw patrol.

"If our theory is correct, there may be fish in that lake. Northern European ones."

Vitaly Bianki might have sounded like the name of some Italian lady, but he was actually a Russian man. He'd been born in St. Petersburg, not that far from the border with Finland. European fish would have been his forte.

"We'll have to check that out next time. I don't have a fishing pole on me."

"Who would've thought to bring one?" Miyoshi looked down at the lake. "There weren't supposed to be any fish."

Come to think of it, fish were another great resource. If there were an ocean floor, it could be open season on seafood just like it was with the oranges here.

Although—just because we'd been able to pick and keep the oranges didn't mean we'd be able to fish. Like dungeon monsters, they might simply disperse into black light when killed. There was much to investigate.

"A dungeon-based fishery... An interesting concept," Miyoshi mused.

"And a novel one."

"Maybe we should try some breeding experiments with a more convenient body of water on a higher floor; we might be able to get designer varieties. Dungeon Trout, or..."

"There is that creek on the fifth floor..."

The problem was that if newly spawned, dungeonized fish worked the same way as the saplings, they'd stop growing as soon as they got scraped by a broodmate's fin—just as the saplings we'd tested had stopped growing as soon as Miyoshi'd clipped one leaf, forever stuck repopulating at the size they were when first damaged. It would be difficult to grow them all the way to adulthood.

"You know, scratch that," I said. "I actually hope it *doesn't* work."

"What? Why?"

“Because of the safe zone. People.”

If fish eggs fertilized in the dungeon were able to dungeonize, then any people staying in the dungeon long-term...

“Ah...”

“Maaaaybe we ought to get the word out on that. Discourage anyone from getting frisky.”

“Right,” Miyoshi agreed. “International space station policy.”

“If there are enough problems with space pregnancies to warrant specific rules, we don’t need to invite dungeon ones.”

“Well, we can cross that bridge when we come to it.” Miyoshi cracked her knuckles and took Igloo 1 out of Storage.

“I’ll *never* get used to that.” Mishiro eyed the silo-shaped home.

“Kei,” Miyoshi whispered into my ear. “Be a doll and stock the fridge, will you? I can’t keep perishables in Storage.”

“Roger.” I gave her the “OK” sign with my fingers.

Slipping inside while Miyoshi explained the finer points of the lock and entry system, as well as the need to have a guard dog present to keep watch, I turned on the fridge and crammed it full of food supplies. The pantry was already stocked with bottled water and nonperishables.

Come to think of it, in a pinch, there wasn’t a Water Magic user in Maitreya.

“Ah well, what’s one more orb?”

I loaded up an additional orb case, figuring that with their current skills, they’d be able to use the Create Water technique right away. I’d leave it up to them to decide who got it.

I popped outside. Miyoshi had just passed over a tablet containing a written user’s manual. It had further instructions regarding the external monitors and portholes for firing projectiles, along with the operation of other amenities.

Amenities such as...

The Igloo 1’s circular living room was concentrically surrounded by a shower

room, a bathroom, and kitchen space, all lining the outer walls. Its exterior had been reinforced in anticipation of monster attacks, and internal monitors allowed for checking the outside from various vantage points. The second floor contained bedrooms, and above that was a station with openings for launching projectiles—similar to on Dolly, where the hatch we’d popped out of for attacks was situated right above our bunks. The hatch let out onto the roof.

Soon after, we all gathered inside the Igloo. Since the Usturas were running loose outside killing monsters, I taught Rokujo about the trick of dropping into the shadow pit every time a new item appeared. That would let her rack up a ton more experience, just like Miyoshi had done with her recent shooting spree on the tenth floor.

“Then this is it for now. You two spend the night getting used to Iggy here.”

“Just like that? You’re leaving?” Mishiro frowned.

“You’ll be coming without us next time anyway. We can’t go along every trip. Besides, based on what we saw today and yesterday, you’ll be fine.”

“If you say so...”

“Don’t worry about us! We’ll come back with more gemstones than you can count!” Rokujo held up her hands to wave goodbye, glittering gems dropping into the Igloo even as she did so—gifts from Garm and Lailaps’s current rampage.

“Then I guess that’s that...” Mishiro shrugged. “We’ll call you when we get back up to the surface.”

“Please do. Ah, and one more thing...” I pulled out the last orb case, handing it to Mishiro.

“Whaaat?!”

“Igloo 1 should have enough potable water to last you quite a while, but just in case you run low, you can handle any water shortage with this and a little trick I like to call Create Water. I’ve left some notes with instructions for the skill. You two can decide who gets to use the orb.”

“Understood.”

“Anubis?”

“Stupid male?”

As the team lead, Anubis was attached at the hip—paw?—to their master, Rokujo.

“Take care of them,” I said.

“As long as they don’t wander to a lower floor or climb to the peak of that cursed mountain, they have nothing to fear in my care.”

“Did you guys get the hang of switching?”

“Hnnrrnn...” Anubis’s flustered response came out as a low rumble. “That has proved...difficult.”

“I see. Well, in good time.”

Until they could master moving through shadows, Rokujo’s fighting force would be permanently down whichever hound she assigned to guard Igloo 1. The Arthurs had gotten the hang of it fairly easily, but maybe that had something to do with the way they were all basically clones of each other. Rokujo’s pack, having come in different shapes and sizes, might have raised the bar.

“At any rate, just keep an eye on these two for one more day.”

“I know my duty to the master, stupid male. Shoo.”

Anubis turned around and whipped his tail at me to wave me off. I politely smiled back, gave Rokujo and Mishiro one last wave, and stepped out of the Igloo with Miyoshi.

“Lanthanide experiment time?” Miyoshi asked outside.

“Think they’ll forgive us if we wind up ruining a floor’s mineral drop?”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Besides, iron has some value.”

“Only if someone buys.”

We still had a bit of time left before sunset, but night was fast approaching. We hastened our pace down to the twenty-third floor.

January 26, 2019 (Saturday)

Yoyogi Dungeon Entrance

Yoyogi Dungeon was bustling. An explorer clad in mid-level gear, who had been attempting to enter, surveyed the gaggle of reporters hanging around the dungeon's front gates.

"What's up with all these people with cameras? Some kind of event?"

"Today's that boot camp's preopening session," a smaller man, probably a member of the same party, answered without looking up as he tied the laces on his boots.

"This much coverage for a dungeon training camp?"

"After that hullabaloo with Ryoko Saito, they probably figure some celebrities will show up."

"Really?! Like who?"

"Relax. I'm just saying 'probably.'"

"I'm gonna go take a look."

The group of reporters around the gate hardly noticed the man craning his neck to peer over the crowd. They were focused on their own task.

"Yao, baby, you've got to get some footage we can use. Otherwise, what did we even come out here for? All we've been doing all day is just asking, 'Are you here for the boot camp?' and getting repetitions of the same tune: 'No.'"

The reporter named Yao turned to her cameraman, face hot with irritation. "Well, what are we supposed to do?! We don't know who's an enrollee!"

Only six trainees had been selected for the preopening camp. D-Powers' website had revealed the event's date, but the rest of the details had been given only to those selected. Similar to how journalists regularly secured some of the few public seats at major trials, various news outlets had hoped to snag a special seat at the boot camp for one of their reporters. Unfortunately, none of the applicants they'd planted had been chosen.

“If only we knew where it was, we could at least snag some footage of the room! Argh, where is the boot camp being held?!” Yao bit her lip in frustration.

A few explorers had spotted Team Simon in the dungeon two weeks prior, but the only people who knew what room the main camp was held in were the selected applicants, JDA staff, and D-Powers. All the reporters could do was hope a combination of legwork and luck would turn up a lead.

Yao’s thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of a middle-aged male colleague hashing it out with JDA staff near the gate.

“What do you mean I can’t go through without a WDA card? I’m media,” the man blustered.

“I’m sorry, sir. Dungeons are too dangerous to allow any unprepared parties to enter. No exceptions.”

The stir Saito had caused had left everyone in the entertainment and sports industries champing at the bit for a spot at the boot camp. But fortune favored the young. Those with longer careers in those industries were less likely to have ever gotten their D-Cards. That had been part of the recent fuss over dungeons. The same problem affected reporters—older, experienced veterans were much less likely to have bothered to obtain a D-Card.

Yao scoffed.

“Really. Being a reporter doesn’t get you into a foreign country without a passport, after all.”

There were those who tried to stretch their right to know a *little* too far. She shook her head internally. What kind of ignoramus would knowingly accept a dungeon-based assignment without having a WDA ca—

“Speaking of—Yao, really sorry, but I actually don’t have a card,” her cameraman confessed.

“You what?” She blinked.

They were here to cover a dungeon boot camp. Even if they didn’t know exactly where it was going to be held, it was definitely going to involve going into a *dungeon*! Even she’d rushed to obtain a WDA card before heading out to

the assignment.

“See, the request came in as a rush...” The cameraman nervously scratched his head. Normally he only covered sports, he explained.

“So how...am I...supposed get footage?!”

“I was thinking if worse comes to worst, you could...carry...the camera in?”

“What have I done to deserve this?”

If she came back without a single bit of usable footage, she might even be looking at a pay cut.

The cameraman looked around for a way out of the situation, scanning the crowd one more time.

“Hey!”

Yao turned in the direction the cameraman was looking. Not recognizing any familiar faces, she cocked her head.

“That’s Serina Takada, right?” the cameraman asked. “And Fuwa next to her? What are they doing in Yoyogi together...? A date?”

“Who?”

“Hot long-distance runners with Seiryu University track and field. A lot of eyes on them recently.”

“Hmm...”

Sure enough, what her cameraman lacked in dungeon preparation, he made up for in sports knowledge. Ordinary people wouldn’t recognize college track stars unless they were running enthusiasts themselves or knew someone on a team.

“Hold on.” The cameraman put his hand to his chin. “What’s Takada doing in Yoyogi?”

“What do you mean? Is she banned or something?”

“No. She’s supposed to be at the Osaka International tomorrow. She should already be in Kansai.”

Why would an athlete with a major marathon in Osaka still be in Tokyo the day prior?

“Hold on, you don’t think...!”

Yao tugged on the cameraman’s sleeve, leading him in the direction of the young runners.

January 28, 2019 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

A single topic dominated the morning talk shows. However, the host of the one we were watching was particularly excited. She had the talk of the town with her in the studio.

“Joining us today, fresh from setting a jaw-dropping women’s marathon world record at yesterday’s 38th Osaka International Women’s Marathon, we have Serina Takada! Serina, congratulations on the win!”

“Thank you.”

“You set a truly unbelievable time, and at only twenty-one years of age.”

“I mean, Osaka is a flat course, and it’s said to be one of the easiest marathon routes, but I guess I outdid myself!” Serina stuck out her tongue in a cutesy fashion.

The host took out a placard with three rectangular tape strips covering information underneath.

“Why don’t I introduce the recent history of the women’s marathon world record to everyone at home?”

After giving a simple explanation of the top women’s marathon times, starting from the tenth best time, for the top three, she tore the tape strips off the placard one by one, revealing the times written beneath.

“And the second best score—that is, the record up until yesterday—was two hours, fifteen minutes, twenty-five seconds! This time beat out the previous

record by over one minute and thirty seconds, and even with marathon times shrinking on the whole, it stood unchallenged for fifteen years.”

A sea of impressed “Ohs” rose up from the studio audience.

“In first place, of course, is Serina. Two hours, fourteen minutes, and eighteen seconds! Beating the previous record by over a minute!”

“Wow! That’s really impressive,” the runner remarked.

The host laughed, asking how Serina herself could be surprised.

“But I am,” Serina responded. “I hadn’t really thought about the direct comparison until now.”

“Your best up until yesterday was two hours, twenty-two minutes, and thirty seconds. You shrank it by eight minutes. I hope you’ll forgive me, but of course there have been rumors of doping...”

“Only natural,” Serina answered with poise. “But I don’t think there’s a substance around that would allow someone to beat their best time by eight minutes.”

“That would be news in and of itself. And of course you’ve been cleared by an investigation.”

The other hosts laughed.

“Now for our audiences at home, eight minutes might not sound like much of a difference, but 480 seconds spread across a 42.195-kilometer course means a difference of over one second per every hundred meters.”

Gasps filled the studio once again.

“Normally that would seem impossible. Just how did you do it?”

“Uh...maybe it’s because I lucked into getting number 38⁽²⁸⁾, the same as the woman in Naoki Urasawa’s illustration on the event flyer?”

“I’m fairly certain he chose that number because this was the thirty-eighth marathon...”

“Oh.”

The host laughed, asking Serina if she'd only just noticed.

"But really," Serina continued, "if I'd run the race just a day earlier, I probably would've only gotten in the twenty-three-minute range, or maybe twenty-two at best."

The host seemed uncharacteristically unsure how to respond. She righted herself, then asked the only question that seemed appropriate.

"What do you mean? Speaking of, Serina, I heard you weren't at the first call conducted the day before the race and didn't arrive in Osaka until later that night. You gave everyone a scare."

"That's true. I had an urgent appointment I couldn't pull away from in Tokyo. I put in an urgent request to the Athletics Federation and was very fortunate to have them allow me to arrive later. If they hadn't, I probably would have just passed on running this time."

"I bet the federation is feeling pretty fortunate too, given you broke the previous world record by this much." The studio erupted in laughter once again. "But really," the host continued, "I'm curious about this 'urgent' business. If you don't mind me prying, what could be so important that a promising young athlete like yourself would consider giving up a spot in Osaka?"

On the other side of the camera, the assistant director held up a card reading "More." The host met the AD's gaze with her own.

"Why, I hear you were spotted with Masato Fuwa. Is that true? Were the two of you on...a date?"

Masato Fuwa, age twenty-two, was another up-and-coming long-distance runner at Serina's university.

Serina laughed.

"I wouldn't miss a race for a date. And Fuwa and I aren't together in the first place. We were just there for the same business."

"Really? Then you actually were there with Fuwa?"

"Yep. We were in Tokyo for the same reason."

"And that was?"

Serina had agreed to an interview with a reporter who had recognized them at Yoyogi, but it had been under one condition—that the interview not air until Fuwa had finished his own race. A moratorium on interviews until after putting up race results had also been a condition of their being selected for our boot camp.

“Let’s wait for his results in this weekend’s Beppu-Oita Mainichi Marathon before we get into that,” Serina answered.

The Beppu-Oita Mainichi Marathon was supposed to be the gateway to success for new male runners, acting as a qualifier for the Marathon Grand Championships—which in turn served as a Tokyo Olympics qualifier—the same as the Osaka International for women.

Being rebuffed so clearly, the host had no choice but to change tactics.

“Well then, let’s all await Mr. Fuwa’s results at the Beppu-Oita marathon! Be sure to tune in again next week!” She turned back to Serina. “Incidentally, you’ve earned your ticket to the Marathon Grand Championship, an Olympic qualifier. There’s also the Doha Marathon occurring around the same time...”

“It’s only been a day. I’d like to think over my plans from this point...” Serina answered gracefully.

“Of course. Thank you so much for your time.”

“Thank you for having me!”

The show cut to a commercial, and Miyoshi turned off the TV.

“Amazing,” said Naruse, who was visiting to deliver a report. “So is she one of the...?”

“Yep,” Miyoshi responded. “One of the ones we selected to help show the results right away.”

Masato Fuwa and Serina Takada, both heralded as the saviors of Seiryu University’s track-and-field team, had met three important criteria: they were runners with a lot of eyes on them; they had both been struggling recently to improve their best times; and they were among the few major athletes who possessed over a year’s worth of meaningful dungeon-exploring experience.

With the two of them also happening to have major upcoming races, Miyoshi had “arbitrarily” selected them from the first batch of applicants. Naturally, the stats to which I had allocated points were AGI and VIT. Apparently VIT had some effect on stamina.

“You sure showed them off,” Naruse agreed. “And that’s after only one round.”

Unfortunately, if either Fuwa or Takada did our boot camp again, the results would be minuscule. Miyoshi had encouraged me to expend all their points to maximize the effect on their upcoming races, so I hadn’t held back. Even then, the amount of SP the two students had managed to accumulate in a year’s worth of diving amounted to a measly ten points. Still, that was enough to put them near the lower end of the 90,000s in the WDARL; you could tell they’d really been trying.

“I think we can expect some pretty impressive things from Fuwa next week, no?” Miyoshi raised her eyebrows smugly.

Fuwa had started with higher stats than Takada, and men’s records in general saw faster times than women’s. There was no telling what kind of time we might be looking at.

“We can’t afford to be drowning in applicants though,” I pointed out.

“What do you mean?” Miyoshi asked. “The more choices, the merrier! We’ll just have a wider swathe of candidates to pick from. It’s better than scrambling to meet a quota.”

“We’re going to get a bunch of people who haven’t done any dungeon diving.”

“That’s where our *completely fair* ‘raffle’ system comes in.”

I could only smirk at Miyoshi for using transparent fibs she wouldn’t accept coming from anyone else.

“That just leaves one other issue...” she continued.

“The JDA-reserved slots?” I asked. “Yeah, what do we do about those?”

As a direct request from Naruse, I wanted to accommodate it, but...

“We can’t deal with another Komugi being thrown our way.” Miyoshi cut right to the point.

The bulk of the boot camp’s effects just came from distributing accumulated SP. We couldn’t handle being inundated with athletes who had only just gotten their D-Cards—or JDA employees with the same problem.

“We could have them nominate a set number of people each time, and have you choose them by ‘raffle’ after that?”

“What if we get a whole crop of Komugis?” Miyoshi gave me an exasperated grin. We couldn’t be sure who would be nominated, but if someone like Executive Director Mizuho got involved, there was no telling what kind of office-politics-motivated nominations he might throw our way.

“What if we treat it like getting a pilot’s license? You need a set number of dungeon hours to apply.”

As part of maintaining dungeon entry and exit records, the JDA could produce records for total time a person spent inside. Despite privacy concerns, such records were kept with the stated goal of exploring links between health and dungeon exposure, for the public good.

“You could clear the quota by going in and just sitting around for hours,” Miyoshi pointed out. If someone did that, their SP would still be zero. “Ah, but Kei, Midori’s just about finished up her factory renovations.”

“What’s that got to do with this?”

“Well, we’ll want to test production prototypes...”

“You mean giving one to the JDA?”

“How about it?” Miyoshi asked, turning to Naruse. “What if the JDA offered free stat-checking services to Yoyogi explorers? You could use it to make sure we get qualified candidates too.”

“Really?” Naruse stammered. “I mean, we’d be grateful, of course, but I’m afraid I don’t have clearance to give you a direct answer here and now.”

“No worries,” Miyoshi responded. “We can follow up later. At the very least, if the people recommended for the JDA-reserved slots need to have at least a

certain number of hours spent exploring and meet a certain threshold of base stats...”

“We can determine whether they’ve actually been exploring for real,” I said, finishing her thought.

“Exactly. How does that sound? We could take maybe two sets of nominees per month.”

“That sounds fantastic,” Naruse responded. “Thank you. I’ll bring the stat-measurement suggestion up to my boss and get an answer right away.”

One problem having been solved, Naruse took some papers out of her bag and handed them to us.

“Now, about another matter. The purity of the ingots you submitted...”

“You have the results?” I asked.

If the iron ingots had some unbelievably high level of purity, they might be worth more than we had thought. Although our theory that they might work as dungeon construction material might have been enough to drive value on its own.

“The vanadium came back at 99.9 percent, and the iron at 99.99. Categorically, they are ‘high-purity metals.’”

Miyoshi’s shoulders sank. She sat down on the sofa with an audible plop. “4N, huh? That’s high, but...normal.”

“That’s still pretty high,” I objected.

“I know. It’s just that I was expecting...more.”

“About that.” Naruse looked concerned. “I also have the results for the rare earth metals, or rather lanthanides.”

“Huh? Already?”

We’d only brought the samples in on Saturday.

Our experiment trying to set drops on the twenty-third floor by concentrating on the lanthanide series’ masses and atomic numbers had been a success. We’d been so elated that we’d rushed up to the surface after getting one of every

metal except promethium, which we'd tried to exclude. We didn't want an unstable isotope—one that was extremely rare in nature and mostly produced synthetically—spawning in the dungeon. Of course, given that we'd only obtained a relatively small number of test drops, we couldn't be one hundred percent certain we'd actually succeeded in excluding it.

“With mass spectrometry and inductively coupled plasma spectrometry tests, noble and rare earth metals have an impurity quantification limit of ten parts per billion. However...” Naruse's face went slack. “According to our findings, the fourteen metals you entrusted us with each came back with impurity levels below the detectable limit.”

“Come again?”

Ten per billion? As in ten over one billion? That would mean our samples were at least 8N. Is that even possible?!

“So, what did you two do this time?” Naruse asked, exhaustion audible.

According to Naruse, the lab technicians who had first registered the findings thought they must have been some kind of mistake, leading them to repeat the analysis over and over again. Rare earth metals, despite their name, weren't particularly rare in nature, but they were difficult to extract at high purity. Even with great technological leaps to improve our extracting and refining processes, it was still extraordinarily difficult to obtain even 4N samples of these metals.

“Kei, this is probably...”

“Due to the atomic structure method.”

The vanadium drop had been caused due to simply imagining the metal itself. That was why it was within the range of plausible purity. But the lanthanides had been imagined as objective atomic structures, causing less “interference” in interpreting the desired drop. That was why...

“That's why they came out so pure,” I concluded.

“What are you talking about?” Naruse asked.

I explained our twenty-third floor experiment.

“So basically, it looks like we've found at least one way to communicate

specific information to the dungeon rather than just vague concepts,” I concluded.

“That’s...” Naruse trailed off without finishing her response. I imagined she was likely turning the word “ridiculous” around in her head, but it didn’t take shape on her tongue. It was hard to call something “ridiculous” when you had evidence of it working, after all.

“Of course this time it was just a mineral element,” I added. “Nothing complex.”

“But do you think eventually you could communicate more complex ideas using mathematical or scientific models?”

I thought about it for a second. “I don’t know” was all I could say.

We knew the dungeons were essentially accessing some kind of giant database constructed from explorers’ thoughts. But would it ultimately be easier, albeit still difficult, to communicate via mathematical and scientific instructions, or to rely on memories and imagination and have the dungeon scoop the required information out of its great anamnesis [\(29\)](#)? That was a question only the dungeon could answer.

“All I can say for now is that we have one method that worked in one case.”

“Understood. Thank you for all the, er, information.”

Naruse stood up with a look of slight trepidation, then headed off to Ichigaya.

“Using scientific terminology to communicate with the dungeons...” It wasn’t a foolproof method yet, but...

“Miyoshi.”

“Kei?”

“We skipped promethium, but couldn’t someone use the same tactic to spawn uranium-235 or plutonium-239?”

Imagination alone would probably only get you uranium-238, which was more abundant naturally. But the atomic-number communication method could net you other isotopes.

A world where anyone could easily obtain uranium-235 or plutonium-239? The risk of nuclear strikes would, pardon the pun, blow up overnight. Even a college student could construct the mechanisms, or so I'd heard. The hurdle was getting the material.

"It's going to pose a major risk if this goes public. Maybe we should call Naruse again."

Miyoshi, who had been wiping the table, stopped.

"Then why don't we just stop them from dropping?"

"What? How?"

"I don't know. You have the 'cornucopia.' Maybe we can use it to communicate some kind of message to that great, collective-unconsciousness database. Set a rule—establish off-limits drops."

"Now you're talking crazy."

"Komugi wanted noble metals, but we didn't get any gold drops. Why do you think that is?"

"Because of...some kind of rule..."

We could only figure it was because the dungeons were saving gold for the fiftieth floor.

Miyoshi nodded. But assuming that were true, it didn't mean we had the ability to test how dungeon rules worked or set our own... Right?

Epilogue

New York City

United Nations Headquarters

A sweet and buttery smell tickled Silkie's nose as she opened the door to Nathan's office.

"Mr. Argyle, what are you doing on the floor?"

Nathan was sitting cross-legged in front of an electric griddle, holding a bowl in his hands and mixing furiously. There was even a smudge of what appeared to be batter on his nose.

"Oh, Ms. Subway! You've come at a good time. I didn't have room on my desk."

He gestured to his desktop, strewn with papers only perhaps slightly organized—to put it generously. There was no room for a bowl and griddle—that much was sure.

"So, er, what are you doing?"

"That report on dungeonizing came in yesterday. These were sent along with it." He held up several kernels of wheat.

"Don't tell me..."

"Yep. Dungeon-grown."

The kernels had been sent as evidence of the successful application of the process outlined in "The Respawning of Intra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops and the Status Change of Outra-Dungeon Agricultural Crops." Apparently these kernels, once picked, had respawned.

"Has it ever felt more urgent that we get over to Tokyo ASAP?" Nathan poured the batter onto the griddle. The batter hissed and popped, spreading in a

circular pattern. *“But first,”* he proclaimed, *“bon appétit!”*

“You’re testing it on yourself? What kind of mad scientist are you?”

“Don’t worry.” Nathan held up a finger. *“I’ve got proper approval. Where’s the harm?”*

Early tests had detected no harmful substances in the kernels; their chemical composition had been identical to that of normal grains. Analysis had shown no viruses or bacteria, and he was properly cooking it.

More than anything though, he had the Wiseman’s Appraisal notes regarding the grain, which contained the descriptor “edible.”

“It’s one thing to believe it, but another thing to use yourself as a guinea pig. Think about our agency’s reputation!”

The WDA’s Department of Food Administration, or DFA, was responsible for assessing the safety of all potentially edible substances to be produced by the dungeon. How would it look if they were entrusting their entire risk analysis process to the largely unknown workings of a recently discovered skill—something which had come from the dungeons itself?

Since the Wiseman was Japanese, maybe her notation of “edible” meant the grains had passed domestic review at Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, but Silkie and Nathan weren’t abreast of Japanese standards. For all they knew, perhaps tagging the grain as “edible” simply meant someone wouldn’t instantly die from consuming it.

“It’s passed every kind of inspection. What’s left but to eat it?” Nathan asked.

“This is a little too punk even for you.” Silkie rolled her eyes. She was well aware of her boss’s past. He could at least have considered animal testing as a precaution.

“What? C’mon. I’m just a poser. A real punk wouldn’t even consider the life track of ‘study, get married, have a family, make money, and die after retiring.’”

Silkie sighed. Given his current experiment, she couldn’t help but wonder if Nathan would live long enough to hit that last step.

“So?” Nathan asked.

Silkie hesitated for a moment, then took a seat on the floor. It was an assistant's duty to aid their boss, after all.

"Bon appétit," she responded, parroting Nathan's earlier invitation.

Nathan smiled, took a pancake off the griddle, and sliced it cleanly in two. After setting half on a paper plate and glazing it with honey and beurre pommade—a kind of thickened butter—he passed it to Silkie along with a fork.

A pretty caloric morning snack, she thought to herself, but cleaned her plate down to the last bite.

"How was it?"

"Hm. A little firmer than a normal pancake, but—"

Before she could finish speaking, a glinting object appeared before her eyes. On the other side of the object, she saw Nathan's eyes widen.

For an instant, all sound seemed to diminish in volume, then disappear. There, in that vacuum, the object seemed to hover for a moment before tumbling downward, as if illustrating the law of universal gravitation propounded in Newton's *Principia*, dragged inexorably toward the surface of what Aristotle would have called the center of the universe. It struck the tiled floor with a clang. Sound once again filled the void.

The faint drone of the air conditioner and smell of crisped batter alone seemed to assert that what they had just seen—were seeing—was no dream.

"Ms. Subway, had you perhaps not yet..." Nathan trailed off, unable to finish his question, not taking his eyes off the object which had just *dropped* in more ways than one.

There was a special assistance service to help members of the WDA obtain a D-Card if needed. Most staff, including Nathan, had availed themselves of it. However, some personnel without any regular need to enter dungeons themselves had never bothered to make use of the service. In fact, Silkie had been one of the few who still hadn't gotten a card.

Or at least she had been—up until just now.

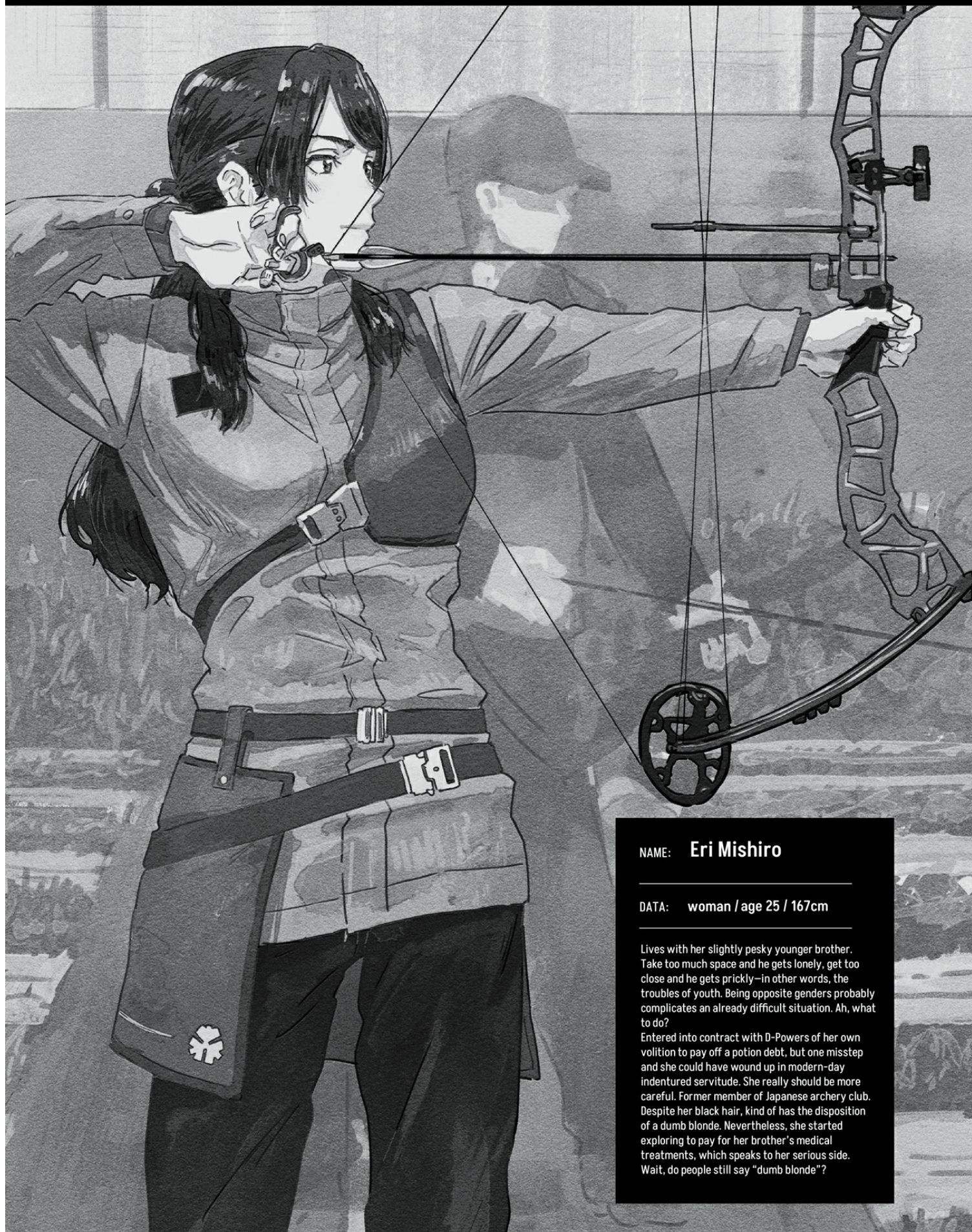
"You're kidding..."

Trembling, Silkie reached for the card on the floor, turning it over and over in her hands. There was no mistaking it. The name on the card was hers.

“Looks like dungeon-produced crops come with a certain special side effect,”
Nathan mused.

Whether that would be a boon or a curse for humanity, he wasn't sure.



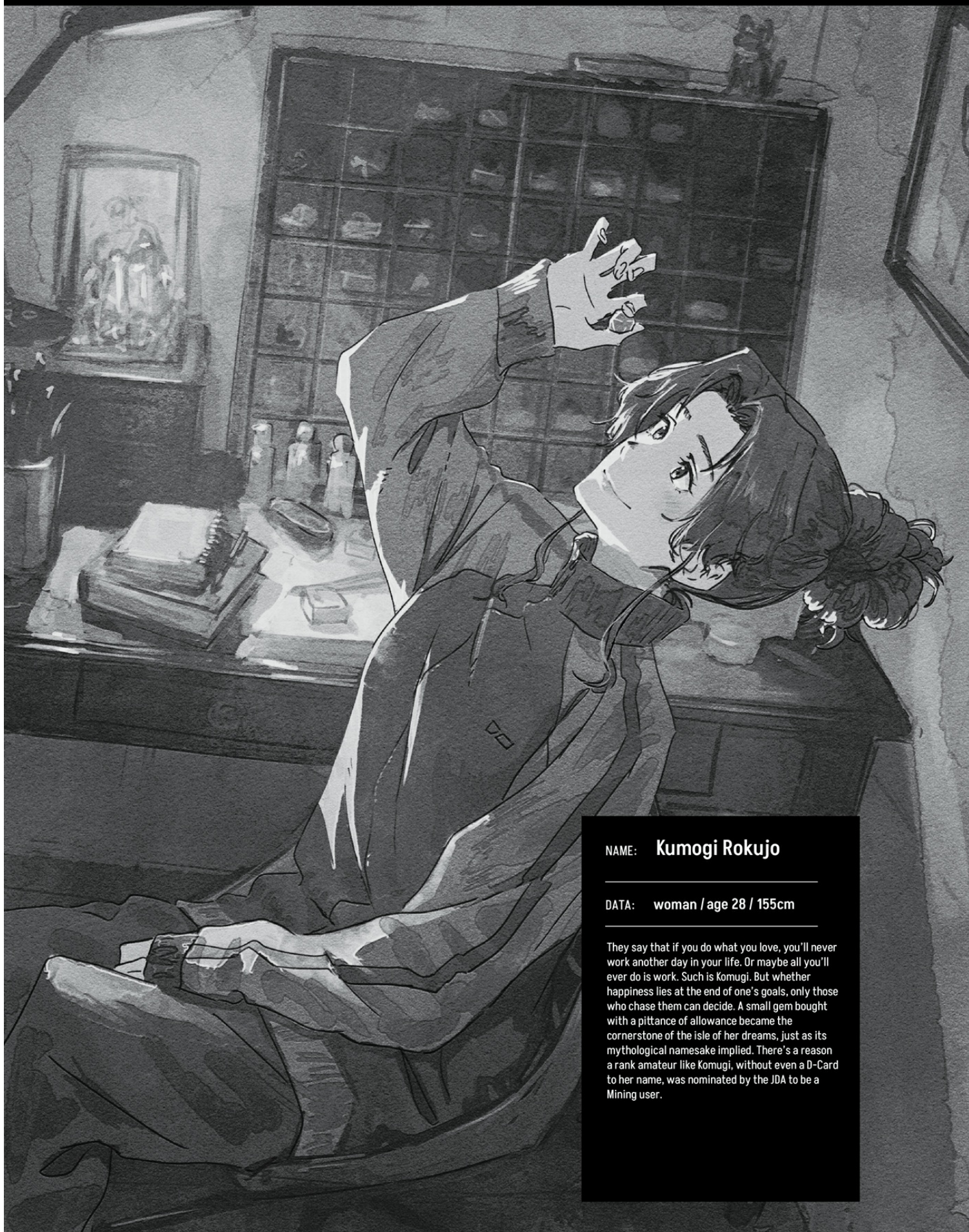


NAME: **Eri Mishiro**

DATA: **woman / age 25 / 167cm**

Lives with her slightly pesky younger brother. Take too much space and he gets lonely, get too close and he gets prickly—in other words, the troubles of youth. Being opposite genders probably complicates an already difficult situation. Ah, what to do?

Entered into contract with D-Powers of her own volition to pay off a potion debt, but one misstep and she could have wound up in modern-day indentured servitude. She really should be more careful. Former member of Japanese archery club. Despite her black hair, kind of has the disposition of a dumb blonde. Nevertheless, she started exploring to pay for her brother's medical treatments, which speaks to her serious side. Wait, do people still say "dumb blonde"?



NAME: **Kumogi Rokujo**

DATA: **woman / age 28 / 155cm**

They say that if you do what you love, you'll never work another day in your life. Or maybe all you'll ever do is work. Such is Komugi. But whether happiness lies at the end of one's goals, only those who chase them can decide. A small gem bought with a pittance of allowance became the cornerstone of the isle of her dreams, just as its mythological namesake implied. There's a reason a rank amateur like Komugi, without even a D-Card to her name, was nominated by the JDA to be a Mining user.

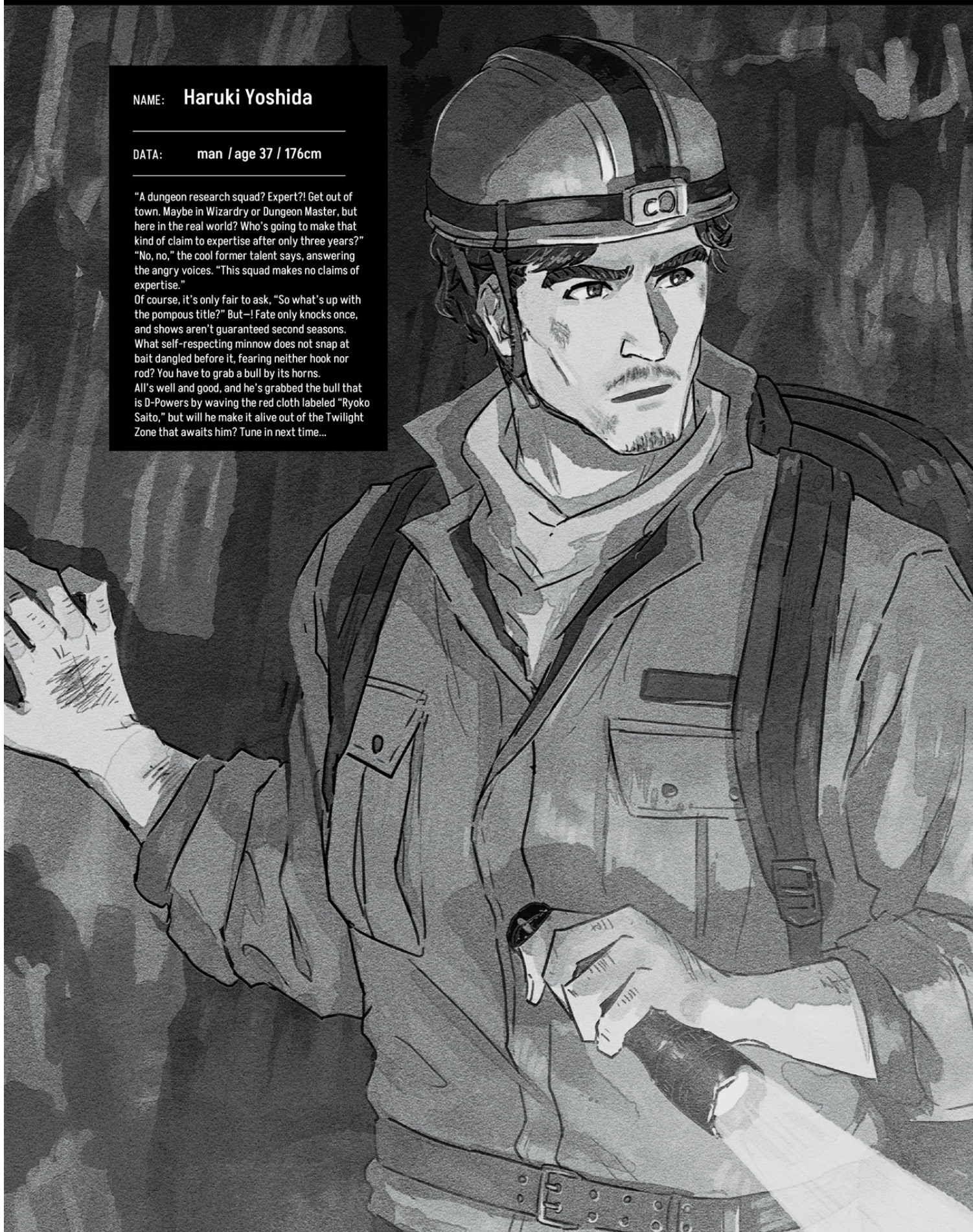
NAME: **Haruki Yoshida**


DATA: **man / age 37 / 176cm**

"A dungeon research squad? Expert?! Get out of town. Maybe in Wizardry or Dungeon Master, but here in the real world? Who's going to make that kind of claim to expertise after only three years?" "No, no," the cool former talent says, answering the angry voices. "This squad makes no claims of expertise."

Of course, it's only fair to ask, "So what's up with the pompous title?" But—! Fate only knocks once, and shows aren't guaranteed second seasons. What self-respecting minnow does not snap at bait dangled before it, fearing neither hook nor rod? You have to grab a bull by its horns.

All's well and good, and he's grabbed the bull that is D-Powers by waving the red cloth labeled "Ryoko Saito," but will he make it alive out of the Twilight Zone that awaits him? Tune in next time...





NAME: **Norihiro “Tenko” Kunai**

DATA: man / age 31 / 175cm

A master of the fake Kansai dialect, cultivated to give his YouTube channel some character, some flair—but in fact a local Kanto resident from near Yokohama. Can't blame a guy for trying, bro. Trapped himself by building up a reputation through his blog and channel—Real Dungeon Yokohama, even spreading around the moniker “Loot Box Dungeon Master”—such that he feels he can't just pivot to Yoyogi after being barred from entering Yokohama due to being sub-B rank. A victim of his own success. Also, er, weirdly earnest?

In that sense, he might actually be happy to have the excuse to visit a new dungeon as a member of a TV exploration squad. Or...is he? Buck up, champ.

Introducing the Igloo 1!

Perhaps this volume's dear readers are veteran woodsmen, but D-Powers aren't the roughing-it types. Hence this super "tent," built at exorbitant cost and equipped with all the amenities craved by pampered city slickers who can't go a day without good food, warm water, or tech to fiddle with. Wash away a day's troubles in the Igloo Bath. Fix yerself up some grub in the Igloo Kitchen. Lay yer head down for sleep in the soft and feathery Igloo Bed. Keeping a low profile? What does that mean when comfort's on the line?

1F

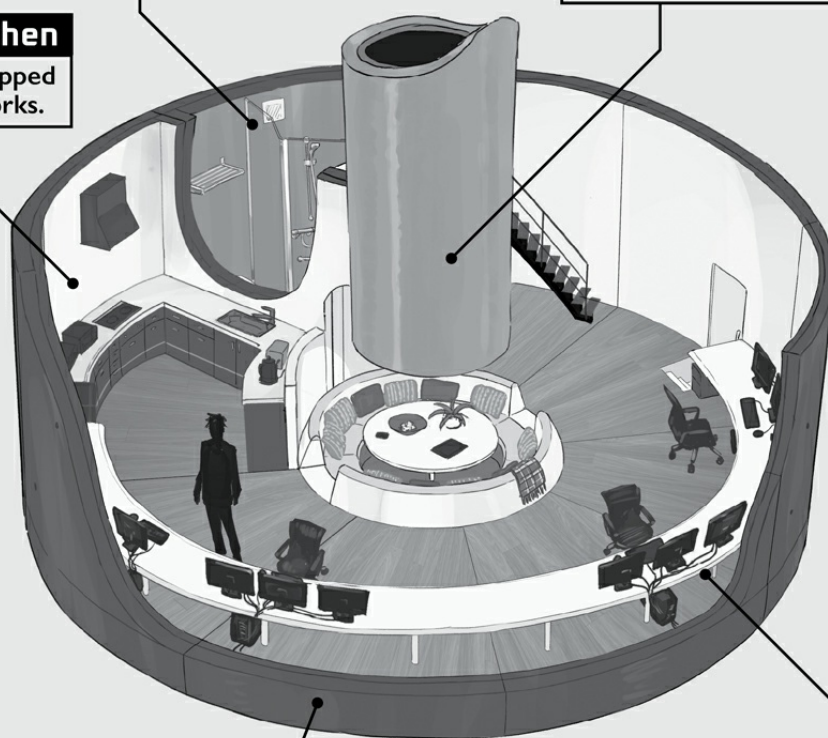
Igloo Bath

"I reject my dirtiness!"

Igloo Kitchen

Comes equipped with the works.

The Igloo Heart is affixed at the center of the construct, a marvel of modern technology into which all key components are shoved. The hydrogen and oxygen atoms colliding in the hydrogen fuel cells inside act as stalwart guardians of the occupant's way of life.



Igloo Tanks: Wedge-shaped floor sections, which can be plugged in and out of the main unit like giant cartridges, contain underfoot tanks for storing clean and dirty water. Disposal of used-water cartridges can be achieved simply by leaving them in the dungeon.

Igloo Eye

Pretty cool, huh?

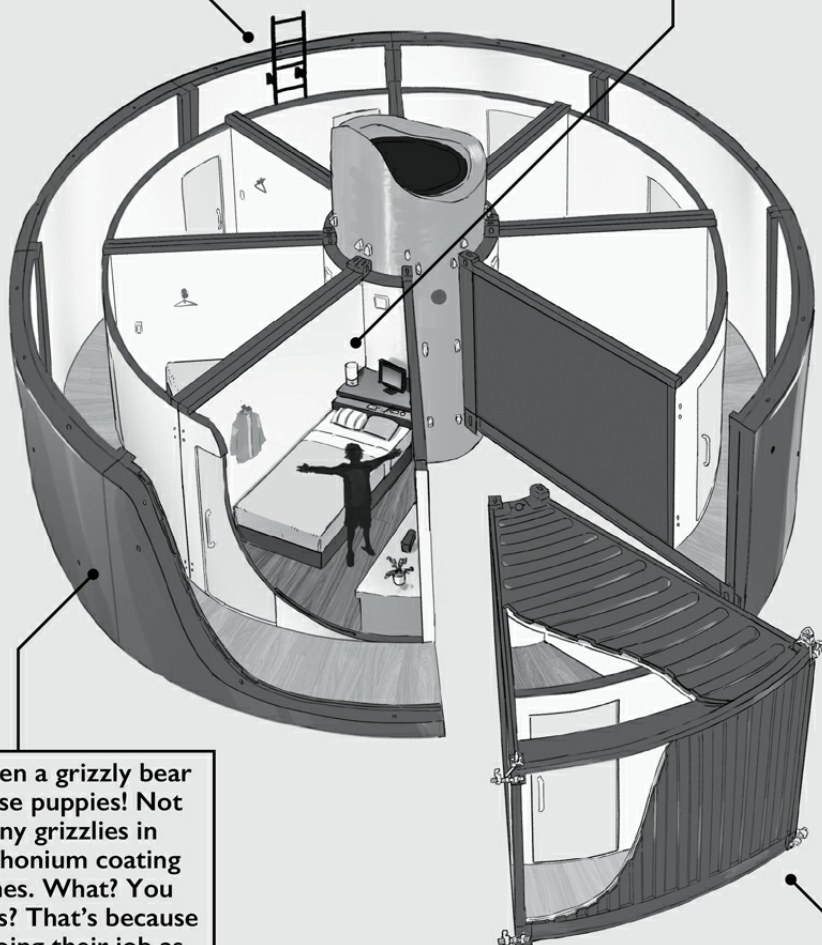


2F

Igloo Room

Sleep easy!

Igloo Ladder: Okay, so it's just an ordinary ladder. Provides access to the Iglurret above—an elevated strongpoint for firing projectiles down on enemies. Can also get up to the roof for stargazing.



Iglamparts: Not even a grizzly bear can penetrate these puppies! Not that there are any grizzlies in dungeons. Benzethonium coating takes care of slimes. What? You don't see any slimes? That's because the Arthurs are doing their job as watchdogs.

Iglunits: The plug-and-place Iglunit wedges allow for the swapping in and out of rooms to meet any and all needs. Future-proofing design is the hallmark of the computer engineer. Or maybe just the hallmark of those who have worked at exploitative companies...

Annotations

1. [*Commercials are fiction, after all*](#): There actually is an example of one actor representing different major beer companies, albeit at different times. Toshiaki Karasawa, currently appearing in commercials for Kirin, has formerly done campaigns for both Asahi and Suntory.
2. [*“Did I say that?”*](#): He did. See volume 1.
3. [*NTP Server*](#): Network Time Protocol Server. A server that sends accurate time data to electronic equipment.
4. [*Patent on the method*](#): A method, or process, patent involves the unique use of existing products or skills to accomplish a specific goal. For example, the discovery of the efficacy of benzethonium chloride when used on slimes, and application thereof.
5. [*According to the Council of Cultural Affairs*](#): Miyoshi is misremembering her style-guide controversies. Guidelines from 1991 on katakana usage published by said council contain no reference to the use of a long-vowel dash for combinations of “e” and “i” characters—as appear in the phonetic “*Meikingu*.” Instead, the convention appears in an NHK language handbook and various newspaper style guides. At any rate, the lack of consistency between these common guides and the National Language Council’s guidelines, which forgoes the dash in favor of writing “e” and “i” separately, can be vexing. It would be written “*Meikingu*” according to the Language Council, but “*Me—kingu*” according to major news sources. The former does lend itself to being read as the separate “May” and “King,” while the latter would be more naturally parsed as “Making,” per Miyoshi’s point. In the Japanese version of this series, the orb displays as the former, with no long-vowel dash.
6. [*Fall harvest soba*](#): Soba—buckwheat used for Japanese noodles—is generally harvested twice a year: in the fall and summer. For a few months after each harvest season, fresh soba noodles are sold refrigerated, with

dried noodle packs sold the rest of the year. The summer-harvest noodles are supposed to have a lighter flavor.

7. [Mazuma](#): A type of wasabi. The fibers on its stem trace a spiral pattern. The thick-stemmed variants don't show up in stores very often. Considered one of the highest-quality wasabi variants.
8. [CAD](#): Computer-aided design. Producing prototypes and production models in computer-simulated environments for engineering tests.
9. [6N](#): 99.9999 percent purity. Abbreviated "6N" due to six nines appearing in a row.
10. ["Crouch End," Stephen King](#): From "Crouch End" by Stephen King, first published in the *New Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* short fiction anthology and emblematic of his late '70s and early '80s style. King likely invented the word "townen" himself. A revised edition, published thirteen years later in King's own short story collection, added extra context, but to the extent that the original renders the Cthulhu mythos elements more ambiguous, it may actually be the better version of the text.
11. [Fancy vivid](#): The highest ranking for a colored stone's color class. Fancy intense is one rank lower. The "VVS" (very, very slightly included) clarity grades indicate inclusions and scratches nearly invisible under ten times magnification. The clarity of colorless diamonds is categorized into twenty-three categories ranging from perfectly clear to strongly yellow-tinted. "E" is the second highest category, and appears generally clear to the naked eye. Grading is nearly impossible without the use of a master stone—a comparison gem specifically used by appraisers for grading.
12. [Loose \(diamonds\)](#): Also called "bare stones." Gems that have been cut and polished, but not fixed into any kind of setting.
13. [Pyralspite garnets](#): Garnets are categorized broadly into pyralspites (red-hued), and ugrandites (green-hued). Pyralspites are solid-solution compounds consisting of magnesium, iron, manganese, and aluminum. Magnesium garnets are called pyropes, but magnesium would appear clear without other elements present—quantities of chromium or iron, in varying ratios, can produce anything from pink to deep red tones. The natures of

magnesium, iron, and manganese closely resemble one another, leading to a solid-state compound. The stone color depends on the ratios thereof. Incidentally, “pyralspite” as a category name is actually a portmanteau of the three pure garnets relating to each of the solid-state compound’s end-members—pyrope (magnesium), almandine (iron), and spessartine (manganese), which explains why Yoshimura wouldn’t be familiar with the term.

14. [*Peer review*](#): The process of submitting one’s research findings for review by other experts in the field. In this case, the contents of the application submitted to the Dungeon Agency Patent Office would have required scientific peer review. Perhaps conducted by one Mr. Nathan Argyle?
15. [*Rumors surrounding Dreyfus opening up public stock*](#): The emirate of Abu Dhabi in the UAE would purchase forty-five percent holdings of Dreyfus the following year. The family-owned company had opened up to outside investors for the first time due to a sudden need for capital.
16. [*World banks*](#): A collective abbreviation for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and International Development Association (IDA). The IBRD offers loans and assistance services to middle-income and select low-income countries with trustworthy track records. The IDA offers financial assistance to the lowest-income nations, covering those the IBRD won’t work with. Together with the International Monetary Fund, they form the core of the Bretton Woods system.
17. [*1966*](#): For some reason Wikipedia (as of September 2022) lists the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as starting in 1965, when it really began in 1966, with the merger of the Expanded Program of Technical Assistance (EPTA) and United Nations Special Fund (UNSF).
18. [*Edouard Victor Saouma*](#): A Lebanese citizen and director general of the FAO from 1971 to 1993. Continuously privileged the political interests of developing nations, stirring up some controversy. I’ll remind you this is a work of fiction.
19. [*Fiat panis*](#): Latin for “let there be bread,” and the motto of the FAO. As a reminder, the information on the FAO contained in this volume is circa

2019; it's undergone further changes since.

20. [*Any moves to ramrod traditional projects and block the new system would depend on the votes of oil-producing nations*](#): Main and alternate members of the IFAD's executive board in 2019 included the following, leading to Donald's uncertainty. In List A (advanced nations): Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, the UK, the United States, Finland, Belgium, Switzerland, Greece, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Spain. In List B (oil-producing countries): Kuwait, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, the UAE, Qatar, Indonesia, and Algeria. In List C (potential recipient countries): Angola, Egypt, China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Kenya, Cameroon, South Korea, Pakistan, Argentina, and the Dominican Republic. As oil-producing countries tend to be heavily dependent on grain imports for their food supplies, the states involved would likely not hesitate to back investment opportunities which might allow them to produce crops domestically. It is perhaps odd that China, with tremendous financial growth propelling it to its status as the second-ranking contributing country, and South Korea, with the world's twelfth highest GDP, remain in List C.
21. [*"Although my origins are African, my perspective is global."*](#): Words spoken in real life by Gilbert Houngbo upon being elected eleventh director general of the International Labour Organization. Prior to his ILO election, he served as sixth president of the IFAD. I stress again that despite any similarities, this is of course a work of fiction.
22. [*5.67 billion years*](#): There is a legend that Maitreya, the prophesied bodhisattva of the future, will appear before the masses 5.67 billion years after the parinirvana (post-nirvana death) of Siddhartha. However, according to the sutra, there are also interpretations of 5,606,000 years, 5,600,010,000 years, 5,600,760,000 years, and others.
23. [*Joaquin Phoenix*](#): Younger brother of River Phoenix. Kenai, the protagonist of *Brother Bear*, is an Inuit man transformed into a bear by a mystical spirit.
24. [*0.25*](#): See volume 3.
25. [*Demantoid*](#): A name which means "diamond-like" in Dutch. The first

sample discovered of this verdant garnet was said to have resembled a green diamond.

26. [*Arecibo message*](#): An interstellar radio message containing information about Earth broadcast in the direction of the M13 globular cluster in 1974, to commemorate completion of the remodeling of the Arecibo Radio Telescope.
27. [*Pet Sematary*](#): A novel by Stephen King. Repeats the impenetrable phrase “The soil of a man’s heart is stonier.” Among the most frightening of his works. The titular cemetery in his story might not stretch on endlessly, but the image of its hardened soil sticks with you. The film adaptations are best forgotten.
28. [*Number 38*](#): The actual number 38 at the 38th Osaka International Women’s Marathon went to Minami Nakajima of Kansai Gaidai University. This is a work of fiction, after all!
29. [*Anamnesis*](#): A pool of innate knowledge existing in the heavens in Plato’s theory of epistemology, forgotten through birth. What we call “learning” or “understanding” is the reacquisition of this knowledge through encounters with objects and stimuli on Earth.

Afterword

Hello all. Greeting you here at the end of a stormy and tumultuous seventh volume, having been batted about on the seas of creation and just recovered from a bout with COVID (probably), it is I, the refreshed and renewed Kono. Thank you, as always, for reading.

Production of the seventh volume was extreeeeemely difficult. Or at least this afterword was.

After missing a submission deadline for the first time in my life (probably), I—continuing to lollygag—found myself at a dead end. “Time flies like an arrow.” Isn’t that the phrase? “What is life, but a trivial interval equivalent to the passage from morning to night,” I mused while staring up at the sky, and yet I felt no closer to the realm of Zhuangzi. Such is the curse of the perfectionist. (No, no, such is the curse of the procrastinist.) I pored over other afterwords—the works of great scholars, authors of light novels past. Indeed, it seemed annotations for volume contents dominated the majority, but alas! I had already included footnotes. Curse my poor life choices.

I worried myself sick. I stressed myself silly. And yet I didn’t even lose any weight (huh?), or get the benefit of sullen, chiseled cheekbones (hmm?) to accompany my gaunt visage! Anyway, I was at my wits’ end. Clenching my fists, I decided on the forbidden fried-egg method.

What is the fried-egg method?

You see, it’s enormously difficult to eat a fried egg with a knife and fork. If you cut straight into the yolk, you’ll spread it all over the plate. But you’ll look like a weirdo if you just eat the egg white and then save the yolk for a last bite. So, if you are ever forced into eating a fried egg in front of someone you’re attracted to, here is what you do: open up to them. Talk about how hard it is to eat a fried egg as you do it. Write an afterword about writing an afterword.

As you pop that final yellow coin of ovular goodness into your mouth, you can even crack a joke about how you may be nervous, but at least you’re “yolked.”

At best, they will politely ignore this. (On second thought, attempt this advanced technique only if you're physically attractive.)

And...that's it! We're just about at the end of the seventh volume afterword. Now, what to do for volume 8...

Next, we have the tale of the Nemi Woods and anti-dungeon movements taking center stage. With the advent of the Ukemochi System, countries are trying harder than ever to bolster their explorer populations—especially China, even though reaching five hundred million global explorers was thought to be a long way off... Cue a silent three-way war between China (and the Middle East), the FAO, and big agribusiness. Plus, the sports world finally starts turning a serious eye toward the disruptive influence of the dungeons.

Finally, development of the safe zone and sales of public status-measurement devices seem primed to pose problems of statism—that is, preferential treatment for those with higher stats—in society. Humans love hierarchies after all. Why else would we be so awash in ranking lists?

As a final note, I made ample use of Akihiko Udoguchi's 2015 National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies dissertation, "Postwar Global Food and Agriculture Regimes and United States Participation in the FAO," in tracing back the FAO's history. Needless to say, any mistakes contained herein are due solely to my own negligence as this work's author.

With that, see you next volume.

KONO Tsuranori

February 2023

NEXT VOLUME



MIYOSHI

I'll say. But I'm really surprised at how flexible the dungeon was, reading her wishes like that. What the heck are the dungeons anyway?



YOSHIMURA

Komugi sure surprised us.



MIYOSHI

Kei, a lot of people don't appreciate meta humor. Careful with comments like that.



YOSHIMURA

By the time we can answer that question, it'll be the final volume.



MIYOSHI

By the way, is it really okay to just ignore that bomb incident with America?



YOSHIMURA

Heh heh.



MIYOSHI

Next! Athletes and movie stars come to boot camp?



YOSHIMURA

What do you want us to do? We don't have any evidence. Besides, there aren't many Japanese politicians willing to make wa—



MIYOSHI

There are two subjects off-limits in light fiction: politics and critiquing the reader's fashion.



YOSHIMURA

Why are you interrupting me?



MIYOSHI

Anyway, my main concern is whether all the applicants will actually read the contracts.



YOSHIMURA

Those are service industry rules. Besides, what about all the scenes in volume 6?

We're asking them to help us with exploration after the boot camp, but will up-and-coming athletes have the time?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



I'm worried.

And what about the stir the Ukemochi System's going to cause?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



There are plenty of countries already working around the clock to get the world to five hundred million explorers so food drops spawn, but the response from big agribusiness is sure to be dramatic. Maybe we can expect to see news about a cluster of thirteen shooting stars after a satellite gets blown up soon?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Golgo 13? That contact method is way harder to understand than the one where they just place an ad for a thirteen-year-old trailer.

Next time! In D-Genesis Volume 8!

Conflict over dungeon food procurement!

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



The sports and music worlds at an impasse!

Confusion over the safe area!

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



The king of Nemi Woods finally appears!

Huh? What's that?

YOSHIMURA



MIYOSHI



Now then...

See you next time!

YOSHIMURA



D-Genesis Volume 8

TO BE CONTINUED...

D GENESIS

WRITTEN BY
KONO Isuranori
ILLUSTRATED BY
tll

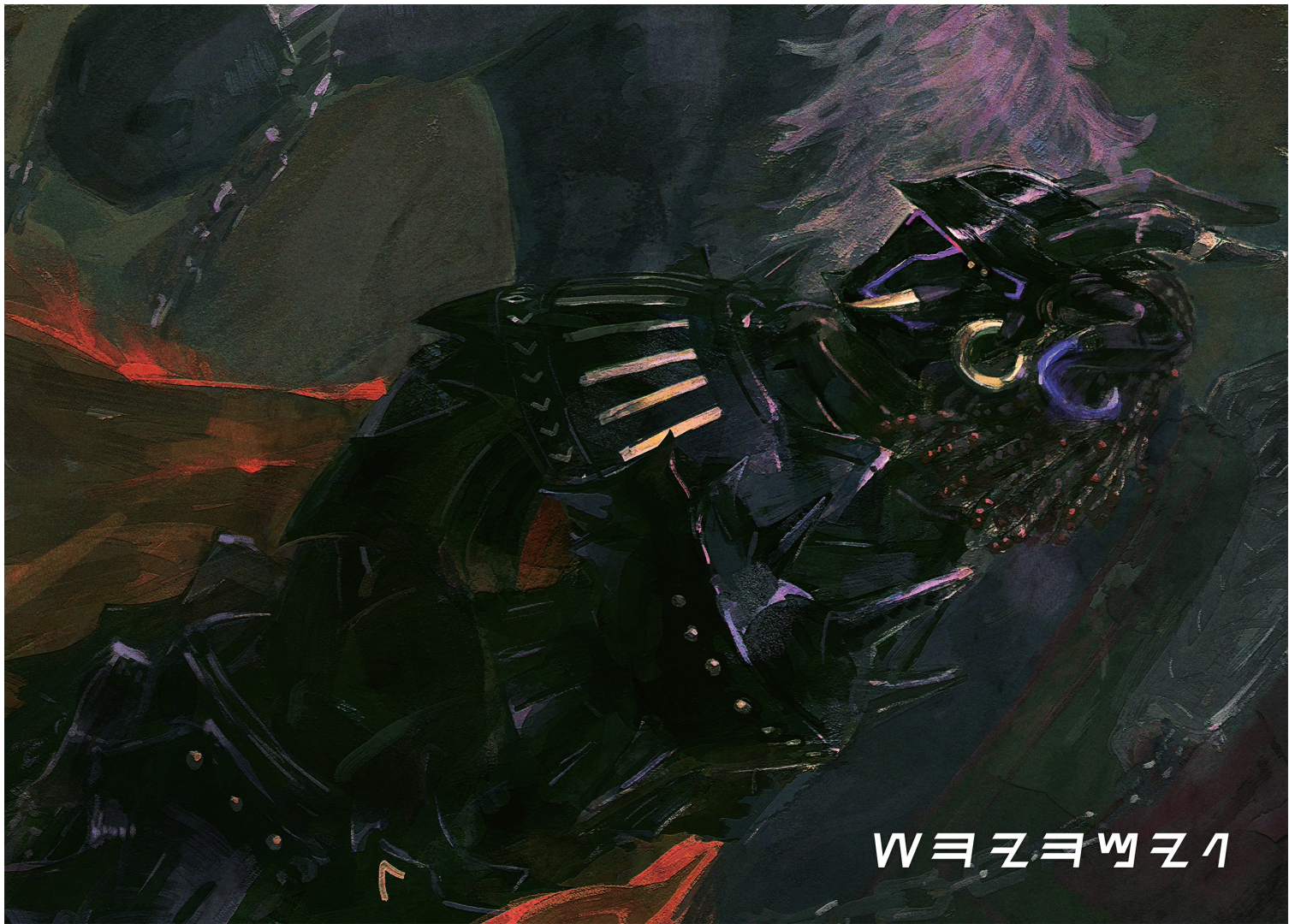
Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared





“The night is long.”

“Let’s enjoy!”



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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 7

by KONO Tsuranori

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D GENESIS DUNGEON GA DEKITE 3 NEN Vol.7

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